

Painting Is a Supreme Fiction

WRITINGS BY JESSE MURRY, 1980–1993

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SAMPLE PAGES

I. CRITICISM

I was faced with the problem of how, and by what means, would I penetrate the art world and declare a position for myself. I was aware that I entered at a time when minimalist and formalist hegemony was in decline, which implied, out of necessity, that the critical doctrine which informed modernism would need to be re-examined. I also knew as I developed my art, I would have to find a way to meet artists, dealers, critics, and collectors and, in the process, get my ideas, if not my work, in public. I took stock of what I had: a command of art history, a vastly accumulated repository of theoretical and critical knowledge, and an agreeable personality that enjoyed dynamic interaction with others. I decided to write.

—Jesse Murry

This section brings together the six major articles that Murry wrote for *Arts Magazine*, as well as a short review on David Smith. They appear here in chronological order, interspersed with transcripts from a pair of 1980 panel discussions and two exhibition catalogue essays. Written between 1980 and 1982, these texts comprise the whole of Murry’s published work (excluding five additional short reviews on contemporary painters, which are not included here for reasons of concision). They are followed by a lecture that Murry delivered about his teaching philosophy in 1984 and a seminar paper, “Painting Is a Supreme Fiction,” written while he was a student of Harold Bloom at Yale, c. 1986.

—Ed.

Quintet: The Romance of Order and Tension in Five Paintings by Elizabeth Murray (1981)

Elizabeth Murray's best new paintings ride on the brink of disaster. They push, at times, to an exhilarating extreme, the tensions held precariously in balance by exploiting the interaction of forms held in dynamic interchange within canvases as eccentrically shaped as the forms they contain. There is new drama in the work, an increased impulse toward figuration and image making, and a use of illusion to engage us in a perusal of her shapes, not so much to disclose their identities as abstract forms, but rather to prompt us into an interpretive seeing of what the forms mean.

We are also made to question how her shapes resonate in a space that has become more and more about establishing order and control and how, by accelerating the tensions of her shapes, they abrogate, lose, and deny the established order. But Murray's work has always taken risks and extravagant chances, thereby going against the grain. However, she has never gone further in running the danger of pushing self-consciousness into a manner as in *Small Town* (1981); or creating exciting new ground in works like *Painter's Progress* (1981) and *Breaking* (1980); or admirably succeeding in bringing to a fine synthesis concerns reflected in her entire career, as in the very beautiful painting *Join* (1980).

Murray's intention was driven by a decidedly romantic impulse that initially manifested itself by turning the formalist notions of unity and balance in pictorial organization and structure on end. The results were, from the first, an invigorating option to the restrictive and tired sensibilities of most minimalist and reductivist painting. The romantic impulse, which continues to guide her work from the mid-seventies to the present, turns on a desire to invent new forms that express in purely aesthetic terms not only visual concerns but an art that implies larger ambition to engage our interest in the relationship between art and life. It is precisely this quality of her ambition that separates her work from the

"Quintet: The Romance of Order and Tension in Five Paintings by Elizabeth Murray." *Arts Magazine*, May 1981, 102-5.

Painting Is A Supreme Fiction: Why I Read Wallace Stevens (c. 1986)

I begin with a trope of evening.

I begin by troping evening as a state of mind. Evening, or vespertinal consciousness explains Augustine and Aquinas after him before the creation of the sun in the first twilight interval of angelic existence, some of the angels perceiving within themselves an image or dim reflection of the creator, turned to the reality above them, to await the eternal morning of the vision face to face, while others remained within themselves and sank into eternal night. I see this as a trope of crossing. For the angels, this separation was deprived of a middle ground, making of indecision a temporary twilight to be crossed in a final, definitive, moment of choice. I take this emblematic of the suspended interval of introspection, when the mind takes on the habit of self-reflection and moves into a temporary or threshold state of mind. I use this image as a trope of time which intends to seize the twilight as an emblem of the twilight zone of history. A zone I am forced to inhabit as the domain and dilemma of an artist caught in fluctuation between two points of time—the modern and the post-modern; an artist prompted by a desire to be free from history, wanting like the angels to perceive and conceive the artistic self as if at day one. Alas, I know the frustrating impossibility of such desire.

So I begin prompted by crisis at this critical juncture, wishing to speak of my particular obsession and the need to come to terms with the reasons not only why I create, but why painting and poetry are for me the only weapons I have to combat the insanity of the world and the only means I have of acquiring a spiritual grip on the chaotic nature of experience. I begin with the figure or the trope of angels as a poetic idea concerning artistic identity, which perceives the angelic as the highest joining of thought and feeling. As I have passionately pursued my identity within the context of art, I have also pursued, and continue to pursue, an angelic intelligence who has been for me spirit, mentor and guide—Wallace

II. NOTEBOOKS

At the time of my arrival [in 1982 to teach at Hobart and William Smith Colleges], I am interested in early American abstraction, especially Arthur Dove. Dove lived in Geneva in the thirties, and I found a house across the street from his. Everywhere I turned, I saw the motifs which informed his paintings, but beyond this, my daily reality is increased by a poetic response to place. I lived by a lake. Every day, I was taken by the drama of water and weather and sky. Something was happening to me. My subconscious was, at last, divining its medium. Landscape began to speak to me as a resonant form. Mind and Imagination were to become, for me, the one true subject. I was coming to an end of teaching, and my critical work was done. It was now time to really, to truly, realize myself as a painter. I applied to Yale, and I was accepted. Now the hard road, and the truth of the journey would begin.

—Jesse Murry

This section reproduces the entirety of Jesse Murry’s notebook, “Windows, Walls, and Dreams,” which he wrote circa 1988–89. The specific spatial layouts in Murry’s handwritten manuscript have been preserved in this transcription. The words have been typeset page by page, as though they were concrete poems or drawings. Throughout this notebook, Murry quotes many poets, painters, historians, and philosophers, often from memory. A Notes section immediately following the transcription (page 229) enumerates, to the extent possible, deviations from the original sources as well as basic source details and essential contextual information. In the few occurrences where a word is either clearly missing or ambiguous in the notebook, its substitution has been noted within brackets. This section also includes an excerpt of another, slightly later (c. 1990), notebook. “Coming to Terms,” as Murry titled it, is an idiosyncratic collage of definitions and usages from the *Oxford English Dictionary* that constitute Murry’s key vocabulary. These notebooks are not “journals” in the sense of daily records of experience but rather arenas in which Murry worked out the references, ideas, and arguments that animated his painting and poetry.

—Ed.

(THE)

PAINTING

IS

A

Complex Sign

Painting is a Complex Sign

The
Essential
Components

Being

FORM \longleftrightarrow Content

and old way of seeing
a persistent problematic s

for me

THE FORM is LANDSCAPE
SUBJECT MIND OR
THE IMAGINATION
THEMES OR IDEA
CONTENT

range from

POETIC
to
The VISIONARY

with

Color As The Carrier

– also light –

(MEANS)

Landscape
is the FORM

Mind
Imagination } is/are
Psyche }
Soul }
the subject



THEMATIC CONTENT
can range from
the
POETIC to the VISIONARY

– PAINTING AS A POETIC ACT –

The function
of
THE COMPLEX SIGN
as

JFE-86-1829
Augustine of Hippo
Selected Writings

ALTERITY

being otherwise – the state of being other
other, different, diversity

OTHERNESS

*Psyche: From thee they spring
O Life of Time
And Alterity.*

H. Moore
The Song of Soul

*The Maker of all things took
union and division and identity
and alterity and station and motion
to complete the soul.*

Stanley 1660
History of Philosophy

1702 p. 337

*Outness is but Alterity
Visually Represented*

Coleridge
Notes on Shakespeare

Related concepts → SOUL – MIND →
Sameness and Other
One + Many : Relation – Space + Time

SOUL

subjectivity
divine
subjectivity

III. POETRY

When I attempted recently to account for the importance of philosophy to my thinking and work in that section of my [Pollock-Krasner Foundation application]—a dam burst. I was released into poetry. It was as if verbal expression could no longer suffice as prose but had to be a presentation of mind given voice and vision through the fusion of image and feeling—had to be poetry, like my painting. . . . Poetry has been central to my development as an artist.

—Jesse Murry

The first poem in this section was written at the time of Murry's exhibition at Sharpe Gallery in 1987; a line from it was used as the epigraph for the press release (see page 23). A sequence of poems from 1988 follows, all of which are titled as either "pages," "fragments," or "traces" from *The Book of Light* or from *The Book of Night*. The remainder of the poems were written later, and with increased intensity, between 1991 and 1992, the last full year of Murry's life. They were transcribed from Murry's handwritten manuscripts, and their specific spatial layouts have been maintained. If a word is clearly missing or ambiguous in the original, a considered substitute has been indicated within brackets. Some of the poems were not clearly titled, and in these cases, the first lines have been used for identification purposes. The final sequence of poems, "Aphorisms," was written in January 1993; by that time, Murry had lost his ability to speak. He wrote the series while in the hospital, and it is prefaced by instructions to his partner, George Centanni, to read his words back to him aloud. These poems appear here, alongside facsimiles of the handwritten originals.

—Ed.

From Notes on Landscape (1987)

In an age where desire may find
its only possible fulfilment in death
and the soul is held captive by nihilism and despair
perhaps the only weapon to combat this is beauty.
Therefore landscape becomes for me
more than a place to dwell
but a suitable space for dreams
where the viewer in the act of looking
becomes as creative as I am in the act of making.

* * *

Weather is everywhere
around us, in us, and through us.
So the weather and the things of the weather –
transient sunlight, storms, rains, etc. –
are to be felt as that which is elemental
to and in our nature, our human nature.
So the need is to do more than project a mood
on the landscape but to release
the fluctuations of weather as the fluctuations of feeling
in order to convey the complexity of human experience.

* * *

All my life
has been a life of crossing
from the racial barriers
imposed by the tragic limitations of history
to the transcendental urge
to move beyond those limitations.

What has prompted this effort toward humanity
is a necessary belief in art's saving powers of address.

This is the effort to restore imaginative possibility
along the line of the horizon,
through the space and form of landscape
as the mind recaptures its capacity to create
and the soul may regain its freedom.

the multiple outside

point of extended

inwardness

wherever it is

I am

where ever I am

it is

merciful darkness =

dis-aster

read it again slowly

de-scribe

un written + de-

constructed

by working a life time

to become

an advanced

co

an advanced

consciousness

through

de-constructed

the multiple outside

point of extended
inwardness
wherever it is
I am
wherever I am
it is

men ciful dark kress =
read of cagion slowly
it is - after
it

de-scribe
unwritten & de-
constructed
by working a life time
to become
an advanced
an ADVANCED
CONCIOUSNESS
through