

Margaret Murphy

A Ten-Year Survey

*Decoding the Marketplace
coupons, dollar stores, and eBay*





Broken #2 (detail), watercolor and acrylic on paper, 15" x 22", 2010

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Decoding the Marketplace
coupons, dollar stores, and eBay

curated and introduced by Midori Yoshimoto
with an essay by Rocío Aranda-Alvarado

Exhibition Dates:

January 30 – March 7, 2012
Harold B. Lemmerman Gallery
New Jersey City University
Jersey City, NJ

March 28 – May 2, 2012
Kresge Foundation Gallery
Ramapo College of New Jersey
Mahwah, NJ

October 30 – December 2, 2012
Rosenberg Art Gallery
Goucher College
Baltimore, MD



clockwise from left: The Hanged Man, The Fool, Temperance
 each: oil and acrylic on paper mounted on wood, 17" x 12", 1997-2000

Margaret Murphy: A Decade of Critiquing the Commodity Culture

In recent paintings, I have used the figurine as a metaphor for physical change, loss, and perseverance. I would buy the figurines—which were very similar to the tchotchkes I remember many of the women collecting in my Irish Catholic, working-class neighborhood—at dollar stores, thrift stores, garage sales, or even on eBay. I am not emotionally bound to them, and therefore have no problem taking a hammer to them. The resulting fragments became the detritus with which I created my paintings.

– Margaret Murphy ¹

In her self-produced video (image right), *Margaret Murphy: Art and Process*, Margaret Murphy walks into one of many dollar stores that line the commercial main street in her neighborhood in Jersey City, and picks up a girl figurine that caught her eye. It wears a red dress with frills and sits on a crescent moon. As she carefully examines details of the figure, Murphy talks to herself and the viewer: “A little Fragonard, Boucher-esque figure.² Let’s see what she looks like from the back. Yah, it’s kind of nice. Usually what I do first is to photograph these from every angle before painting. So, I check them out from every direction.”³

This video, with its casual do-it-yourself feel, is valuable for revealing the artist and her thought processes. While some artists prefer to keep their studio practices secret, Murphy is very open about hers. Following her in this video, we discover the wide variety of figurines available at these stores, all of which are located within walking distance of her home. The noisy background music and different languages spoken (Hindi and Spanish, for example) at these stores provide a specific Jersey City cultural context, in which these figurines are displayed and sold.

Born and raised in an Irish Catholic working-class neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland, Murphy draws inspiration from camp aesthetic, an undeniable signifier of the working class, and the films of John Waters, another Baltimore native.⁴ Her subsequent education at Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of the Arts (for the M.F.A.), helped her to develop a critical approach, inflected with feminist humor, in her Pop Art style painting.



Margaret Murphy: *Art and Process*, video still, 2011

One of her earliest painting series, *Tarot Cards* (opposite page), from the late 1990s, utilizes the twenty-two face cards of the tarot, while incorporating grocery-store or drug-store packaging imagery into the readings of each card. *The Fool*, for example, contains a hand-painted reproduction of the container of Dexatrim®, a drug that supposedly helps people “lose weight fast.” *The Hanged Man* features five credit cards, realistically painted in detail. The series started Murphy’s critical examination of the American commodity culture, which has continued over a decade.

Notes: The author is grateful to Aileen June Wang and Gus Tsekenis for their editorial support.

¹ Margaret Murphy, “Artist Statement,” 2011, accessed through her website, www.margaret-murphy.com

² Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) and François Boucher (1703-1770) are painters representative of the French Rococo style during the eighteenth century.

³ Margaret Murphy, *Margaret Murphy: Art and Process*, video, 2011, accessed through youtube.com

⁴ John Waters’ film, *Pecker* (1998) was mostly shot in Hampden, a neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland, where Murphy grew up. See Murphy, “Artist Statement.”

The next series, *Henna Hands* (image right and back cover), advanced her aesthetic investigation of American consumerism by juxtaposing cut-outs of supermarket coupons with stenciled henna-hand patterns, which were popularized in the early 2000s by such celebrities as Madonna.⁵ Murphy's versions, though, are composed of recognizable logos of commercial products, such as Tide® (laundry detergent), TicTac® (candy), Dannon® (yogurt), and Thomas (English muffins). Despite their exotic appearance, the source of the henna-pattern stencils is local, an Indian goods store in the Indian district in Jersey City.

By 2004, Murphy established her signature style of painting, which contrasts a dollar store or eBay-purchased figurine against a blank pastel background or fabric/wallpaper pattern. As discussed by Dr. Rocio Aranda-Alvarado

in this catalogue, these paintings do not simply represent American culture like Pop artists did in the 1960s, but highlight the present-day reality of globalization: the majority of these Caucasian porcelain dolls are made in China, for a U.S. market. The saccharine sentimentality of Murphy's paintings is nothing but a thin veil over a piercing assessment of the ironies created by a globalized market.



Celebration (detail), unique silkscreen print, archival digital print and acrylic paint on paper, 29" x 21", 2008-2009

Murphy embarked on a more expansive and ambitious project with her 2009 *Celebration* series (page 15), which was inspired by the artificially created town of Celebration, Florida. In a mixed media work, entitled *Celebration* (detail left), she placed a figurine of a Cinderella, dancing with her prince, in front of a billboard for the town of Celebration. Partially visible text makes up the phrase: "The destination your soul has been searching for." Set within a cameo design against a Victorian wallpaper pattern, this painting draws the viewer into a fairy-tale world reminiscent of Disneyland, which happens to be adjacent to Celebration. The fantasy quickly dissolves, however, once the viewer realizes that the protagonists are simply mass-produced figurines, and that the billboard is an advertisement for a theme park-like town, which exploits people's nostalgia for "good old America." An epic piece from the same series, *American Family Triptych* (pages 8-9), consists of three paintings depicting the crucified Christ in the center with his head cropped out of view, witnessed by oversized figurines of a newly-wed couple, a giant baby, brother and sister, and a dog. The largest paintings ever produced by Murphy, this triptych is a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of an average American family, whose family values and religious faith seemed to have deteriorated over the course of time.

One of the more recent series, *Broken* (inside covers), features partially dismembered figurines, missing such essential parts as arms and feet, against a cold turquoise background. As Murphy states in the epigraph above, the artist took a hammer to destroy them. Produced during the artist's recovery from her own health crisis, these figures not only provided her a means to reconcile her sense of loss, but also became metaphors of physical and psychological suffering, to which any viewer could relate. More significantly, this series signals a critical turn in Murphy's career. Breaking the figurines, which had long been her artistic inspiration, was a ritual move towards a new phase of experimentation. Hardly taking a break, Murphy has already progressed to creating installation works. We await her next move with great anticipation.

Midori Yoshimoto, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Art History and Gallery Director
New Jersey City University

⁵ December 14, 2011 interview with the author: the artist specifically remembers celebrities like Madonna popularizing henna tattoos in her music videos.



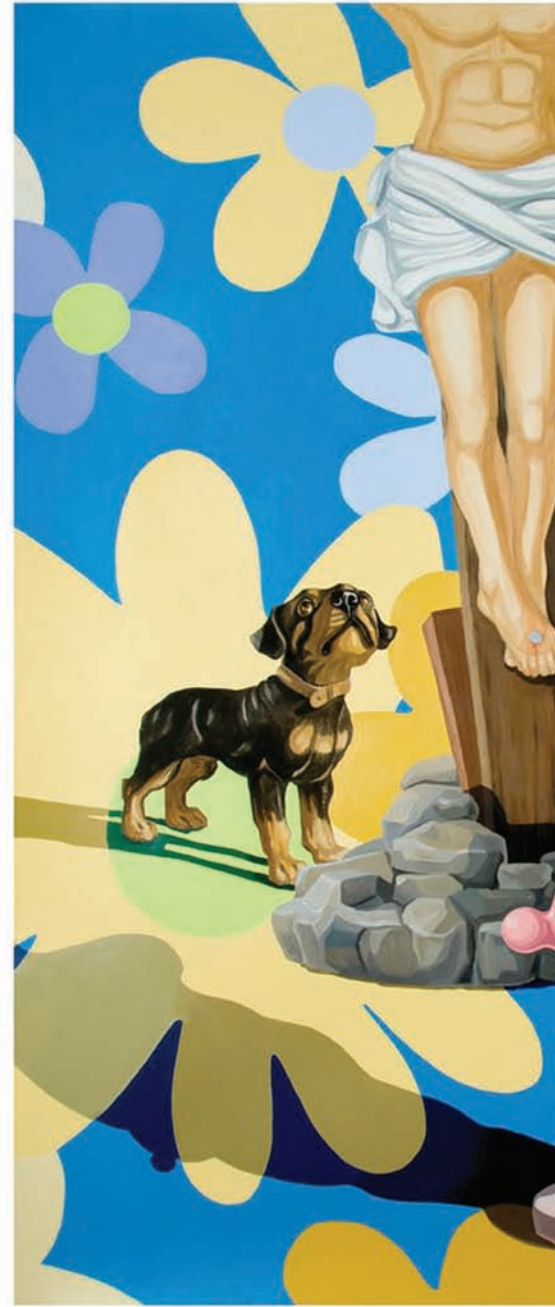


above left:
Sweet 16 #2, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 60" x 40", 2005



above right:
Sweet 16 #1, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 60" x 40", 2005

opposite page:
Sweet 16 with Brice Marden, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 22" x 15", 2005



American Family Triptych, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 80" x 186", 2008. Photo credit: Daniel Mirer





Small informational text panel on the wall.





above left:
Woman 180 Degrees, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 22" x 17", 2004

above right:
Wedding Couple, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 22" x 17", 2004

opposite page:
The Jersey City Museum, Guest Artist to the Permanent Collection: Margaret Murphy,
12-paintings installation, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 22" x 17" (each), 2004-2005. Photo credit: Meredith Allen

Sinners and Saints

Against a vivid blue background, scattered with pink and yellow flowers, a mother sits with her child, carefully combing her hair (page 14). Like a three dimensional object atop a flat ground, they cast a shadow across the flower pattern below them. Sharing a quiet moment, they are forever bound together in this endless gesture of love. In another scene, a female figure leans onto a fabric covered pedestal with her knee. She wears gold high-high boots and a minuscule gold bikini, which barely covers her body. Her curvy buttocks are prominent, as are her fulsome breasts. In the shadow that she casts, her erect nipple emphasizes her nudity under the tiny garment. Between these two figures lie a host of others: young girls, maturing women, lap dancers, debutantes, prom queens, the Virgin Mary, and even the occasional creature.



Mary (detail), watercolor and acrylic on oval paper in oval frame, 20" x 14", 2006-2007

These seemingly incompatible figures represent the ends of the spectrum relating to fixed notions of social roles occupied by women. As feminist artist and writer Joanna Frueh has noted:

Art, mythology, literature, and religion, their ideologies constructing popular concepts, have promoted two interdependent ideas... One notion is that the female body is impure and dangerous and provokes corruption. The other is that the body is sacred, nurturing, and asexual. The Mother-Whore ideology makes it difficult for women to be comfortable, let alone in love, with their bodies.¹

This dichotomy is at the core of Margaret Murphy's figurative paintings and underpins the meaning, each figurine becoming a static role that young girls and women are at pains to fulfill. Her works freeze each moment of pose, dress, and attitude, alluding to struggles of sexual, social, and cultural identities.

Some of Murphy's works focus specifically on the backs of female figures. Enigmatic and mysterious, these works provoke even more questions from the viewer, who is left to wonder about the features, the gestures that remain invisible. A series of larger works, entitled *Sweet Sixteen* (pages 6-7) also seen exclusively from the back, features young girls in fancy dresses as though prepared for their proms or their quinceañera or sweet sixteen parties. Faced away from the viewer, the figures are frozen in a moment that will never be completely revealed. Inherent in these poses are excitement,

pleasure, and anticipation, all bound up with anxiety, apprehension, and teenage fretfulness. The reality of life at the threshold between youth and young womanhood is held carefully in check, each figure remaining known to us only through the fullness and color of her skirt and her gloves; the length, color and texture of her hair, and the tone of her skin.

Equally present throughout Murphy's work is the legacy of Pop Art and her love for the humble decorative object—what many people would call kitsch—is palpable. She chooses her objects carefully, however, so that even the most humble plastic figurine is reconceived through a magnitude of gesture, a subtle elegance. While American painters of the 1960s were heralding the design and appeal of American consumer products, Murphy's paintings address objects that abound as a result of globalization. The prevalence of objects made in

¹ Joanna Frueh, "Feminism," *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. Thomas H. Kocheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989): 41.

China and distributed through dollar stores around the world are here isolated so that, instead of seeing them as evidence of mass production, we look at individual figures, concentrating on their expressions, their movements, their uniqueness. These Chinese-fabricated objects, tightly bound to American culture, become ironic symbols of hegemony. The global need to collect and display them, to give them away as mementos, to gather them as evidence of beauty only adds to their allure.

A reference to material culture is seen in the variety of patterned backgrounds that the artist uses. These wallpaper designs equally evoke the arabesque excesses of nineteenth century parlors and the spare forms and autumnal colors of 1960s living rooms. The oval paintings, particularly reminiscent of the Victorian era, feature a variety of figures that includes tiny dancers, pensive Southern belles, and ladies of the contemporary burlesque. Prim, saucy, proper, tempting, the figures are a mix of those we observe with tenderness and those that evoke our desire. Perfect plastic legs are encased in stockings, curvaceous limbs of resin are displayed like eye candy. Figures clothed in historic fashions are captivating with elegant gowns of every color. A young woman extends herself across a chaise lounge, surely reading and rereading a letter from her lover.

In *Rabbit Ears* (cover image), we see the figure's hair in motion, her skirt billowed up by the passing breeze. She stands atop a pad of green leaves and a bright red flower, a form that is repeated at the strap of her dress. Her face, arms and hands remain out of view. Searching the form of her shadow for clues, we see how the effect of the wind on her hair gives her entire figure the form of a rabbit. This aspect of whimsy is palpable throughout Murphy's works, where children, erotic dancers, sportswomen, mothers, religious figures, and happy dogs are all given a space in which to exist, forever.

Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, Ph.D.
Curator, El Museo del Barrio



Reclining Woman (after Kurosawa), watercolor and acrylic on oval paper in oval frame, 20" x 14", 2006-2007



left to right:

Marilyn, watercolor and acrylic on oval paper in oval frame, 20" x 14", 2006-2007

Mother and Child, watercolor and acrylic on oval paper in oval frame, 20" x 14", 2006-2007

Girl on Border, unique silkscreen print, archival digital print and acrylic paint on paper, 29" x 21", 2008-2009

Fallen, unique silkscreen print, archival digital print and acrylic paint on paper, 29" x 21", 2008-2009



About the Artist

Raised in an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland, Margaret Murphy's practice is borne out of the deep mythology, working class value system, and inherent sexism she was steeped in from birth. After receiving her BS degree from Towson State University in Maryland *summa cum laude* in 1990, and her MFA in Painting from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University in 1992, Murphy spent two years in Chicago teaching and making art.

She then settled in Jersey City, where she has lived for the past eighteen years. The city, which is in close proximity to the New York arts scene, is uncannily similar to the Baltimore of Murphy's youth, with its working class vernacular, and population of eccentric characters. In Jersey City, Murphy is both rooted to her past, and unmoored from constraints, allowing her to best create meaningful work.

Murphy's practice is rife with undercurrents of religion, kitsch, and gender politics. In her paintings, videos, and collages, she references themes that have stayed with her since her childhood, many of them informed by the Catholic Church—the early Renaissance altar paintings, the tiny figurines of the Virgin Mary, the Stations of the Cross—as well as issues concerned with feminism as embodied by the Victorian wallpaper, textile design, and the objectified porcelain figurines that characterize her best known work.



The Parlor Paintings, installation at Real Art Ways, CT, watercolor and acrylic on oval paper in oval frames, 20" x 14" (each), 2006-2008.

Murphy, whose work has been exhibited widely, was recently the recipient of numerous awards including fellowships and grants from the Pollock Krasner Foundation (2010); the Pat Hearn and Colin de Land Foundation (2010); the New Jersey State Arts Council (2008); the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, Rutgers University (2011, 2008); the Puffin Foundation (2006); Change Inc.; and finally, two Geraldine R. Dodge Fellowships (2005, 2006), among many others.

Murphy has been an artist-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony (1993); the Aljira Center for Contemporary Art (2000); Newark Museum (2001); the Vermont Studio Center (2004, 2006); Virginia Center for Creative Arts (2005); Weir Farm Trust (2006); Cooper Union (Summer, 2006); Gallery Aferro (2008), and most recently, a project studio residency at PS 122 in Manhattan (2010). In 2010, Murphy was inducted into the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base at the Brooklyn Museum.

Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *New American Painting #63*, *The Star Ledger*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Jersey Journal*, and "State of the Art," a PBS program featuring prominent New Jersey artists.

In addition to her art practice Murphy is an accomplished curator. Recent curatorial projects include *Material Girls* at the Visual Art Center of NJ, summer 2010. She directed, curated and financed *The Garage* gallery in Jersey City from 2005–2008. Her curatorial projects have been written about in *The New York Times*, *Jersey Journal*, *The Star Ledger*, *Art Fag City*, and *ArtInfo.com*.

Additional information and images are available at: www.margaret-murphy.com



Broken #1(detail), watercolor and acrylic on paper, 15" x 22", 2010



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Harold B. Lemmerman Gallery
New Jersey City University
Jersey City, NJ 07305

front cover: *Rabbit Ears* (detail), watercolor and acrylic on paper, 20" x 14", 2007
back cover: *Henna Hand*, acrylic and coupons on paper mounted on foam core, 7.25" x 4.5", 2001
Dollar store photograph by Margaret Murphy
Catalogue design by Lisa Dahl