

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dan Cameron, "Elizabeth Murray: Drawings (1974-2006)" *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2024

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Elizabeth Murray: *Drawings (1974–2006)*

By Dan Cameron
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Elizabeth Murray, *Untitled*, 1999. Watercolor pen and marker with collage on paper, 13 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches. © The Murray-Holman Family Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy The Murray-Holman Family Trust and Gladstone Gallery.

On View

Gladstone

Drawings (1974–2006)
April 30–June 12, 2024
New York

Considering the towering presence of Elizabeth Murray's paintings in the trajectory of American abstraction at the end of the last century, it has become somewhat rare to come across a full-blown exhibition of her drawings. Presumably this isn't because of any shortage of works on paper, but

more likely because anybody who was fortunate to get their hands on one—friends, family, colleagues, bidders at benefit auditions—has guarded it zealously. After all, the proper care and maintenance of Murray’s archipelago paintings requires an institutional-sized conservation budget. By contrast, stewardship of a Murray drawing requires only a cool, dark room.

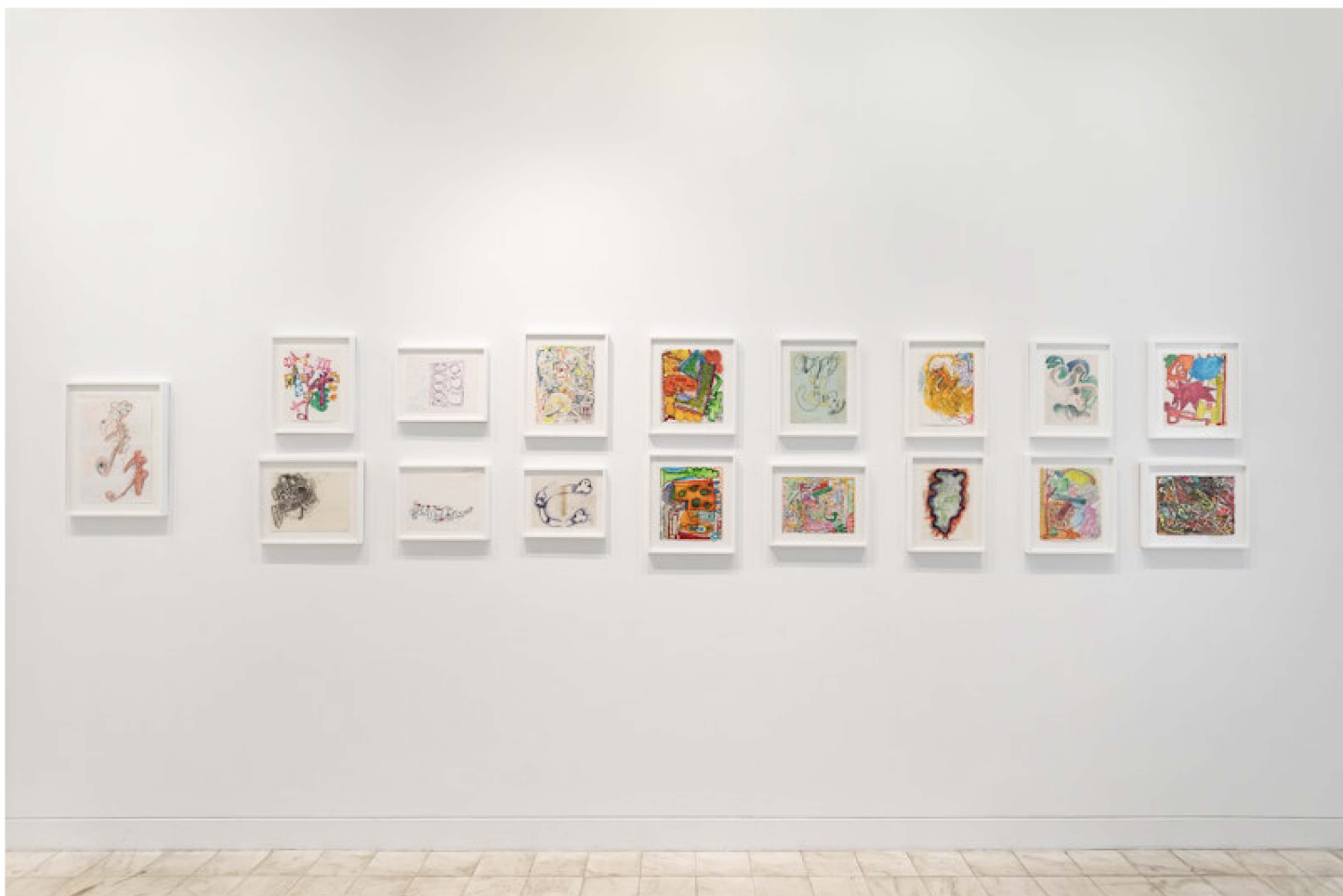
Until now, the one comparable presentation was at the end of 2016, CANADA gallery presented a survey of some forty works on paper (and one painting), organized by fellow artist Carroll Dunham and curator/publisher Dan Nadel. Less than a decade after her passing, the exhibition was mostly positioned as a validation of Murray’s protean ability to combine figuration and abstraction through a multitude of formal and color variations that permitted her to keep making minor tweaks to finished compositions, while also developing works in progress, and creating provisional works that only exist on paper. It also offered a case in point regarding Murray’s legacy, with her estate then managed by Pace. As Roberta Smith drily noted in the *New York Times*, Dunham and Nadel approached Pace asking for works on paper, and essentially brought the whole batch they were offered downtown.



Elizabeth Murray, *Study for "Body and Soul"*, ca. 2001. Colored pencil on paper, 14 x 16 7/8 inches, 17 7/8 x 20 7/8 x 1 3/8 inches. © The Murray-Holman Family Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy The Murray-Holman Family Trust and Gladstone Gallery.

The current presentation at Gladstone’s uptown gallery, by contrast, was meticulously curated by Kathy Halbreich, who was the first curator to organize a retrospective of Murray’s work in the late 1980s. Including more than sixty works, most small in size, they range from 1974 to 2006, the year before her death from cancer at age sixty-six. Here the emphasis is on the intimacy you might expect at the Morgan Library.

Considering that Murray's range of mark-making techniques was uniquely rich and varied, some works appear to have been resolved quickly with one or two tools, while others became transformed into miniature paintings along the way. As an example of the latter, a colorful untitled 2006 drawing painted with marker and watercolor appears predominantly abstract, with a light-green horn-like shape floating above an orange, quasi-figurative form. The composition is laid out almost entirely in thick, colored lines, with the exception of an intricate doodle-like pattern in ink running along the lower left edge, adjacent to a stick-figure standing on an x-ray of its leg, its head bent to one side and alarm signaled by its cartoonish open mouth and widened eyes. The figure's appearance suggests that the rest of the composition may contain other identifiable elements of a narrative, but as no other recognizable form appears, we're left with the uncanny sense in Murray's work that abstract forms and recognizable shapes (i.e., human heads) occupy the same realm of



Installation view: Elizabeth Murray: Drawings (1974 – 2006), Gladstone Gallery, 2024. © The Murray-Holman Family Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy The Murray-Holman Family Trust and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen.

In her 2000 study for Benefit Print Portfolio (*Médecins sans Frontières*), in pen, marker, watercolor, gouache and colored pencil, Murray transforms a low-relief field of cross-hatch marks into a black and orange rendition of what could easily be the bird's-eye view of a surgery room in a field hospital. None of the biomorphic shapes resolve into specifiable forms, but they're suggestive enough that we may be looking at medical tools, limbs, containers, or merely a frenzy of overlapping bodies acting to save a life. Borrowing freely from the vocabulary of surrealist invention, Murray gives us the atmosphere of a nightmare without ever letting us glimpse anything that could be easily pinned down

as representing man's inhumanity to man. The simple palette is thrilling: black employed for background and outlines, orange/yellow for human flesh and viscera, and occasional daubs of white gouache for the occasional highlights that pull the entire composition forward.

Initiating her studio practice at a time in the 1970s when the few options available in abstract painting did not include robust drawing or anything resembling the grab-bag of semi-representational forms that came to define her mature style, Murray employed the tools of drawing to explore, respond, and eventually give herself over to a fully innovative practice that has yet to be fully integrated into the discourse around abstract painting today. Until it does, we have the current exhibition, accompanied by a brochure written and designed by Paul Chan, in which he makes a good case for the capacity of drawing to convey meaning by using the sense of touch as a vehicle for transforming the visual imaginary into a haptic reality.

Contributor

Dan Cameron

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