

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Seeing Spectral Visions in Fulsome Skirts

The artist Todd Murphy uses skirts as a means of projection, making them gateways to mythical realms.

Seph Rodney | November 29, 2016



Installation view, *Todd Murphy* at Marc Strauss (all images courtesy of Marc Strauss)

Dresses, especially those with fulsome skirts, can hide much. Long ones that reach almost to the floor, or traipse along it, conceal what's below the waist, even the wearer's

feet, so that the body under the folds of fabric might have a clandestine life. And what's veiled can easily become a space for projection.

The artist [Todd Murphy](#) uses skirts as just such a means of projection, making them gateways to mythical realms. For Murphy's [solo exhibition at Marc Straus gallery](#), he has placed dresses inside black shadow boxes, and within their skirts he's created otherworldly landscapes. The boxes are lit from the inside, so one can see in each skirt's carved outline a forest of trees denuded by winter, concocted from branches wrapped in copper wire; or a similar woodland at night, pocked with stars and suffused with indigo light; or a sailboat with white sails spilling out. These pieces work because they play on the notion of the feminine mystique (which is made up of a buffet of patriarchal ideology, self-help discourse, and essentialist ideas of what constitutes womanly power). They imagine the territory under the skirt as a place where other realities come into being.



Todd Murphy, "Murmuration (Piney-Woods)" (2016), wood, found objects, archival print, and oil on Plexiglas, 86 x 60 x 7 inches



Todd Murphy, "Murmurations (Nocturne)" (2016), wood, found objects, archival print, and oil on Plexiglas, 86 x 60 x 7 inches

Murphy also dances along the edge of the difference between image and object. Softly spectral images, such as a woman holding a dress and twirling, are projected on the bottoms of the boxes, thus the pieces traffic in the media of photography and video (plus, elsewhere in the show, painting). Yet they also contain sculptural elements: sails made up of small triangles of fabric lashed to supports with string in "Murmurations (Regatta)" (2016) or a whole dress,

bodice included, that becomes a confection of interlaced twine in “Murmurations” (2016).

Murphy’s *Murmurations* series deftly illustrates the metaphorical leap from the everyday object to the visual associations embedded within it. What’s more, in other works in the show, he poetically manifests that tenuous relation between the sign and how it might be physically expressed. For example, a large photographic print of a stag (over which the artist has placed plexiglass embellished with paint) has a spray of branches sprouting from its head; these function as both a regal crown of antlers and a way to render the animal part of the natural scheme that includes the growth of trees. For all these reasons, Murphy’s work feels anachronistic, like it’s swimming against a contemporary tide that moves toward a shore of disenchantment. Our culture constantly reminds us of the ugly underbelly of things. Murphy lets us instead be bewitched.



Installation view, Todd Murphy at Marc Straus

Todd Murphy *continues at Marc Straus gallery (299 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 11.*