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Elizabeth Murray and Betty Woodman

by Jody Zellen

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Elizabeth Murray and Betty Woodman, Installation view, David Kordansky Gallery

The surprising yet somehow inevitable pairing of Elizabeth Murray (1940 - 2007) and Betty Woodman (1930 - 2018), two artists whose beautiful, idiosyncratic works made them icons of their generation, opens up new avenues of discovery. Woodman, a ceramicist and Murray, a painter, were both exceptional colorists who created abstract works utilizing eccentric shapes and patterns to explore the relationships between composing in two- and three-dimensional spaces. They experimented with hybrid forms. Murray's canvases were hardly ever just rectangles, and Woodman's ceramics often included a painted element mounted on the wall. Both women were known for layering geometric and organic forms to build their complex, nuanced and idiosyncratic pieces.

The exhibition unfolds like a conversation or a dialectic in which we contemplate the relationships between the works. Within two modestly sized spaces are paintings and sculptures spanning the years 1982-2015. Installed to highlight formal relationships (and not chronologically), the objects prompt the eye to zig-zag across the walls, at first taking in all of Murray's bombastic painted reliefs, then scanning Woodman's more delicate, freestanding and wall-based ceramics. Eventually we hone in on where they intersect. Is it through texture? Color? Shape? Or the fracturing of surfaces?

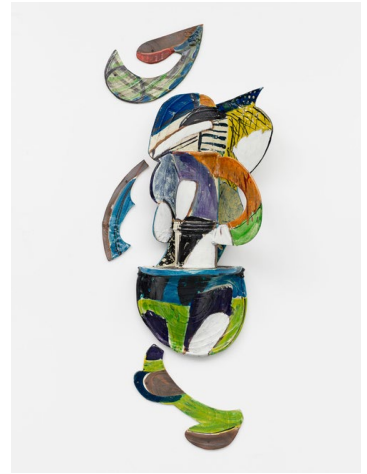
Murray's "2.B.!" (1990) hangs next to Woodman's "Reaching" (2012). "2.B.!" is a three-dimensional oil in which Murray collaged together cut-out canvases that form a backwards letter "B," a reversed number "2," and a bright pink exclamation point. The work takes its point of departure from the graffiti lettering that covered the walls and subway cars of New York in the 1970s and 80s. It also references the soliloquy in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in which the words "to be, or not to be" are spoken. In "Reaching," Woodman adheres flat fragments of curvilinear earthenware glazed in white, red and black to a canvas painted with an array of subtly colored concentric rectangles. The orange lines that fill the "B" echo the black lines of glaze in Woodman's ceramic shapes.



Elizabeth Murray
"Reaching," 2012



Installation view, David Kordansky Gallery



Betty Woodman
"Balustrade Relief Vase: 96-20," 1996

Another notable relationship transpires between Woodman's "Balustrade Relief Vase: 96-20" (1996), and Murray's "Midnight Special" (2000), installed across the wall from one another. In "Balustrade Relief Vase," Woodman breaks apart vase forms and assembles the varied pieces on the wall. The shapes appear to dance as we try to reconstruct the object. Murray's large painting shares a similar palette to Woodman's ceramic deconstruction, as well as its spirit of light-hearted composition. Murray's work is filled with intestine-like shapes that encircle her oval canvases.

Murray's "Moonbeam" (1995-1996) and Woodman's "Santa Barbara" (2005) use different subject matter while engaging in another compelling dialogue. In "Moonbeam," Murray brings the outside in. Her paintings often depict abstractions of domestic interiors. This one is essentially a bed with two pillows that twist and turn in on themselves. The bedposts curve into the painting and hover over the pillows as collaged elements.

A painted green-yellow line that cuts diagonally across the composition is the moonbeam of the title. Like many of Woodman's other pieces, "Santa Barbara" is a combination of painting and ceramic. In this work, she depicts a quasi-interior space. A light blue and pink painted backdrop is bisected by a washy black horizontal band. In front of this is a ceramic vessel in two parts from which emerges swirling fragments that boil to the top of the wall. Looking at Murray's work and then at Woodman's, one sees spectacular formal similarities, especially in both artists' use of shape and color.

At work are forces drawn from Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, as both women were interested in breaking forms apart and putting them together anew. They reimagined traditional art mediums, never denying their interest in formalism while pushing boundaries and often exploring the relationship between the artwork and its placement. The blurring of positive and negative space and traditional figure/ground relationships were key to both artists' practices. While never denying their femininity, they created large, extravagant works filled with vigor and energy, as well as an undeniable delicacy and intimacy. Both employed abstract language, delighting in visual pleasures, and were dedicated to their chosen media while rebuffing accepted aesthetic norms, opting to chart their own paths. Seeing their works together allows for a conversation that examines similarities and differences in themes and approaches pertinent to both artists. The comparison is enriching.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com