



Amy Sillman "[Beyond the frame: Robert Storr and Amy Sillman on Elizabeth Murray](#)". ArtForum. FindArticles.com. 28 May, 2010.

ELIZABETH MURRAY'S WORK was not in fashion, and that is exactly what makes it so very interesting. Being fashionable makes you look good and feel successful, camouflaging you in the consensual taste of your time and the issues of your day. But that wasn't Murray's goal. Instead, her work challenged a triumvirate of safety zones: good taste, the "right" art-historical trajectory, and sophisticated feminism. She posed vexing questions with belligerent awkwardness, making her paintings hard for a whole bunch of people to like, even if they wanted to. Come on, admit it: These works aren't cool. They lean in on you and get up in your face, all rounded and overly present like a bucktoothed midwestern cheerleader. The palette is jarring and too bright. The lumpen forms are uncomfortable, either overworked and crafty or totally slapdash. And the gender politics make no sense. Her so-called domestic imagery is more like a thorny essentialist nightmare than a feminist stance. What to do about a female painter who has abandoned her impeccable Minimalist neutrality for pictures of cute animated cups and saucers, shoelaces and beds, all seemingly rendered in a dialect of Cubism, in conversation with Cezanne and Picasso? This seems like barking up all the wrong trees and risking gender troubles from all sides. Murray generally ignored both contemporary European art and the Conceptual schema of her time, lodging herself stubbornly within the history of easel painting. The cost of this was to be regarded in critical circles as painfully old-fashioned, or even politically retrograde.

Meanwhile, as a painter she was a badass, a wrestler, ripping it up with the best of them. Her innovations with shaped canvas are as aggressive an inquiry in rethinking the rectangle as has come along, except, of course, with Frank Stella. She was out to rake the frame over the coals, to reformulate formalism, to mess it up and throw it over an edge. She shredded picture planes, pushed them on top of each other, slapping and scraping endless layers of paint or letting colors drip sloppily into emptied gutters that jutted down from gnarly overlaps. For sure, Murray's work never really mutated into proper sculpture that left the wall, nor did it go the way of full-blown installation that ends the dichotomy between space and object once and for all. Indeed, her paintings expressed nothing but love for the tradition of oil paint on canvas on stretcher bars, reveling in those very support structures as bulwarks while doing damage to the traditions that sustain them. What I prize most is Murray's way of overworking a painting almost to death while somehow keeping it looking as if she wasn't really worrying about it. She worked like a rebellious formal deconstructionist whose primary address was to all of painting's heavy lifters, but she was simultaneously plowing over conventional ideas of what masterful technique looks like. Floating like a bumblebee, and stinging like one, too.

Murray was almost a "local" artist in that she was a painter with a specific relationship to her time and place. In the mid to late '70s, she defined a New York-type painting process that had come down from AbEx--a tradition in which the slow, intuitive buildup of innumerable layers and endless alterations was as much a belief system as a way of working. Although this kind of studio practice was already under critical assault in the '70s, Murray was viewed as a kind of hometown hero by many students of painting in New York at the time--especially women--for her defiant engagement with, and against, AbEx painting history. Murray brought a fearless new kind of ugliness to the table

that made her work strange and discomforting, against the grain. But by the beginning of the next decade she was eclipsed--by an emerging global gallery scene, by Los Angeles, by German painting, and by a total critical reevaluation of the very art history that she sought to challenge from within. Her process, her stance, and her whole vibe were totally out, and this unfortunately meant that some of what she had accomplished was rendered invisible. Carroll Dunham described Murray in Artforum in November 2005 as offering "a completely different way past the modernist dilemma, a forward exit strategy." Yes, but before this difference is clearer to us, Murray's language might be all but incomprehensible to an audience unfamiliar with the problematics of her own milieu.

At the time of her 2005 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I was downright impressed by how much resistance her paintings garnered. One should look carefully at anyone who provokes this much discomfort. But the resistance was itself notable as well. Her work elicited some cringeworthy adjectives: cartoony, expressionistic, domestic, and--oof!--kooky. Some would claim that she got flak because she was a woman painter, but on the other hand even some feminist friends of mine said they couldn't quite go there. I do not believe that the responses to her show are attributable to her gender alone--a simple charge of the establishment's misogyny deprives Murray of the credit she is due for her rebellious aesthetics. She tilted her lance purposefully against various taboos of taste, propriety, and gender and thereby exposed some historical problems in painting that she could not, herself, necessarily solve. The strength of the work thus lies partly in its ability to force the question of how tolerant we really are. This question, not to mention the paintings it rides in on, makes for an uncomfortable and eccentric behemoth, forcing us to do an end run around our conventional notions of attraction and repulsion.

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