

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.

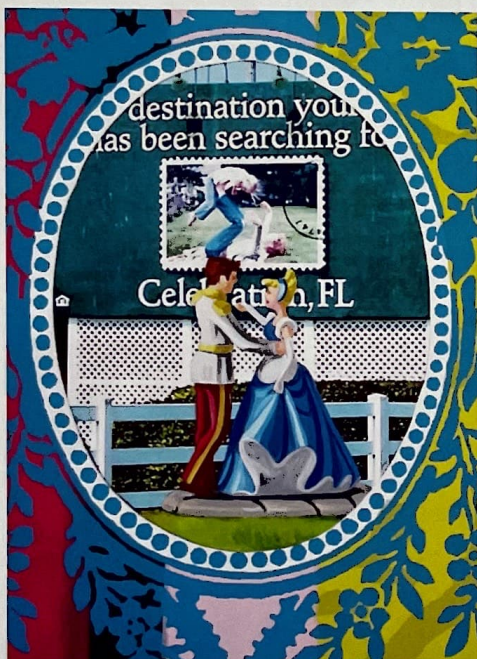
³ Margaret Murphy, *Margaret Murphy: Art and Process*, video, 2011, accessed through youtube.com

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.