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West,

Young Man

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**In Atlanta, Todd Murphy
was merely appreciated.
In L.A., they bought his art.
by Vincent Coppola**

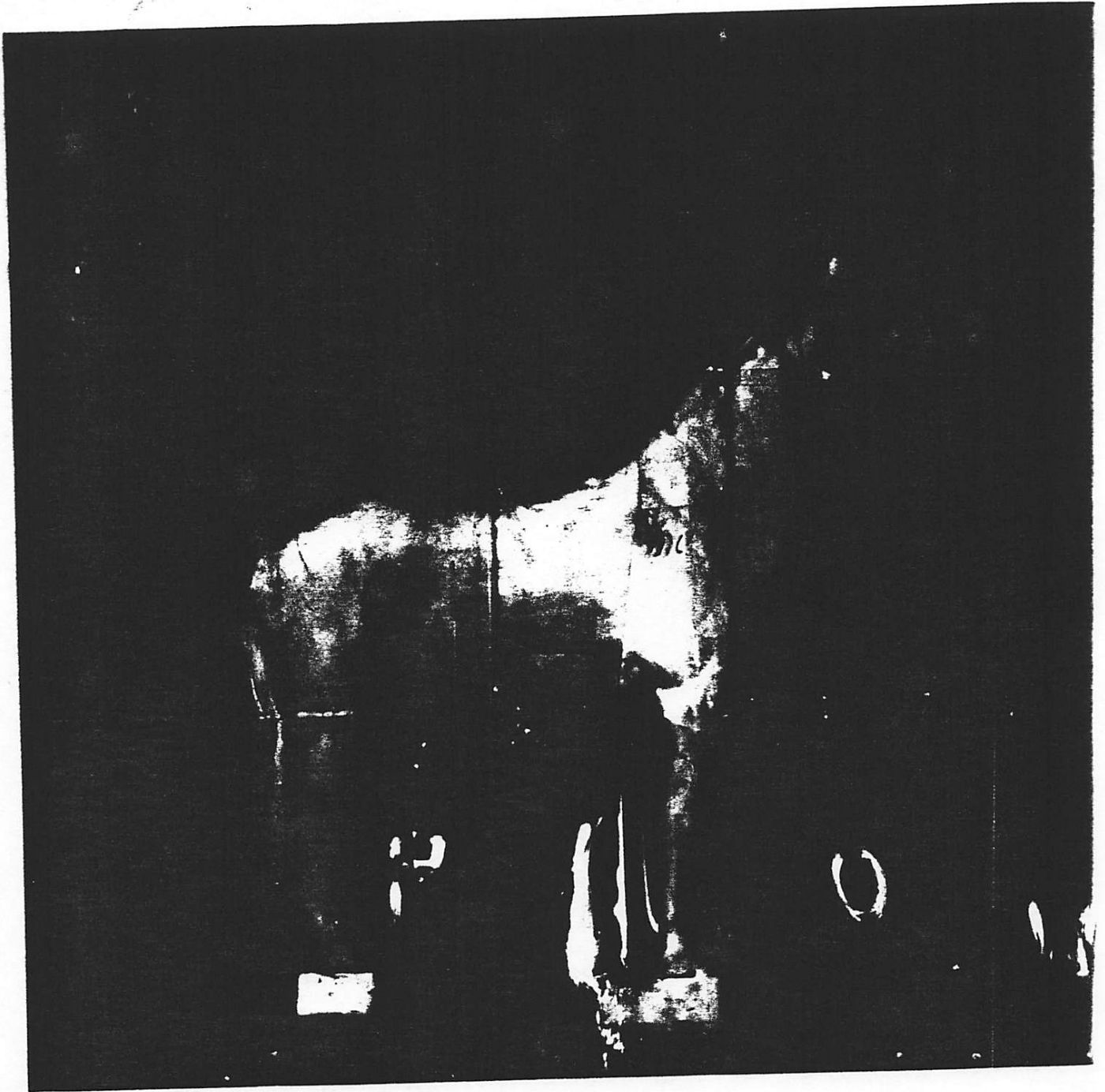
ord spread quickly that a new gallery had opened in Santa Monica: a hot young artist was on the scene. Someone to see, and more importantly, be seen around. So they came — celebrities, serious collectors, artists, students and hangers-on — by the hundreds, to celebrate themselves, of course, and to celebrate the arrival of The Lowe Gallery of Atlanta and a 29-year-old Atlantan named Todd Murphy. Sugar Ray Leonard and footballer Marcus Allen were there. Sissy Spacek came later, as did mega-collector Peter

Norton and Ron Meyer (president of the powerful Creative Artists Agency) and representatives from the Whitney Museum biennial committee.

As they entered the Lowe Gallery, each of these self-assured, sophisticated Californians was struck by the sheer beauty and passion of Murphy's monumental paintings, some of which ran more than 20 feet in length. Many were moved: some to tears, others to open their checkbooks. Allen paid \$32,000 for a hauntingly beautiful piece titled *DiDiBurlesque*; Leonard spent \$15,000. (Elton John selected a piece for his Park Place condo before Murphy's exhibit left Atlanta.) By the time the show closed in March, four major pieces had been sold and Murphy's work had drawn the attention of the *The Los Angeles Times*, *Art in America* and other well-regarded art journals.

Photography by Daemon Baizan





At The Lowe Gallery opening in L.A., footballer Marcus Allen paid \$32,000 for a hauntingly beautiful piece by Todd Murphy. Sugar Ray Leonard spent \$15,000.

Gallery owner Bill Lowe's boast that "people sensed they were in the presence of an historic body of work," seemed almost justified.

Ironically, Murphy has been largely unknown in Atlanta . . . his work unfamiliar to the Buckhead establishment and the major corporations who eagerly collect "known" artists (i.e., those with a New York or European imprimatur). Free-spending art consultants and interior designers who can showcase young artists prefer to shop name artists at established galleries like Fay Gold's in Buckhead. The Lowe Gallery's gutsy crusade to propel Murphy and a half-dozen other unheralded Southern artists into the national arena — the Los Angeles venue a part of that strategy — has gone largely unremarked. Gudmund Vigtel, former director of the High Museum of Art, "never walked in here in 2 1/2 years," says Lowe, "never came to an opening, never communicated to us about artists." In a sense, Murphy's story is really two stories. The first a portrait of a young artist struggling to come to terms with himself and his extraordinary talent. The second the story of a young, insecure city torn between its traditionalist past and its lust for an exciting but often uncertain future.

Soft-spoken and self-effacing, Murphy is a true Atlantan: he wasn't born here. His family migrated from Chicago to Sandy Springs when he was 10 years old. One of four children, he wrestled and played football (linebacker) at Marist School, enrolled at the University of Georgia willing, he says, to embark on the white-collar path — "pre-law . . . advertising . . . journalism" — his father, Hank, might have preferred for him. Willing yet unable. Even as a child, Murphy had a gift that went beyond his ability to draw and render: a sensibility, a way of looking at the world that did not lend itself to the macho regimen of the locker room and corporate suite. A gift that perhaps frightened and confused him because it ran counter to the straight-ahead career of his father, an ex-paratrooper who grew up on Chicago's tough southside and is now a senior partner at Arthur Andersen in Atlanta. For his part, the elder Murphy says he never set strict parameters for his son. "His career objectives are entirely his," he says. "I wanted him to get as much education as he could. That's all I care about."

At Georgia, Todd amassed about 250 hours searching for the "right" career and never graduated. "In my heart," he says, "I knew I was biding my time." He worked on a TV show in Los Angeles, enrolled in a Russian studies program at

Harvard, spent a critical three months on an archaeological dig in Tunisia in 1987 where he met "dedicated people who loved what they were doing. I realized one person's definition of success is not necessarily another's."

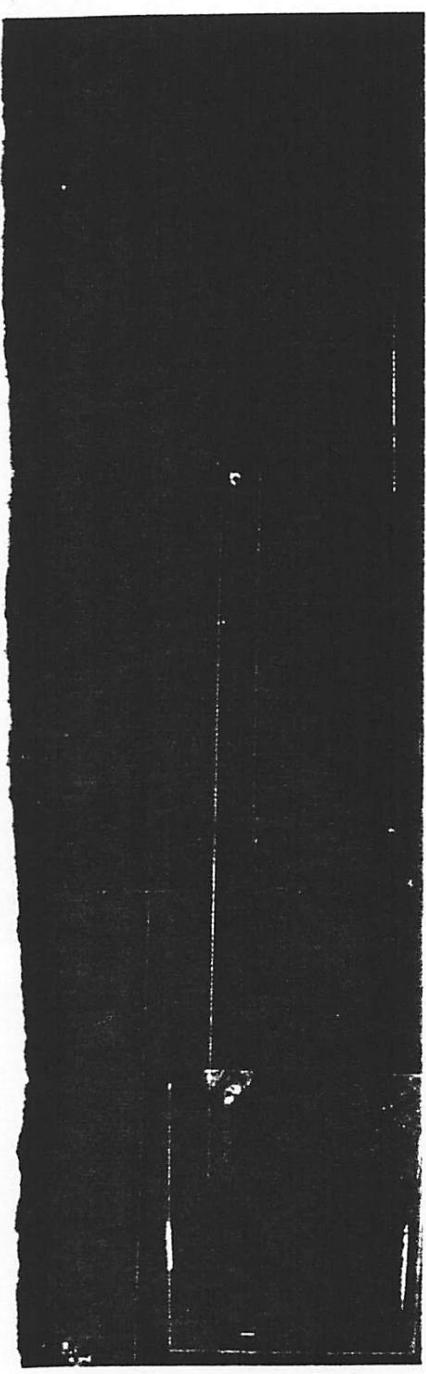
He drifted back to Athens, a creative hotbed that had birthed the B-52s and R.E.M. and was a burgeoning arts center in its own right. Murphy moved into a storefront that he renovated in lieu of rent. "I was poor . . . poor . . . poor," he says sitting on a ragged cloth chair in his "new" studio, a chill, grim 10,000-square-foot space on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive that most homeless people would pass up. Murphy sleeps there most nights on a cot, unable to separate himself from his work.

In Athens, Murphy threw himself into his art, painstakingly developing a "visual vocabulary" to express the themes and images crowding his brain. His most recent pieces are complex assemblages involving photographs, paint, objects and other materials sheathed in Plexiglas. There is a tenderness to Murphy's work despite its monumental scale, a yearning for beauty and compassion. It is figurative, immediately accessible, a reaction, he says, against the lifeless conceptual art so long in vogue. "So much art is charged with hopelessness, ugliness and sterility," says Murphy. "I'm interested in making beautiful things. . . . People are thirsty for beauty."

On a more personal level, there is a challenge in these paintings, a questioning of stereotypes and assumptions that goes beyond mere gender-bending. In some instances, male figures are dressed surreally or in wedding dresses, seemingly poised to escape or leap headlong into the abyss. "Todd's work is very much about vulnerability," says Bill Lowe. "About taking risks." Others see much more specific meaning: a child eternally struggling to please his hard-nosed dad.

"His father is a gift to his creative passion," says Lowe, who sees himself as a mentor to Murphy. "It's not as Pat Conroyish as people make it," responds Murphy, referring to the conflict between novelist Pat Conroy and his father, Don, also from a blue-collar, sports-loving Irish family in Chicago. "My father taught me to be strong-willed and strong-minded. And that's what I am."

Like a thousand starving artists before him, Murphy made the traditional pilgrimage to the art world's Mecca — and fled back to Athens after a week. "I realized I wasn't going to be an artist in New York," he says. "I was going to be a waiter." Something deeper was at work: clearly Murphy would create wherever he



Murphy's art is figurative and immediately accessible, a reaction against the conceptual art so long in vogue. Above, a painting called *Plow*.

lived. He'd fallen in love with "the landscape . . . the history . . . the strangeness . . . the dignity" of the South. It possessed him, fired his imagination. "I am about the South now," he says in his ruined studio. "This is where I do my best work."

Murphy developed a loyal following in Athens. Encouraged, he exhibited at Candide, an "arts pub" in Buckhead, then at the Trinity Gallery in downtown Atlanta, where his works sold in the \$2,000-\$5,000 range. An article in the Sept./Oct. '89 issue of *Southern Homes*, says Lowe, "made it very evident to everyone that he was extremely talented." He was briefly associated with Fay Gold, the doyenne of Atlanta's art scene and a national figure in her own right. But Murphy wanted a one-man show and a relationship he felt he could grow into. "I asked Fay, 'Where do you see yourself in 10 years?'" says Murphy. "She said, 'I'm already there.'"

The Lowe Gallery, put together on a shoestring by two Alabama-raised broth-



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ers, grabbed Murphy immediately. Todd's first show, in January 1991, drew an astounding 2,000 people opening night, backing up traffic on Bennett Street all the way to Peachtree. A young arts crowd turned out in force; and Lowe's publicity in local and national media, plus the favorable *Southern Homes* article, drew attention to the event. Among the crowd were Murphy's mother and father, who apparently came early and didn't identify themselves. "Nobody knew who I was. I could roam around at will and listen to comments from people. People were overwhelmed. That's what impressed me," says the elder Murphy. "It was his parade."

The power brokers from the High Museum, Coca-Cola, King & Spalding — the law firm has a highly-regarded art collection — were conspicuously absent. Private collectors, lawyer Emmet Bondurant, developer Charles Ackerman and carpet mill owner Peter Spitzer among them, have been Murphy's biggest local supporters. Murphy will have another show at the Lowe Gallery in Atlanta in November.

Lowe is pushing ahead, showing other Southern artists in the Santa Monica

gallery. "We are trying to create the cross-pollination [in order] to be taken seriously," he says. He's maintaining national exposure for Murphy by running ads in well-known art publications such as *Art in America* and *ArtSpace*. And he recently purchased seven pages for his artists in a reference book called the *Fine Art Index* — one page more, he says proudly, than renowned gallery owner Leo Castelli has for his artists.

For now, the L.A. imprimatur is a definite boost for Murphy and for Lowe. "There was a feeling," says Bill Lowe, "that if it's an Atlanta artist in an Atlanta gallery, it really can't be important. People in New York and L.A. know Todd's important. When his prices reach New York standards in two years, a lot of Atlantans will be rushing out." His prediction is being born out: King & Spalding bought a Murphy piece last winter; the law firm of Long Aldridge & Norman commissioned one the day the Lowe Gallery in Santa Monica opened. "All of a sudden because we were in L.A., we were real," grumbles Lowe. "Plus they wanted the Atlanta price." ■

Vincent Coppola is an Atlanta Magazine contributing editor.

Right, an untitled work Murphy sold to Sugar Ray Leonard.

