

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 thigh-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.

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