

Elizabeth Murray
MATRIX/BERKELEY 108
Mid-April - mid-June 1987
Hold On, 1984



New York painter Elizabeth Murray has developed a distinctive vocabulary of biomorphic and geometric shapes, disjunctive surfaces, irregular edges, and offbeat color. Her highly personal style, however, is thoroughly grounded in the modernist tradition. While still a student at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, Murray remembers being fascinated by a small Cézanne still life. In his still lifes Cézanne treated the objects—the table, the fruit, the pitcher—as planes and volumes to be adjusted at will to best meet the demands of the overall pictorial organization. Picasso and Braque took Cézanne’s revolutionary handling of space one step further, simultaneously depicting multiple aspects of an image, a device Murray uses in her own painting. It was Stuart Davis’s exuber-

ant “Americanized” Cubism, however, with its high-keyed color and simplified forms, that had the most profound impact on Murray’s own style.

During the 1970s Murray’s paintings were composed of interlocking, nonreferential shapes. Although self-contained and clean-edged, they were obviously painted by hand, without the aid of straightedge or masking tape. More wildly colored and formally eccentric than those of most young New York abstractionists, Murray’s paintings had an affinity with the loosely geometric works of such other post-Minimalists as Mary Heilmann, Sean Scully, and Bill Jensen. Some writers have suggested that the lighthearted quality of Murray’s work reflects her student days in Chicago and Northern California,

regions notable for the irreverence and wit generated by such artists as Jim Nutt and Robert Arneson.

By 1981 Murray’s paintings had grown in size and complexity, and her forms had become recognizable distortions of ordinary domestic objects such as cups, plants, and tables, as well as of human and animal figures. At the same time Murray fractured her compositions into many pieces, incorporating the negative spaces of the wall into the overall scheme. Murray’s most recent paintings, in which individual curvilinear canvas panels slide behind or in front of each other, are not only balanced between abstractions and representation, but contain elements of both painting and sculpture. Murray’s dimensional paintings have been

likened to Frank Stella's elaborate constructions, but the resemblance is superficial; Murray's paintings *feel* completely different, being more emotional than formal, more jubilant than aggressive.

Like many other artists making significant contributions to the medium today—Bryan Hunt, Robert Moskowitz, and Jennifer Bartlett come to mind—Murray regards drawing as an end to invention and spontaneity. Murray's drawings, nine of which are included in this exhibition, are less complicated than her paintings. While Murray plays one shape off another in a painting, in a drawing she concentrates on a single configuration that expands to the edges of the paper. Many of the images Murray develops in her drawings appear in her paintings. For example, the bulbous, amoebic form in *Ting-a-Ling* is echoed in the painting *Mouse Cup*, 1981-82; the five-stemmed plant or hand in the drawing *Wave* appears again in *Leg*, 1984; and the guitar in *Untitled* (#9) forms the basis of *The Force of Circumstance* (for Simone de Beauvoir), 1986.

Just as Murray constructs her paintings of many panels, she forms her drawings, most of which are large scale, from several sheets of paper that have been cropped to conform to the irregular outline of the image. Murray applies her pastels with characteristic vigor and freedom. Color areas are never solid; each contains within it lines, smudges, or strokes of underlying hues. Though the colors in Murray's drawings tend to be more restrained than those in her paintings, their juxtapositions are often unexpected, as in the apricot, green, and purple of *Hold On* and the orange, lavender, and grey of *Untitled* (#6). Certain shapes permute from one work to another. For example, the elongated extrusions that, in *Wave*, undulate like kelp in water, become more static in the five-pronged plant from *Untitled* (#2). Animal and human forms populate the drawings as well. Two figurative shapes seem to embrace in *Ting-a-Ling*, their tentacle-like arms intertwining. What appears to be a humorous canine in *Sniff Drawing* also recalls the sinuous 1952 *Blue Nude* by Matisse and, while the semi-reclining figure of *Hold On* reach-

es for an ambiguous, pink snake-like form, it is difficult to mistake the identity of the blue guitar in *Untitled* (#9), perhaps a reference to Picasso's Blue Period masterpiece, *The Old Guitarist* of 1903.

In her work, Murray achieves a balance between order and chaos as she does between abstraction and figuration. In her topsy-turvy world, nothing is permanent or fixed; shapes are twisted, distended, folded, and stretched; spatial relationships are unpredictable and constantly shifting; the pieces of the puzzle never quite fit. Despite these disquieting elements that also describe late 20th century life, Murray's paintings clearly display an optimism absent from much contemporary art.

Murray was born in Chicago in 1940 and grew up in small towns in Michigan and Illinois, eventually settling with her family in Bloomington, Illinois. She received a B.F.A. from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 1962. Murray pursued her art studies at Mills College in Oakland, California (Jennifer Bartlett was a fellow student and good friend), and earned an M.F.A. there in 1964. She moved to New York City in 1967.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

1. *Untitled*, 1984, charcoal, pastel on 2 sheets of paper, 32 1/2 x 26 1/2". Lent by Douglas Baxter, New York.
2. *Untitled*, 1984, charcoal, pastel on 5 sheets of paper, 20 x 33". Lent by Paula Cooper, New York.
3. *Wave*, 1984, pastel on paper, 14 x 24". Lent by Michael Hurson, New York.
4. *Ting-a-Ling*, 1985, pastel on 2 sheets of paper, 60 3/8 x 39 3/4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Anderson, Atherton, CA.
5. *Hold On*, 1984, pastel on 4 sheets of paper, 59 x 49". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Anderson, Atherton, CA.
6. *Untitled*, 1984, charcoal, pastel on 3 sheets of paper with clay, 43 3/4 x 34". Lent by BankAmerica Corporation Art Collection, San Francisco.
7. *Sniff Drawing*, 1984, pastel on 2 sheets of paper, 18 x 42 1/2". Lent by Byron Meyer, San Francisco.
8. *Untitled*, 1984, charcoal, pastel on 3

sheets of paper, 37 x 38". Lent by Bob and Linda Gersh, Los Angeles.

9. *Untitled*, (March-April) 1984, pastel on paper, 44 1/4 x 25". Lent by Rose and Morton Landowne, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Paula Cooper Gallery, NY, '76, '78, '81, '83, '84; Galerie Mukai, Tokyo, '80; Daniel Weinberg Gallery, S.F., '82; ICA, Boston, MA, '84; Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA, *Elizabeth Murray: Drawings 1980-1986*, '86 (catalogue).

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, *Annual*, '72 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, *Biennials*, '73, '77, '79, '81, '85 (catalogues); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, *Directions 1983*, '83 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, '84 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Ratcliff, Carter. "The Paint Thickens," *Artforum*, June '76.

Kuspit, Donald B. "Elizabeth Murray's Dandyish Abstraction," *Artforum*, Feb. '78.

Russell, John. "Art: Exploding Canvases Elizabeth Murray," *The New York Times*, May 8, '81.

Cohen, Ronny H. "Elizabeth Murray's Colored Space," *Artforum*, Dec. '82.

Gardner, Paul. "Elizabeth Murray Shapes Up," *ARTnews*, Sept. '84.

Rosenthal, Mark. "Jennifer Bartlett/Elizabeth Murray," *Art of Our Time—The Saatchi Collection*, Book 4. (London: Lund Humphries, Ltd., '84).

Perrone, Jeff. "Hugging and Tugging," *Arts*, Feb. '85.

Storr, Robert. "Added Dimension," *Parkett* (Zurich), No. 8, '86.