

EXHIBITION: *Elizabeth Murray*  
IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern  
8<sup>th</sup> June – 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2006  
CURATOR: Robert Storr

SPONSORS: Bancaja & Fundación ASTROC

*The exhibition is organised by the Museum of Modern Art of New York and travelling under the auspices of the International Council*

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This exhibition, the result of collaboration between the MoMA and the IVAM, is the first exhibition dedicated to Elizabeth Murray by a Spanish museum and comprises fifty works dated between 1963 and 2003, constituting an anthological illustration of all the creative periods of this American painter. Thus it comprises pieces from her periods of reaction to Minimalism, her commitment with Surrealism and Cubism and her incursions in New Image and Neo-Expressionism. A catalogue of the exhibition has been brought out containing reproductions of all the works displayed in the show and an essay about Elizabeth Murray's oeuvre by Robert Storr, holder of the Rosalie Solow Modern Art seat at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and curator of the exhibition.

As complementary activities to the exhibition, today, Thursday, 8<sup>th</sup> June, at 7.00 p.m., a conference about the artist's work will be held with the participation of the art historian and critic Barbara Rose, Robert Storr and Elizabeth Murray herself. Besides, on 1<sup>st</sup> July, a Summer Educational Workshop about this exhibition will be inaugurated at La Malvarrosa Beach, in which the participants will work on the different creative aspects of Elizabeth Murray's work. The timetable of the workshop, sponsored by Bancaja, will be from 10.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m., from 1<sup>st</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> July.

In spite of the myth of the avant-garde, there is no such thing as absolute rupture from tradition, and traditions are not automatically self-rejuvenating either, even what Abstract Expressionist critic Harold Rosenberg dubbed “the tradition of the new”. Fresh vitality unfailingly stems from fresh understanding, which is, almost inevitably, the contribution of artists who see the same set of variables as others from a radically different viewpoint. And this is where Elizabeth Murray comes in.

Born in Chicago in 1940, Murray grew up in the middle of the United States in an area surrounded by little villages in the conservative fifties. The place and time were not very propitious for a person of humble means to dream of becoming an artist, especially a woman. However, thanks to the anonymous financial backing of an art teacher at her high school and the moral support of her parents, Murray made her way to the Art Institute of Chicago, where she enrolled with the intention of becoming a commercial artist. The crucial event that led her to become a painter was the discovery of Paul Cézanne’s work. Other “revelations” in these early days in Chicago include the work of the Cubists, above all Juan Gris; the Surrealists, particularly Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró; and De Kooning.

After her four years at the Art Institute she engaged in postgraduate studies at Mills College, near San Francisco, where she discovered the work of Clyfford Still and West Coast Funk, a trend full of vernacular humour in which Bruce Nauman, a contemporary of hers from Bay Area, was involved. Then, in the midst of all this relatively direct work, she had her first glimpse of Pop Art, specifically of paintings by Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. That encounter made her fix her attention on the East and in 1967 she arrived in New York, where she made her living as a teacher while she

created often humorous sculptures and reliefs painted in bright colours, such as *Night Empire* (1967-68), whose exuberant comic-strip style owes a great deal to Claes Oldenburg and Red Grooms, although a lot more to Walt Disney, whose crazy drawing style she had imitated as a child. As a reflection of the artist's experimental nature and her precarious financial situation, most of the works of the early seventies are modest in scale when compared to the large-format works that were not long following. In response to the preponderant impact of Minimalism, Murray went for simple repetitive designs. Some are almost organic drawings in the shape of a fan; others consist of boxes piled precariously on top of one another. Nevertheless, although Murray was temporarily bewitched by the austerity of Minimalism, she could not resist the temptation to modulate that style that tended to shun implication with her own touch of practical involvement and her skill for syncopated composition.

This rhythmic sensibility pulses in *Wave Painting* (1973), but can also be detected in the tauter paintings of *Mobius Band* of 1974, and the two are actually a fundamental indication of what was to follow. By definition, a Mobius strip is a continuous surface that can be bent and twisted without breaking, thus demonstrating the principle behind all the geometries of topological surfaces: homeostasis. This elastic quality permits forms to be subjected to extreme manipulation that would destroy rigid flat surfaces and still retain their integrity as mathematically coherent entities. To affirm that Murray's later paintings were strictly topological would be an exaggeration. Breaking, tearing and the threat of coming loose are fundamental in her painting dynamics and the psychological content underlying her imagery; however, as a metaphor, topological homeostasis keeps open the possibility that, under extreme conditions, forms can

metamorphose into eccentric albeit still recognisable permutations of themselves.

Thus the Surrealist dimension of Murray's work contains not only a superficial likeness to Miró's and Dalí's organic forms but also underlying structural poetics and logic. These Surrealist elements are mixed with other artistic legacies: the rich saturated colours of Stuart Davis, the unrestrained geometric compounds of Kasimir Malevich and Liubov Popova and the traces of Disney-style cartoons.

By melding the shattered planes of Cubism with the biomorphous surfaces of Surrealism, Murray has created a unique hybrid of the two major formal traditions of the Modernism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Murray herself would be the last person to express the matter in these terms –art made at the service of issues is not to her liking– but that personal preference does not make her less of an innovator in the history of modern painting, and this is evident from the step she took next.

Immediately after her reconfiguration of painting on canvas into shapes, conceived as an object on the same level as the wall, Murray started to increase the layers or open up the panels away from the wall. In 1984, this combination of projecting layers and panels provided Murray with the technical means to create *Can You Hear Me?*, among the most animated and complex uses of this new language she had created. Although it also shows Murray's liking for comics, the central image –the screaming face– is inspired by the Expressionist icon of the first Modernist, Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1893), and reminds us that in spite of the fact that some aspects of her style are carefree and happy, both anguish and its mocking invention set the tone.

It is worth emphasising the remarkable importance of the discovery that the interior (image) and the exterior (outline) of the painting can be handled in the same terms, although Murray's otherwise traditional technique and her refusal to take a stand for these formal changes in the status quo tend to distract us from the originality of what she has in fact achieved. However, the unrestrained conclusions that Murray herself extracted immediately after this discovery proved this. Since the end of the eighties, the flat character of the painting –that blind faith of the formalist painting of the sixties– has been almost completely included in the totality of volumes that press or stick outwards towards the spectator, as though a timber skeleton meant for the wall covered with a painterly skin were trying to touch that other skeleton covered with volumetric skin that returned its gaze.

Murray has periodically returned to conventional rectangular frames to retrieve orientation, and she did so again in *Bounding Dog* (1993-94), portraying an exuberant cousin of the red dog that shot out from under the table ten years earlier in *Sleep* (1983-84). When Murray again used canvas with forms, they were no longer enormous, but rather a combination of many small- and medium-format units put together in a haphazard manner. Conceived in successive drawing stages and later cut out jigsaw-fashion in a very similar way to the supports of larger dimensions that she had been making over the previous decade and a half, but with a less sculptural appearance, each of these carefully designed and painstakingly worked units is, in essence, a painting in its own right. One only need observe the alternatively sandy and juicy edges of these modules and the thick impasto around them to understand to what extent each module is like an autonomous volcanic island in an archipelago of mini-abstractions. However, encased within the curves of brackets, they look like Pop

hieroglyphs or visual parts of colloquial speech placed inside the balloons in comic strips about to burst at the seams. These speaking forms are usually brightly coloured –the dull combinations of the eighties had given way to dazzling scarlets, oranges, shocking pinks, violets, royal purples, lemon yellows, leaf greens and sky blues. Besides, the different sections are separated by gaps that incorporate the intense white of the wall behind into the total composition like flickering reflections. The result makes the eye leap from a warm place to a cold one and back again through the optical labyrinth they describe collectively, but the sensation created by this ceaseless readjustment of the visual focus endows them with the quality of recombined molecules and endows the whole thing, accentuated by the contribution of the animated parts, with the character of a quivering multicellular organism.

Nowhere is this geological/syntactic/biological mixture and disarrangement more evident than in the most recent painting in the exhibition, *Do the Dance* (2005). Behind the apparently facile behaviour that Murray's work sometimes conveys, we find audacity, above all at a time like the present, when corrosive irony represents the prevailing tone in mass culture and distracting effects constitute the norm of advanced aesthetics. In such a context, Murray may seem to some observers to be just as anxious, without being in fashion, to reach the public. Nevertheless, this would be tantamount to ignoring how her underlying ironies are deeply wounding – Murray's visual puns elide drollery with a palpable threat, whereas alienation and death lurk about her crazy polyps– and how her crude and ungainly constructions do not approach us like friendly strangers but pounce on us like close friends whom we would have preferred to avoid. By breaking the decorum of the modernism of the predominant trend with her own distinctive mark of urgency that catches you by the lapels and of

improvising and implicitly anarchistic joie de vivre, Murray has run a great many risks to create her art and, in the process, she has altered the rules of the game entirely.

Robert Storr