

THE BREADTH OF A POET BY PETER FRANK

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TODD MURPHY: BREATHS OF A POET

By Peter Frank

It is hard to believe that his career spanned barely a third of a century, so prolific was his output, and so varied. But Todd Murphy's rich legacy only promised to be richer; his passing was all the more untimely for that. Murphy was driven by an insatiable curiosity – he sought not to “express himself,” but to articulate the endless marvels and marvelous endlessness of the world. He could never run out of subject matter; indeed, he – not to mention his audience – could hardly keep up with the subjects, and possibilities, at hand. But Murphy's hand was as deft as his mind was voracious, and he never let the allure of one subject(-cum-project) distract him from the realization of another. The nobility of a concept required proper formulation in its manifestation. Craft was only one bow in Murphy's quiver, but it was one he counted on and wielded with an admixture of flair and restraint.

In bringing forth his interpretations of everything from American Southern culture to the intellectual structure of the biological sciences, Murphy got neither in nor out of the way of his topics. He let them speak, or infer, on their own behalf, not so much inventing them as casting them as players in the overarching dramatic sequence of his oeuvre. Certain themes connected certain series; for instance, Murphy tacitly condemned the historical institution of slavery in America in the billowing white dresses that float through his “Murmurations” (as well as earlier work) – the dresses, already loaded with cultural and metaphorical suggestion, conjure the fate of chattel African women, and the series both sources and culminates in a monument to Sally Hemings, who “belonged” to Thomas Jefferson (in more ways than one, bearing him several children). In a subsequent series, “Kingdom Phylum Class Order Family Genus Radio,” Murphy looked at the more general racism that inheres to anthropology even as he examined the scientific tendency to denote, classify, and display. What was supposed to be a stable and logical way of communicating and improving knowledge, Murphy indicates, amplified and perpetuated stereotypes: biology was – and very much remains -- as much a weapon of suppression as a tool of enlightenment.

In effect he argued the same for horses, rendering them, with masterful exactitude, as central figures of monumental self-possession but subject to human dominance and attendant abuse. The phenomenal distortions Murphy visits on what remain beautiful sentient beings in the “Transformation Horse” series are at once risible and painful to behold. By contrast, the “Wink” series re-ennobles both beast and man, paying homage to Jimmy Winkfield, one of several African American jockeys who rode – and won – at the Kentucky Derby and other prominent races, here and abroad, at the turn of the last century. In the “Wink” images Murphy invariably depicted Winkfield with horse, effecting a twinning of dignities.

Murphy’s fixation on racism and the misuse of science, manifested since early in his career, proved not simply precocious, but prescient: he mirrored the concerns of African American counterparts, one of the few non-Black artists of the time to address the issue, but envisioned those concerns in terms of poetic elision more than documentary narrative. The moody, crepuscular, even ghostly quality of this work admits to sorrow and guilt, more anguish than anger. Current anti-racist art, by artists of all breeds, encompasses much more of this mordancy, as our historical knowledge of racism broadens and complectifies – and as the struggle for (and, alas, against) civil rights endures.

Murphy made his reputation not just on this message of equality, but on his ambitious, virtuosic delivery of that message in paintings, sculptures, work on paper, installations, the more-than-occasional found object, and whatever else served his restless inquest. Such hybrid assemblies often took on an operatic vastness; certainly, they embrace the theatrical and point to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the Wagnerian “total work of art” that conflates discrete media and disciplines into a unified, if multivalent, experience. Here, too, Murphy exercised impressive foresight early on. Later, he re-examined his own approach to the Gesamtkunstwerk, turning to digital technology to deepen the intricacy and resonance of his work. Murphy was restrained in his incorporation of computers and video projectors; it was clear that a wholesale turn to the digital would divert him down a rabbit hole, swallowing the febrile images and dramas that he already had flickering at the margins of perception. He created stages, panoramas, gnarled presences, paintings in which the void surrounding and swallowing human and other figures was itself a character in the pageant. The electronic element came in not as an issue or gesture, but simply as technical expansion. Still, there it was, connecting Murphy formally to the 21st century – just as he was connected to the 20th and 19th.

For all his expansiveness and breadth of spirit, Murphy's vision was deeply interiorized. He had to coax it constantly out of its shadowy, even sepulchral mode. It is that darkness and quietude that establishes the dimmed and localized light pervading his imagery, a kind of Old Master – specifically Caravaggesque – commingling of murk and brilliance. When Murphy left the South and moved to New York, his work only gained in such intensity, taken over by an intimacy and poignancy that previously had only beckoned from backstage. As it revealed itself in Murphy's work, the human condition became a state not (just) of social and humanitarian passion, but of contemplation and abstraction – abstract attitude and abstract form. In his photography in particular Murphy allowed himself purely compositional play, embedding his passion in texture, form, and a muted but viscerally affecting palette.

Throughout his career Murphy was cited time and again as a “storyteller” and a “narrative artist.” But he never told his stories in a straightforward pictorial (much less illustrative) manner; and by time he left the South he had evolved into a kind of image-poet, inferring ideas at least as much as spinning or elaborating on tales. More and more, the tone and texture of his imagery became characters themselves, even as Murphy's purview maintained its epic proportions. It wasn't so much that he was assuming the mantle of a bard; in fact, he was always nearing that galvanizing position but always steering clear of its full implications. Rather, Murphy was looking for a lyric voice, the lyric voice that kept breaking through the surface until he found the chiaroscuro, visual and spiritual, that could fully liberate it. Todd Murphy's Gesamtkunstwerk required not things to say so much as ways to say them, and the arc of his art takes us from declaration to account to poem. Had he been able to give us another 20-30 years of work, Murphy would have found his way to music, too. As it is, his every artwork is a breaking into song -- into the soul of a song, and into a song of the soul.

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