

In art, as in baseball, cricket or pizza tossing, nothing beats seeing a professional master at work. By master, I mean the operator who is in perfect control of means and ends, who shapes his performance with such crafty discrimination that the eye brims with pleasure.

You are introduced to Todd Murphy's "The New World" by one sculpture seen against a wall in the foyer of Fay Gold Gallery. You then move smoothly into the exhibition space proper. Three large paintings occupy walls all by themselves, show-stoppers they are, allowing no distractions to interfere with their communion with the viewer. The paintings are enlarged photographs, mounted on board and placed behind sheets of transparent Plexiglas. The Plexiglas is painted here and there so as to obscure or only partly reveal some of the images in the photographs. In *Splitting the Girlhood* and *King of Infinite Space* the artist adds more bits and pieces, wires, Christmas tree lights and other stuff to the basic foundation of photograph behind Plexiglas. In some of the paintings, as a bonus, he successfully plays tricks with the viewer, creating a *tromp l'oeil* effect with what looks like an actual red bulb appearing to shed real light on the scene in the photograph.

This is very convincing stuff, the production of a consummate master, but, with Todd Murphy's track record and influence among other artists, any show of his is bound to draw an extra measure of scrutiny. It is not until the second visit that one begins to question the authenticity of the inspiration. The paintings appear as if the dark literature of these dramas has already been fully explored; the results are now more stagy, less dense, less charged with his original

A World Apart

Todd Murphy's "The New World"

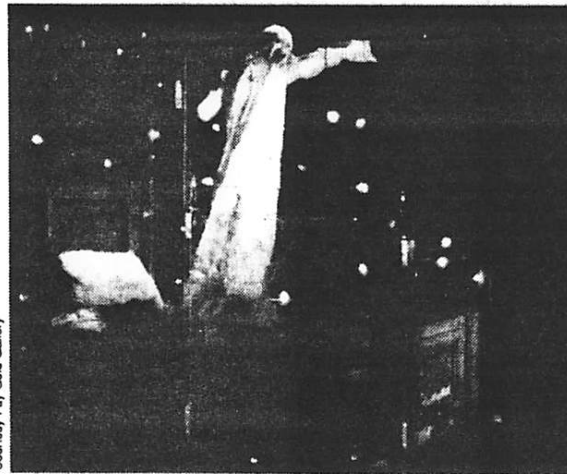
BY DONALD LOCKE

feeling of Gothic mystery. Pictorially adroit they are, but more as a response to professional urges rather than to the internal gut necessity of the picture-making poet.

The single enlarged photographic image appearing in most of the

paintings is placed very loosely against a flat, black background. While this simple device does not strengthen the composition, it is not just an empty background, but an envelope of space. As such, it is a clue to what happens in the sculptures which, incidentally, are exceptionally successful.

The drawings, like the paintings, promise more than they deliver. The edgy, granite-shaped line, if one can excuse this fanciful term, the smudging of the crayon, the enigmatic inscriptions



Courtesy Fay Gold Gallery

King of Infinite Space, 1994, by Todd Murphy

tastefully scrawled on the patched paper, the carefree dripping of paint applied with great care, the collaging of patches of old paintings — all of this is very carefully calculated to stroke the viewer exactly where it is most plea-

asurable. The cartoonist Shultz, of "Peanuts" fame, once said that his drawings were not proficiently executed, but "efficiently so." As masterful as this group of drawings is, there is no churning of the guts as is promised by the pictorial strategies they utilize. They are, however, "sufficient unto the purpose."

When you come to the sculptures, however, as Jerry Colonna once said, fracturing the language with telling effect, "it's a different color of a 'nother horse.'" There are still vivid memories of

Todd Murphy's sculpture *Bee Boy*, which he showed some years ago at the Lowe Gallery. Oh, that sculptors could paint paintings as well as he makes sculptures.

There are 13 of them. Simply described, they are made from found objects, from fabrics, dolls and wooden sculptures from Africa, Indonesia and here in the U.S. All this material is taken in to that vast, echoing, heroic mausoleum Todd Murphy calls his studio. They are then chopped up, re-assembled with heads, bodies and torsos freely interchanged, and then partially covered with common salt mixed with an adhesive. They emerge as radically re-figured beings. Sounds like a project in Three Dimensional Design 102, doesn't it? But this is no rookie artist. He invests each newly fashioned sculpture with an eerie tactility, making the other works in the show seem false and stagy by comparison.

In every one of these 13 pieces, the tactile sensations come with an evocation of what one should call "The Poetics of Decay," the beauty of objects and substances, "the antique," whose active lives have ended, but which still live on in the imagination of the artist. It is this sense of beautiful decay which, contradicting the tactile quality of the sculptures, makes the viewer stop short, afraid to get too close. Any nearer in physical distance would break the spell and unforgivably offend the spirit inhabitants of these sculptures. That is the hand of Murphy the master. ■

Todd Murphy's "The New World" is on exhibit at Fay Gold Gallery through Nov. 8. Hours are Monday-Friday 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. 247 Buckhead Ave. 233-3843.

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