

Artist Statement – Margaret Murphy

Memory and its unreliable nature has been a constant thread in my work tying together all of my recurrent ideas and concerns. My paintings, videos, and collages address themes that have stayed with me since childhood; issues of class, consumerism, religion and gender representation as embodied by the objectified porcelain figurines that characterize much of my work.

My paintings are watercolor and acrylic on paper for the most part. The combination of these two materials creates a visual juxtaposition of opaque and transparent, hard and soft, synthetic and naturalistic. This flux between figure and ground, static and fluid, minimal and decorative is an inherent element in my paintings.

My muses are porcelain figurines of women and animals that have appeared in most of my paintings. The female figurines represent the “woman” in a post-feminist analytical arena, one that has been objectified on many levels. In my work, she is returning home to be the voice, and the anchor point, for my public concerns regarding gender, class, consumerism, and beliefs. Just as women are objectified and sentimentalized in mass media, animals are often designated to fill a similar role. I use them in my work because they represent an attempt to control nature by diminishing the forms of natural beings and placing them, in miniature form, on a curio shelf for decoration.

In recent paintings, I have used the figurine as a metaphor for physical change, loss, and perseverance. I would buy the figurines—which were very similar to the tchotzkes I remember many of the women collecting in my Irish Catholic, working-class neighborhood—at dollar stores, thrift stores, garage sales, or even on eBay. I am not emotionally bound to them, and therefore have no problem taking a hammer to them. The resulting fragments became the detritus with which I created my paintings.

In contemporary culture, we are constantly bombarded by images that are mediated rather than experienced. In such a world, it’s hard to distinguish between what is authentic, and what is illusion, forcing us to distrust images that are right before our eyes. Rather than being a negative characteristic of contemporary life, this new state of perception actually allows many things to co-exist at once—sounds, moving images, thoughts, and physical objects. In many ways our perceived physical spaces become like memories—unreliable, chaotic, and fraught with emotion. My paintings, collages and videos attempt to spark the memories of the viewer, thereby creating a shared history.

Inspiration for the visual elements in my work include Manet’s figurative compositions, Alex Katz’s paintings of Ada, Diane von Furstenberg’s prints, and John Waters’s¹ films, to name a few. I also look at domestic textile prints and wallpapers, Kurosawa films, tawdry consumer objects and advertising.

¹ As a native of Baltimore I understand Waters’ aesthetic of trash and working class values. I grew up in Hampden the site of his film Pecker.