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Christopher Murphy

*Tangle*

Combining Abstraction and Representation

Billis Williams Gallery

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by Jody Zellen



Since his first exhibitions in the early 2000s, Christopher Murphy has presented paintings and works on paper, often derived from found photographs. Murphy looks closely at both people and their surroundings, including the built and natural landscape, and he appears to faithfully reproduce the originals with exacting detail. While at first glance, his works are “normal” and “believable,” there is always something purposely off, or “surreal” in his depictions. Murphy’s works are disorienting as he uses images of the past to comment on the isolation and need for connection missing from recent times.

In the exhibition *Tangle*, Murphy focuses on groups of people, often closely pressed together. There is something strange about these works. As the title of the exhibition suggests, what is most striking is how the figures intersect to become a *tangle* of intertwined bodies and limbs. For example, *I thought We Settled on Florals* (all works 2022) is a closely cropped image looking down at a crowd of young men, all (but one) wearing mustard yellow t-shirts and matching caps. They are gathered together: perhaps waiting for an unknown event. All have close cropped dark hair. Some wear thick black glasses, while the facial features of others are obscured by their hats. Centered in the composition is an individual with crossed arms dressed in a floral- patterned shirt and hat, obviously the “odd man out.”

*Hang in There* is equally familiar and disconcerting. In this painting, (presumably based on a photograph from the 1970s or 1980s), Murphy portrays six girls from just above the knees, many wearing patterned sweaters over white, buttoned-down, collared shirts. Their hair rises toward the top edge of the painting against the sand-colored background. The painting seems to be oriented incorrectly to show the figures right side up. After a “double take,” it becomes evident that these kids are hanging upside down at a park or a playground with their long brown hair pulled down toward the ground by the force of gravity. That two of the figures are wearing the same sweater, as well as pants, gives pause and invites closer examination as to whether these are indeed the same person repeated in different outfits.

While Murphy describes the starting point for his works are found photographs culled from family albums, thrift shops and estate sales, he also speaks about the fact that he often re-contextualizes the figures, re-stages the action or creates invented scenarios. While photographs are instantaneous, paintings take time. The surface of a photograph is often smooth, whereas a finished painting is the result of many layers that become a combination of textures resulting from different applications of paint over time. If one squints, the paintings verge on pattern, as Murphy repeats gestures and forms across the compositions like in *Four on the Floor* and *Shake a Leg*, where “cheerleaders” or “dancers” are duplicated and become

visual rhythms consisting of cropped bodies.

What is unique about Murphy's work is how he translates the photograph into a painting. The skin of the people in many of Murphy's paintings is a fractured texture akin to peeling, modulated paint or a scraped cottage cheese-like ceiling. In some senses, this texture is off putting, as in *Coordinate*, a painting of four young women all wearing the same multi-colored striped sweaters, perhaps sisters, or even the same person at different moments in time. The contrast of the textured skin with their refined hair and the abstracted background not only illustrates Murphy's dexterity as a painter, but also his interest in complicating the formal aspects of painting to combine abstraction and representation in a single image.

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