Welcome to Episode 93: Elizabeth Murray: Boundless Possibilities of Paint and the Canvas

I experienced female painter Elizabeth Murray's work for the first time about a decade ago at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut. Their Morgan Great Hall gallery, was home to the Wadsworth's collection of American and European history paintings displayed salon-style. Designed in 1907 by Beaux-Arts Benjamin Wistar Morris, the Morgan Memorial was built by J. Pierpont Morgan between 1908 and 1915 in memory of his father. It was renovated and reinstalled for the first time in 2011 with large-scale works from the museum's Contemporary art collection. The once scarlet red walls were painted grey displaying monumental works from the 1950s to the present. The Director Susan L. Talbott noted that the "reinstallation brought new life to the museum's historic space, enabling the public to experience familiar galleries in new ways." Well known artists such as Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol graced the walls.

And from across a Frank Stella painting, on one side of the gallery, I experienced contorted shaped canvases, jutting out from the wall, Elizabeth Murray's painting *Slip Away* blew me away. What immediately drew me in were the layers of garish, bright colors; red, blue and black pulsating within large geometric and organic forms. In the center a red curved kidney shaped form, an abstract figure of a woman, atop a bright blue bed, tipped upwards revealing two of its gyrating legs, the figure's bottom is hollowed out to reveal a white shaped egg. The forms, seemingly dance, animated like old cartoons. This is a recurring motif in Murray's paintings--the New York Times wrote "she reshaped Modernist abstraction into a high-spirited, cartoon-based, language of form"

*Slip Away* is representation of a mother about to give birth. It visually leaps off the wall--experiencing this work changed completely the way I see painting. Unique and instinctive she breaks away from the artistic traditions of creating an illusionistic three dimensional space on two dimensional canvases. The PBS series Art 21 highlighted her in season 2 in their celebration of contemporary artists--In the segment she is described as playfully blurring the lines between the painting as an object and the painting as a space for depicting objects.

I immediately felt a kinship with Murray; the physicality of this piece, the colors, she tries as she said to "have an image and not have an image." She put content into abstraction. said artist Deborah Kass. Her subjects include domestic life, relationships and the nature of painting itself. Her daring paintings are layered resulting in works that are part sculpture and part painting.

Murray said about her artistic process: "I see the image slowly take form. There's a suspension for me in making my work. She uses images from experiences in her life. Familiar objects like cups, utensils and chairs and tables--rendered as cartoony shapes; they are as Murray describes "blumpy and rounded and inflated and sort of wacky."For years, I have painted tables, cups a few shoes--I usually am thinking of something specific.

Within the story of Western art, Murray is identified as a Neo-Expressionist artist. Formed in the late 70s and early 80s, Neo Expressionism was an art movement that reacted against the era dominated by conceptual art and the restraint of minimalism. Neo-Expressionist artists revitalized the return to the traditions of gestural painting. Imagery may come from a variety of sources but it retains a "return to brash and emotive artworks in traditional and accessible formats, like the canvas or sculpture." The deliberate crudeness in its use of artistic materials reflect deep feelings in the artist. Some of the celebrated artists from this movement include Jean Michel Basquiat and Julian Schanbel.

What makes Murray's paintings stand out is that wonderfully goofy cartoonish loopy style of hers. This was rooted in her childhood. Murray said, " All of my ideas about art came from looking at comic books. I remember writing to Walt Disney to ask if I could be his secretary...I think cartoon drawing the simplification ,the universality, the diagrammatic quality of the marks, the breakdown of reality, its blatant, symbolic quality--has been an enormous influence on my work." She gives us fresh insight and a fresh vitality, to see from a radically different angle--in particular through her unconventionally-shaped canvases.

Born in Chicago in 1940 from a modest family, Murray dreamed about being an artist. From an interview in Art News magazine, she described it. “We moved around a lot and finally settled in Bloomington, Illinois. My family started out with the usual upper-middle-class expectations, but my father became ill. Financial setbacks made it very difficult for my parents, who had to deal with the death of their dreams. My brother and sister and I learned at an early age that life wasn’t like the movies. It was hard on us, but getting reality drummed into me at an early age made me strong. The important thing is that my parents always encouraged me. My mother had wanted me to be an artist, but when she was growing up women did not have careers. I loved to draw and started when I was very small, scribbling with a pencil. My father said, ‘Oh, you’ll be an artist . . .’ Can you imagine what that meant to me, hearing him say that?”

At the school of her birth city's major museum Art Institute of Chicago, is where she trained to be a commercial artist. Here is part of the story I love and where I find my kinship with Murray. Through its collection at the Institute, Murray saw great paintings for the first time. In particular, Paul Cezanne a pioneer in modernism, who represented figures and objects as geometric and volumetric forms--he is famous for his signature still lifes, apples on a tipped surface; his landscapes of mountains and trees realized through patches of color. Murray's discovery of the collection's two still lifes and a portrait of Cezanne's wife pivoted her artistic sensibility. Artists like Cezanne and some of the earliest modernists alongside the vitality of Chicago inspired Murray to declare her ambitions as a painter. She would also "go upstairs to view de Kooning's Excavation to see how he manipulated the paint," recalled Murray," I had an idea of what it ought to feel like to make a painting. It's a very inner experience. when things go well you stop thinking about what you're doing. I finally put it together and discovered how to get my feelings out. It's not that you learn how to paint--anybody can do that--but you learn how to be expressive with paint." It was her encounters with Pop Art that is owed for Murray's exuberance to incorporate the loopy drawing style of Walt Disney. In the late 60s she moved to New York City and it was there she made significant changes to her approach--she became more experimental and pushed through the restraints of more modestly scaled paintings to sprawling works, like the painting *Slip Away*.

We can see the rhythmic sensibility, the pulsation of a surface that twists and binds in an earlier work, *Wave Painting,* 1973. The painting reminds me of a sheet on a clothes line outside drying in the wind. Bright red with a swaths of blue the surface of the work employs interesting geometric shapes and curvilinear lines. It twists without breaking; it is both fragile and yet its contours remain solid to the extreme manipulation.

*Her Story* a work from 1984 is a complex assembly of surfaces about her mother who died in 1983. "I associated books with my mother, said Murray. *Her Story* is really a portrait of her sitting with a book, holding a cup." It is a challenge for the viewer to make out those details; they have been so thoroughly abstracted. The assembly of surfaces include geometric shapes, two triangles in opposing directions veer your attention, a rectangular piece sits atop with jagged cut out pieces. the colors are bright blue, green, yellow with patterns of purple. Knowing the context, I attempt to envision her mom with a book and perhaps a cup of tea, but the tornado of colors and patterns and geometric lines, I am no longer a viewer contemplating a portrait of a woman reading a book, I am ushered into the work those shapes, those colors, transfixed by the Murray's visual vocabulary. And even as I am pulled in different directions, there is a sense of cohesiveness in the piece. The shapes she selects, as critics call are "shattered" or "overlapping" canvases cut from the sheet with a razor blade and then fitted, like dress patterns. *Her Story*, and I love this description, "is a contemplative moment to do with reading remembering thinking about how all the pieces fit together (both literally and figuratively) It is at once a portrait of the artist's mother and a self-portrait." That just gives me goose bumps.

Her progress of painting and overlapping shapes, works may take from 2 months to a year to complete, is an expression of her process. From an interview in 1984 in Art News magazine, Murray said "Basically I follow my nose. I get bored with analytical thinking, arranging. The work appears to be getting more sculptural, but I'm interested in the illusion of making something look 3-D in 2-D space. Anyway I want the panels to look as if they had been thrown against the wall and that's how they stuck together." and yet the collision and tipping of swerving shapes, are somehow unified by Murray's hard-edged focus.

She died in 2007 from cancer. She was 66. Murray is distinctive because she abandoned the traditional rectangular canvas and instead made eccentric and irregular shapes that writhe and undulate with energy and vitality.

Murray reveals part of herself in her often strange paintings. And through that revelation, expressed in her unique visual vocabulary of cartoony flavor, I am transported to see in ordinary objects, like a cup or a book or in the experience of birthing in playful, fantastical ways. She was her own person and took what she needed and then chartered her own way fully committed to the boundless possibilities of paint and the canvas.

Thank you for listening. Resources for this episode are in the podcast notes and images discussed can be viewed on my website at beyondthepaint.net and on Instagram @beyondthepaintpodcast. What do you think of Elizabeth Murray and her vision of zany and vibrant images--I would love to get your insights--email me at bernadine@beyondthepaint.net.