

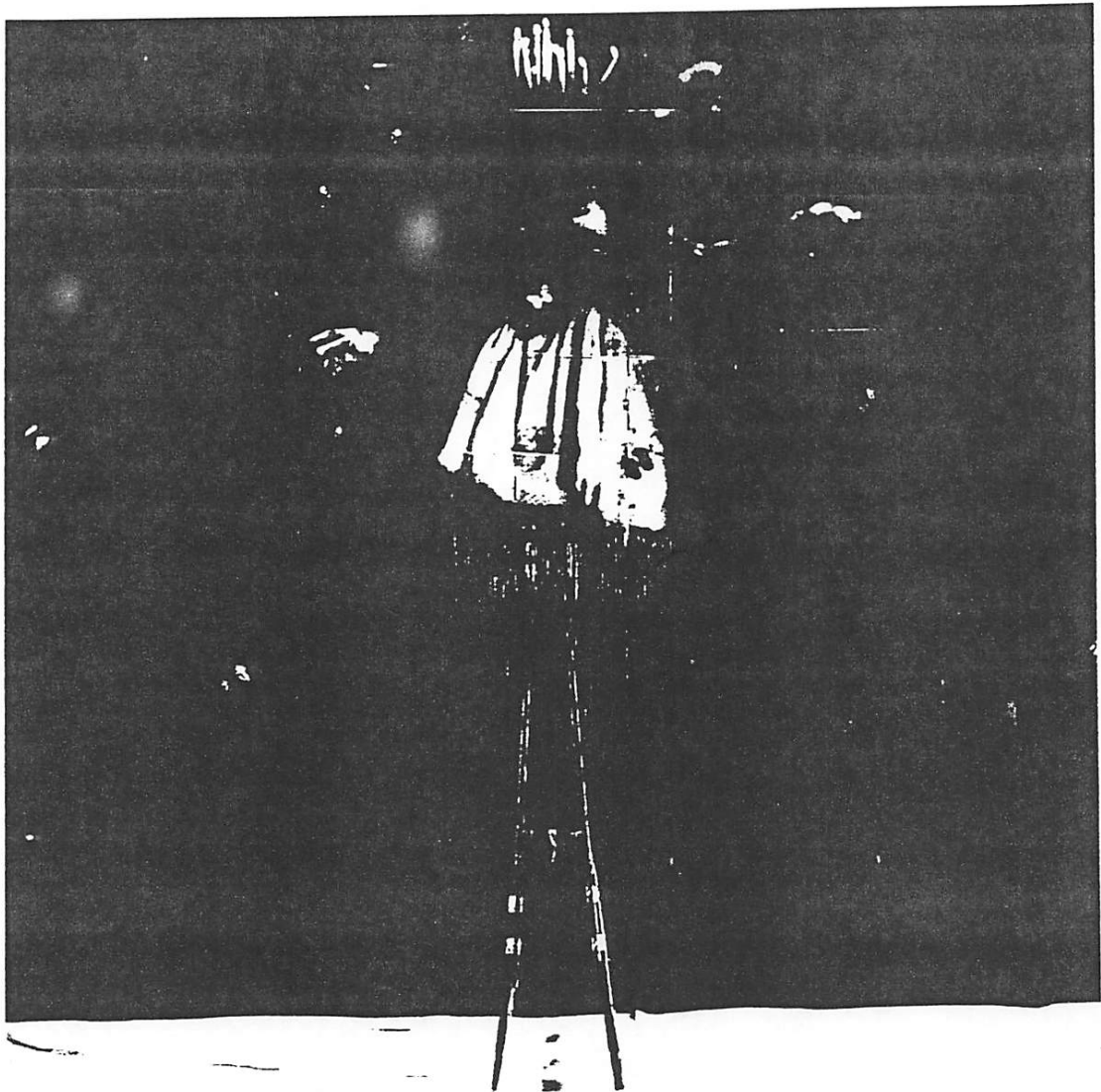
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A GUIDE TO GALLERIES

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TODD MURPHY

MIXED MEDIA IMAGES LARGER THAN LIFE

Todd Murphy's entire world, his warehouse-studio-living quarters and his art are all of the same fabric. This fabric is very old, falling apart and reconstructed, with patches and seams visible everywhere. He is reclaiming a world in decay, piecing the fragments together in a deliberately honest and imperfect way, and

**I N T E R V I E W
T O D D M U R P H Y**

By Virginia McClure

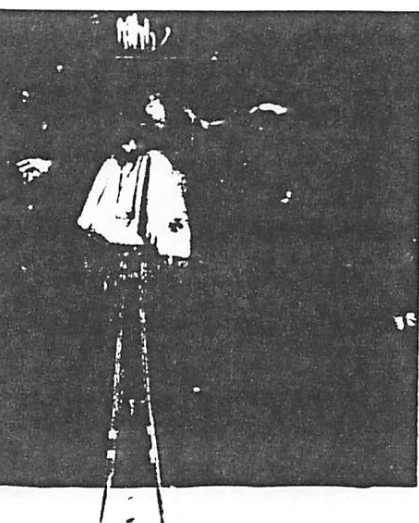
coming up with a new aesthetic that is firmly based in European tradition, but has a distinctly contemporary look. He has occupied an old mattress factory of about 11,000 sq. ft. and decorated it throughout with battered furnishings and art objects, all arranged so consistently in his style to the extent that it is difficult to discern what is in use and what is some kind of installation piece, prop, or found object under revision or repair. Everything in the place looks like his art, showing evidence of a former elegance, yet reveling in the poetry of disintegration. The eerie intonations of Gregorian chants set the mood in the warehouse. It is dark, with the pervasive gloom pierced by spotlights, like the light in his paintings.



Along every wall are his huge paintings, some hung and lit, some propped facing the wall. The pictures are mixed media images of larger than life figures, dressmakers' forms, still life props or live animals, shown in very enigmatic, provocative and even surreal tableaux, dramatically set on a dark, atmospheric background suggestive of the Baroque tenebristic tradition. They are covered with sections of plexiglass of irregular size and shape that overlap, don't quite fit and are visibly fastened with large screws. The images have a startling presence, holograph-like in their depth, but ghostly as apparitions in the twilight.. The honesty of the evident piecing together of the photos, the purposely awkward fit of the plexiglass, and the painterly handling of the surface save the pictures from being slick or gimmicky.

We started our interview by approaching the enormous painting, "King of Birds", 138" x 192", showing a person dressed in a long, monkish gown, head covered, who is holding a model bi-plane and standing on an armchair surrounded

by geese:



"Miracle Vendor", oil, plexiglass and wood (12' x 16'). This thought provoking image teases the viewer into a number of interpretations and associations. Is it about a mythological figure? Is there a moral about honey, butterflies and birthdays, or ivory towers? Welcome to the zany world of Todd Murphy, where things seem to be meaningful, and they appear to make important references...but to what?

the birds and plane, with that title; how would you explain this picture?

TM: I'd say as little as possible. The work has a vocabulary of it's own and the images are familiar things taken from my surroundings, though I do a lot of work with animals, like the horse (pointing to a picture with a life size horse) and the geese. I paint from a visual, emotional point of view...the imagery just comes from some area of my life.

SA: Even the geese?

TM: They were fun. I rented a flock of geese and turned them loose in here. They were wonderful the way they marched around packed in a tight military formation inspecting everything. They settled down fairly quickly and we got to work photographing them.

SA: Let's go to the beginning. I'd like to find out how you got started as an artist and ask you about your mentors and people that influenced you.

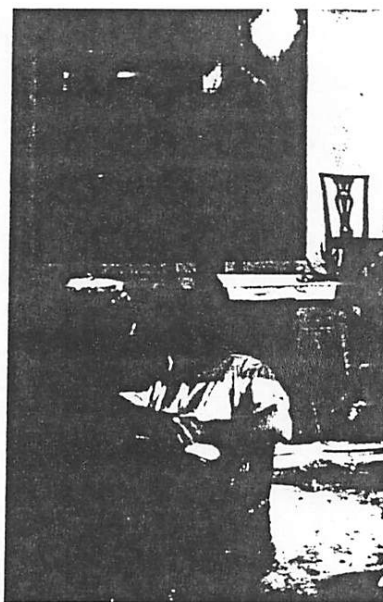
TM: Well, when I was in school, this was what I wanted to do: I just wasn't interested in anything else, so I studied art. But, I'm self taught in photography. I just read up on it and figured out how to do everything. Mentors and influences...I can't really pinpoint what or who influenced me to work this way. In terms of the people I worked with at [the University of] Georgia, I can say that I learned my idea of scale, of infinite space from Jim Herbert. Then I got a lot from Bill Paul about working with different materials. The rest of it is open.

SA: You seem to fit into the contemporary art dialectic regarding all the experiments with multi-layered picture planes. Also there are a number of artists internationally who are working in styles derived from the old masters. Did any of them influence you..... do you classify yourself as a post-modern because of this derivation?

TM: Only indirectly. It's mainly an intuitive, personal direction. It's only natural that there are similarities and common interests since we have access to what artists all over the world are doing through the media, the magazines and so on

SA: What about literary references or the implications in some of the reviews about your work being about the South?

TM: You can interpret my work in many ways. Of course, it reflects my attitude about things in general and my literary tastes, especially regarding the incomprehensibility of life; my thinking in that direction is attuned to Beckett and Spinoza. Still, you don't have to know anything about that to appreciate the work at a visual, suggestive level. The images do contain art historical and literary references, so that view-



ers can find as much as they bring with them in terms of their own familiarity with those subjects.

But I've already said more than enough.

SA: May we step into your work area to see what's going on in there? Aren't you afraid the dogs will shred those photos lying on the floor?

TM: Well, the big one (a brindled mastiff the size of a pony) has a bowling ball as her toy. The other two are trained to leave this stuff alone.

SA: So is this how you start...with the photos...?

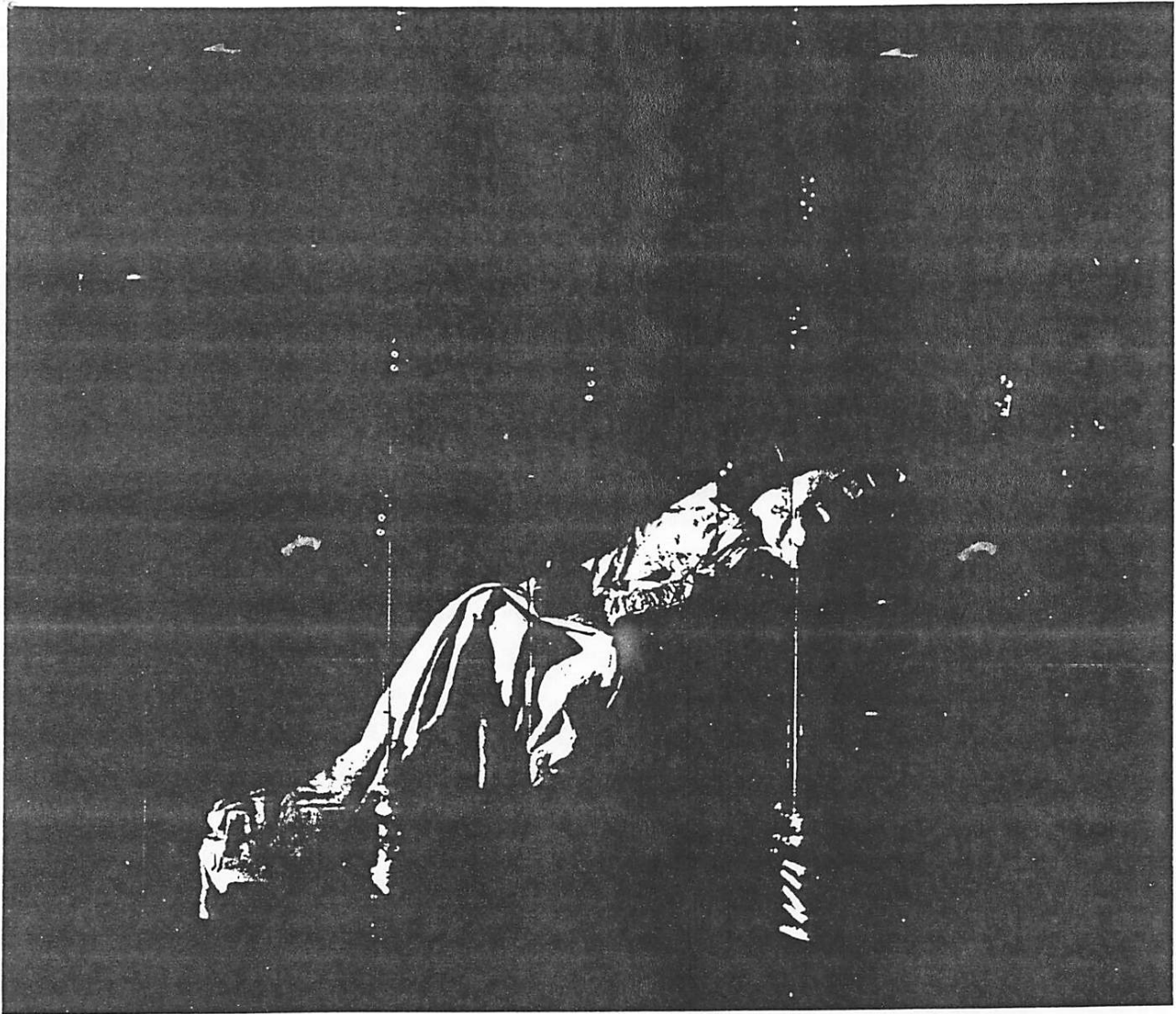
TM: Yes, first I shoot the model and props, then I assemble the photos here on the only accessible surface large enough to work on without a ladder. I mount them on a stretched canvas and then place the plexiglass over the whole thing. That's when the painting, tarring and the collage begin.

SA: What kind of tar and paint?

TM: Roofing tar, art resin, and oil paint.

SA: How do you feel about being so successful thus far?

TM: First I was painting in Athens and not selling anything. Then I moved to Atlanta and wasn't selling anything. I went on painting anyway. Money makes it so you can pay the bills and go on. I'm still the same one staying up all night doing the



In "Cocoon" (12' x 16') the image is powerful enough to make a definite statement about mortality, without the viewer having to think about it being an indirect artistic answer to the traditions in portraiture of the Pope, as in Velasquez or Bacon. It could bear interpretation as a statement about Southern politics, so, according to how you see it, the dead figure could be a Pope, a KKK grand wizard or a clown....it's open.

drawings and doing all the work. Regardless of my gallery success, I would be painting just the same anyway. Financial success is nice just so you can support yourself. My family, my parents and my brother have been so supportive. My friends have helped just by being tolerant and Anna, my secretary/factotum, frees me from having to deal with gallery contacts and all the time consuming business so I can dedicate myself to my studio work all the time.

SA: Tell me about a typical working day for you.

TM: Well, today started yesterday. I was up all night working on some drawings. I quit and had breakfast and a shower, then came out for our appointment. Most days I spent part of the day doing nuts and bolts errands, shopping for props, photo and painting supplies, then I spend the balance of the day working. I stay up all night

going to bed at around 6 am and getting up at 10:30 am; after a few days. I crash and sleep all night.

SA: Any upcoming shows?

TM: I just had an opening at Mindy Oh Gallery in Chicago and in November I'm in a group show, called "Plow" at the Chassie Post Gallery in New York. It's a show for Southern artists.

Photographer Catherine Cardarelli approaches.

CC: Have you about finished? It's time for me to start shooting and I've got the light set up over here.

SA: O.K., we're nearly done. Todd, what would you like to say in conclusion....any final elucidations?

TM: As far as I'm concerned, I've already said more than enough, really more than I usually would.....I paint the pictures and it's up to everyone else to do

all this talking.

SA: Well, you certainly have an impressive career for someone so young. I must say I've never seen anything like this and on such a grandiose scale...It's just amazing.

As Todd sits down for his photo, his dog lavishes her affection upon him.

Todd Murphy has established a national reputation, showing in galleries and museums in California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois and New York. He is currently represented by the Lowe Gallery in Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Virginia McClure, M.F.A., is an artist living in the vicinity of Athens, Georgia. She returned from a 12 year stay in Italy to pay homage to her homeland with landscapes in oil.