



Dwell

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The notion of place in America still stands as an important factor in defining what we want and what we are. The three women in this show—Lisa Dahl, Susan Hamburger, and Margaret Murphy—apply the concepts of home and decoration to their skilled and subversive art. Kitsch lives deeply in their work, but it serves as a warning that all is not well in the increasingly frayed pursuit of the American dream. The idea of a sublime residence, or an esthetic whose rhetoric has moved past its usefulness, looms large in these artist's representations, which undermine the life of consumption in not so subtle ways. Can the failure of American culture be represented in media associated with the portrayal of something beautiful? It seems to me that this is harder than one might think; the act of painting has a history in which the depiction of turpitude is engaged, but at a cost—beauty may be more easily acknowledged and revealed than the immoral in art. Nonetheless, the artists are determined to investigate the consequences of a culture neck deep in consumerism; they note the loss of innocence and expose the life of the cliché.

Lisa Dahl records the absurdities of suburban life by painting over color photographs she has taken of houses that sit in fine settings; she acknowledges as an influence the format of homes reproduced in real estate magazines. *Blush Glitter* reduces a home within a formal garden to a featureless state of pink; the wide path leading up to the house in the background and the beautiful sky above it cannot redeem the seamless frontal presentation of a home without attributes, without any means of entry. In *House Camouflage with Round Tree*, Dahl documents another exquisitely tended garden, with a light-green lawn flanked by a curving road in the foreground and a thin strip of water and a row of trees in the distance. In the middle are two round trees, with one of them hiding a third tree with higher foliage. Here the camouflage is so perfectly rendered, the home hardly seems visible. *House Camouflage with Red Maple* consists of a red maple tree in the midst of carefully shaped green bushes and other trees; closer examination shows that Dahl has painted over a one-storey home with green foliage. The red maple not only centers the painting; it also hides the house that in an earlier version of the image had played a major role in the composition. These houses, hidden from view, suddenly become symbols of a mindless wealth.

Susan Hamburger is a politically engaged artist who refuses to spare those in power. Creating colorful, decorative gouaches that skewer American operators such as Dick Cheney and Karl Rove as well as the Iranian president Ahmadinejad, Hamburger reveals the more sinister aspects of contemporary public life. In *Lyre, Lyre*, the artist portrays Dick Cheney and Scooter Libby; she also shows Karl Rove as a naked putto riding a lion in a black and white composition. As the title's pun suggests, these men's veracity is meant to be questioned. In each case, the seal-like portrait is surrounded by decorations that look like official emblems of the state; this feeling is reinforced by the presence of a bald eagle on either side of Rove's portrayal. In *The Enemy of My Enemy...*, we see a naked Ahmadinejad holding a missile while riding a lion. This collage and gouache on paper repeats several of the stylistic effects of *Lyre, Lyre*, except that the birds standing on either side of the black-and-white painted seal are roosters—cocks of the walk—rather than eagles. This is not subtle satire, but then



left to right: Susan Hamburger, *The Enemy of My Enemy...* (detail); Lisa Dahl, *Blush Glitter* (detail); Margaret Murphy, *Snow White* (detail)

the circumstances facing the world today are not particularly refined. Like all satirists, Hamburger aims to show the world as it really is, and her political insight demonstrates little patience for those who claim the high road but who are actually partisans of power's indifference to suffering.

Margaret Murphy remembers from childhood the kitsch collected by her family and neighbors, including religious figurines and artificial flower arrangements. She paints decorative motifs which often include flowers, but which also contain ominous references. In *Snow White*, the cartoon princess is given diminutive scale; she is barely half the size of a transparent vase with flowers. The background of the image is a pattern rendered in gray, white, and blue; it looks suspiciously like camouflage. The painting is framed by white lace, and so its feeling is quite feminine, except for the fact of the camouflage. In *Seated Soldier*, a man in a brown uniform sits cross-legged, holding a rifle with a telescopic lens; his background couldn't be more absurd: an oval, pink flower motif with a frame of the same color. Its very decorative quality has no visual influence on the soldier aiming his gun, but that's exactly the point—imminent aggression cannot be redeemed by art. *Skulls and Lace*, which consists of a pretty still life of various yellow and pink blooms rising out of a vase, is undermined by a kind of wallpaper behind it, consisting of equally spaced skeleton's heads. A tiny figurine of a horse strides in the foreground; its illogical existence is exacerbated by the deathly grin of the skulls, which make the entire composition ghastly. The composition also points out the strained relations between high and low culture. Yet Murphy is not necessarily referencing simple mortality or a particularly effusive reading of art as aristocratic play; the macabre and vulgar instincts of the painting show that beauty, death, and the culture of affluence are sometimes aligned. Murphy, like her colleagues, is concerned with larger issues than what appears to be; their works are allegories for our brave, new world.

– Jonathan Goodman

Jonathan Goodman is an art critic and writer based in New York. He has authored many articles and reviews for such magazines as *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, and *Art on Paper*. Currently, he is teaching in New York City, where his affiliations are with Pratt Institute and the Parsons School of Design.

Margaret Murphy



Photo by Dennis Murphy

Margaret Murphy grew up in a Baltimore row house where everyone in her working class neighborhood had a collection. Religious figurines, paintings on flocked velvet and artificial flower arrangements graced the walls and tables of her family and neighbors. It is no surprise then that Murphy's paintings are informed by material culture and its ability to reflect, influence, and misrepresent views of gender, culture, class and history. Rendered in a realistic style, Murphy's paintings of figurines and flowers address these personal and societal concerns in a provocative way. Living now in Jersey City, NJ she claims it reminds her of Baltimore therefore it feels like home.

Murphy received her BS degree from Towson State University in Maryland and her MFA in painting from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University in New Jersey. Her paintings, collages and videos have been exhibited in solo and group shows internationally. Murphy is the recipient of many professional awards. These include a New Jersey State Arts Council Fellowship in Painting, a MacDowell Colony residency and travel award, two Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation fellowships, a Puffin Foundation Grant, and a Change Inc. grant to name a few.

Publications and literature include five reviews in *The New York Times*, *New American Painting #63*, *The Star Ledger*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Jersey Journal*, and *State of the Art* – a half hour PBS program featuring prominent New Jersey artists. Online reviews include ArtInfo.com, John Haber art reviews, Fallon and Rosof Artblog, among others. Murphy's work is in the collection of Deutsche Bank, Jersey City Museum, Hudson County Community College Foundation, Deborah Buck and numerous private collections.

