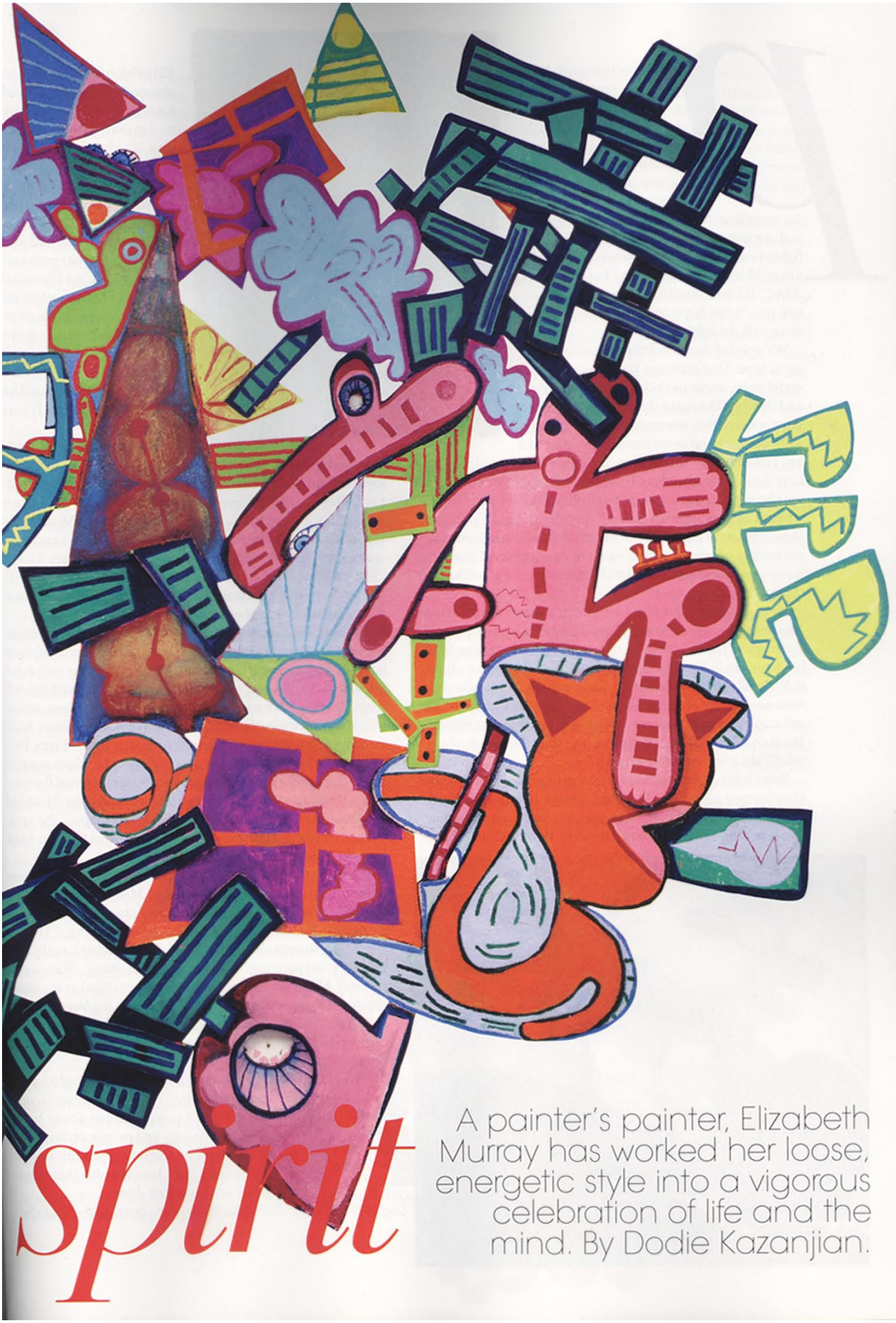
TAKING SHAPE
"When something makes me laugh, I know I've got it right," says Murray, seen here in her studio, 1988. FAR RIGHT: *The Sun and the Moon*, 2005, a painting in progress Murray has been working on this summer.

freeing the



spirit

A painter's painter, Elizabeth Murray has worked her loose, energetic style into a vigorous celebration of life and the mind. By Dodie Kazanjian.

Painting is Elizabeth Murray's life. No one is more passionately and wholeheartedly dedicated to the act of painting than this seemingly frail, infinitely strong, and utterly idiosyncratic artist, who after existing apart from the mainstream for four decades is about to enter it in triumph this month, with a full-blown retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (October 23 to January 9, 2006). "If I think about it, I get really scared," she tells me. "I just hope people see my successes along with the failures."

We're in her studio in Tribeca on a hot morning in June. The first things I notice are the wonderful smile, warm and intimate, the quiet voice, and the childlike naturalness of her welcome. Barefoot, reed-thin, wearing a grayish T-shirt and work pants, she takes me immediately over to a big, riotously colorful painting that nobody else could possibly have done. Its wild and goofy shapes overlap, argue and make up, play games with the eye, and spill off in all directions. "So this is what I'm working on right now," she tells me, "and it's a big fat mess. I was working on it before I got sick, and it was depressing me terribly, because I couldn't get it to go anywhere. I think it's going somewhere now, but a lot of different places. I feel like I'm finally getting a grip on it."

Now comes the hard part. Last March, a tumor was found on Murray's lung. Tests showed she had cancer, which had spread to the brain. The first thing she remembers after waking up from brain surgery in April was saying to herself, "OK, I know what it is. We're all going to die someday, and I'm going to live differently from now on. But of course I didn't." She came back home (home and studio are just a door apart) and couldn't work for two months. But then, one day, she started painting again. "I feel such a huge relief," she tells me. "I can still do it."

Bob Holman, her husband, looks in to say hello, trailed by Otis (named after Otis Redding), a huge and friendly black Bernese mountain dog. Bob is a poet, the founder and guiding spirit behind the high-energy Bowery Poetry Club. When Elizabeth lost her hair to chemotherapy, Bob shaved his off in solidarity. They have two grown daughters: Sophie, 22, who graduated from Barnard in June, is an aspiring actress; Daisy, 20, a junior at Wesleyan, is asleep in her bedroom down the hall. Elizabeth has a 36-year-old son, Dakota, from her previous marriage; he's a financial planner in Los Angeles and has two children of his own. "Dakota wanted to have some money in the bank," Elizabeth says. "I didn't start to make any money until he was in high school. It was slim pickin's."

FORWARD MOTION

TOP: Murray's *Beer Glass at Noon,* 1971. LEFT: *Bounding Dog,* 1993–1994.

Even today her work tends to be undervalued. "She's been at the top of the B-list forever," says Rob Storr, the former MoMA curator who has been fighting for ten years to bring off this retrospective. "It's time we think of her as a central painter, a crucial painter." Most of her fellow artists already do. "There's nobody who is more respected in the art world than Elizabeth," says Chuck Close. "She's a great artist, an artist's artist. She's also a terrific wife and mother who has managed to have a career, and that's made her a real hero for a lot of younger women."

The new painting in the studio is not as three-dimensional as her work has been in the past. There's the same structure of overlapping, fragmentary images, but they don't project out so far into the viewers' space, and I catch glimpses of the wall behind them. The only other painting in the studio is *Do the Dance,* which is finished and will be the last one in the MoMA exhibition. Its title comes from the Ray Charles–Betty Carter song "Takes Two to Tango," which she listened to over and over while she was painting it. The mostly abstract images keep suggesting real things—railroad tracks, musical notes, teeth, water, cartoons. "I added the blue water shape and the squiggly green shape," she says. "When I do them, I don't really know exactly what they are. I just try to let it all bubble up and then edit."

Pinned to the studio wall by her desk are small reproductions of favorite paintings: Velázquez's *Las Meninas,* Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece,* Cézanne's *Bathers,* Vermeer's *The Art of Painting.* "There's something so neat about reminding yourself what it really is to make a great painting." She bursts out laughing. "Keeps you trying." Also a photograph of the apple orchard at the place she and Bob have in upstate New York, near the Vermont border. Also, the little drawing John Currin did to announce the birth of his and Rachel Feinstein's first child—a huge-breasted blonde suckling a miniature man.

"You know, it never occurred to me that I would have a show at the Modern," she says. "Never, never, never. I don't have illusions about being some kind of a genius and people saying, 'Why haven't we understood how great this woman is?' [*Big laugh.*] But I love the idea that people will really see what I've done."

Elizabeth Murray was born on the South Side

of Chicago in 1940. The second of three children in an Irish Catholic family (older sister, younger brother), she grew up in circumstances that veered close to poverty. Her father was trained as a lawyer, but a succession of nervous breakdowns kept him from practicing. Her mother's ambitions to be a commercial artist were not fulfilled. The family moved often; Elizabeth remembers how they would sometimes ride the subway all night long because they didn't have a place to stay. When she was six, they went to live with her mother's mother in Bloomington, Indiana. Looking back, she is amazed and touched that in spite of their difficulties, her parents both were proud of her precocious drawing talent, which they encouraged. She could draw anything—boys and girls, elephants, cartoons. (As a kid, she wanted to create her own comic books.) Her art teacher at Bloomington High thought so highly of her that she arranged (and paid for) a scholarship to send Elizabeth to the Art Institute of Chicago.

She started at the institute in 1958, planning to study advertising design "because I felt I had to make money to help support my parents." Seeing great paintings on her way to class changed her mind. "I zoned in one day on a Cézanne, the one with an arrangement of little ovoid biscuits," she tells me, "and I suddenly realized that a real person had made that painting. It sounds so simple and weird, but it was like the door opened." She switched to painting, "and then the shit hit the fan because I couldn't paint. But I could draw, and painting comes out of drawing." She spent a lot of time looking at and copying de Kooning's *Excavation,* which is owned by the Art Institute. "I wasn't coming anywhere near it. I was just trying to allow my brain to let my arm do those motions. And it started to come to me. I felt it. I knew I could do it, and I loved the feeling."

"I fool around with shapes and colors until I start to feel satisfied," Murray says. "I want to make a beautiful, beautiful thing that gives you ideas about how life can be"

Mills College in Oakland, California, gave her scholarship money for a graduate degree, and a job as resident assistant in the dorm. This is where she met Jennifer Bartlett, who was a year behind her. They quickly became best friends for life. "I had never met a real artist, and Elizabeth seemed like one to me," Bartlett tells me. "She was extremely intense, also goofy, and she had the beatnik qualities that I was dying to match. I can remember Elizabeth lying on the floor, reading *Ulysses* and laughing—I was so impressed with that. We were extremely ambitious. Neither one of us had any question that our goals were to be great artists, or that we couldn't compete with the men."

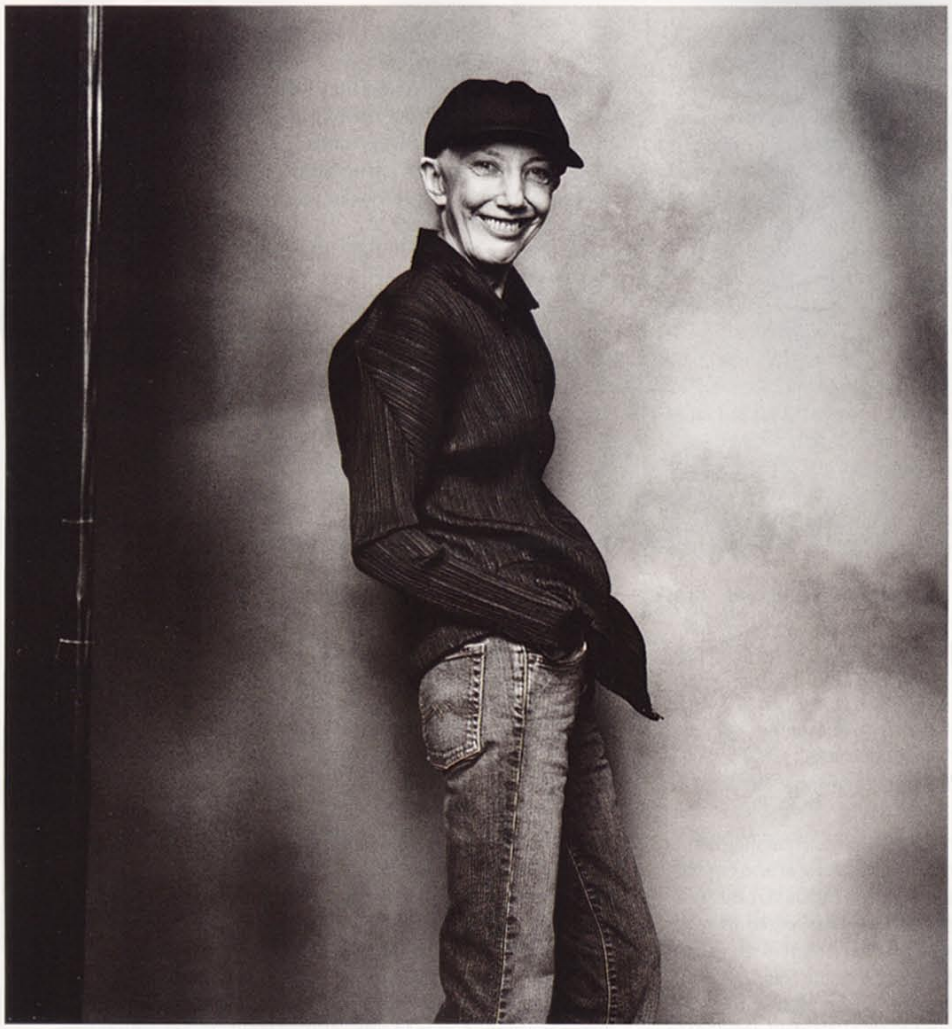
Mills was where Murray plugged into contemporary art. She experimented with Rauschenberg's collage techniques and responded with glee to Lichtenstein's Pop Art. "I didn't love Warhol, but I thought he was the coolest. After all the Abstract Expressionist angst, here was somebody taking the idea of commercial art and turning it on its head. I loved Oldenburg's sewn things, the exaggerated scale of the big telephone and the cloth hamburger. They had such a sense of humor. But Jasper Johns was my favorite. The way he painted and the toughness of it just delighted me and had a huge influence on the way I started to think of paint as process." Bartlett says she never knew why people went up close to paintings to look at them. "I finally asked Elizabeth what she was doing when she walked up real close. She looked at me, utterly dumbfounded. 'I was looking at how it was painted,' she said. 'I was looking at the *paint.*' "

Murray got married in 1963, while she was still at Mills, to a former classmate of hers at the Art Institute. He wanted to have a child right away, but Elizabeth "just knew that wasn't for me." They moved to New York in 1965 by way of Buffalo, where she got a job teaching art at a small Catholic college—the first of many teaching jobs. By 1967, they were living in Manhattan, and not long after that she was pregnant. "What's funny about that is, I loved being pregnant. It was as though all of a sudden, my body made sense to me. I felt normal for the first time." Their son, Dakota, was born in 1969. Four years later, the marriage broke up. Now a single mother, she and Dakota lived at 27 Cooper Square, near the Bowery. Friends or baby-sitters looked after Dakota during the day, while Elizabeth was away teaching in Queens. "I would feed Dakota dinner, put him to bed, and then go to work around 8:30 or nine o'clock in the same room—I'd torn down a brick wall so I could work right there." For a while, a teaching job at Bard College obliged her to spend one night a week out of town. She'll never forget the sound of Dakota clattering down the stairs after her, sticking his fingers through the mail slot in the front door, and crying, "Don't go, don't go."

She was doing small paintings, in bright, Pop-like colors, and starting to look hard at the abstract, Minimalist painting of Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, and Al Held. The seventies was the "pluralistic" decade in art, with no one dominant style, but the conceptual approach to art-making led a lot of people to proclaim that painting was dead. For someone as committed

GOOD FORM

RIGHT: *Bop,* 2002–2003. "When I do them, I don't really know exactly what they are," says Murray of her shapes. "I just try to let it bubble up and then edit."

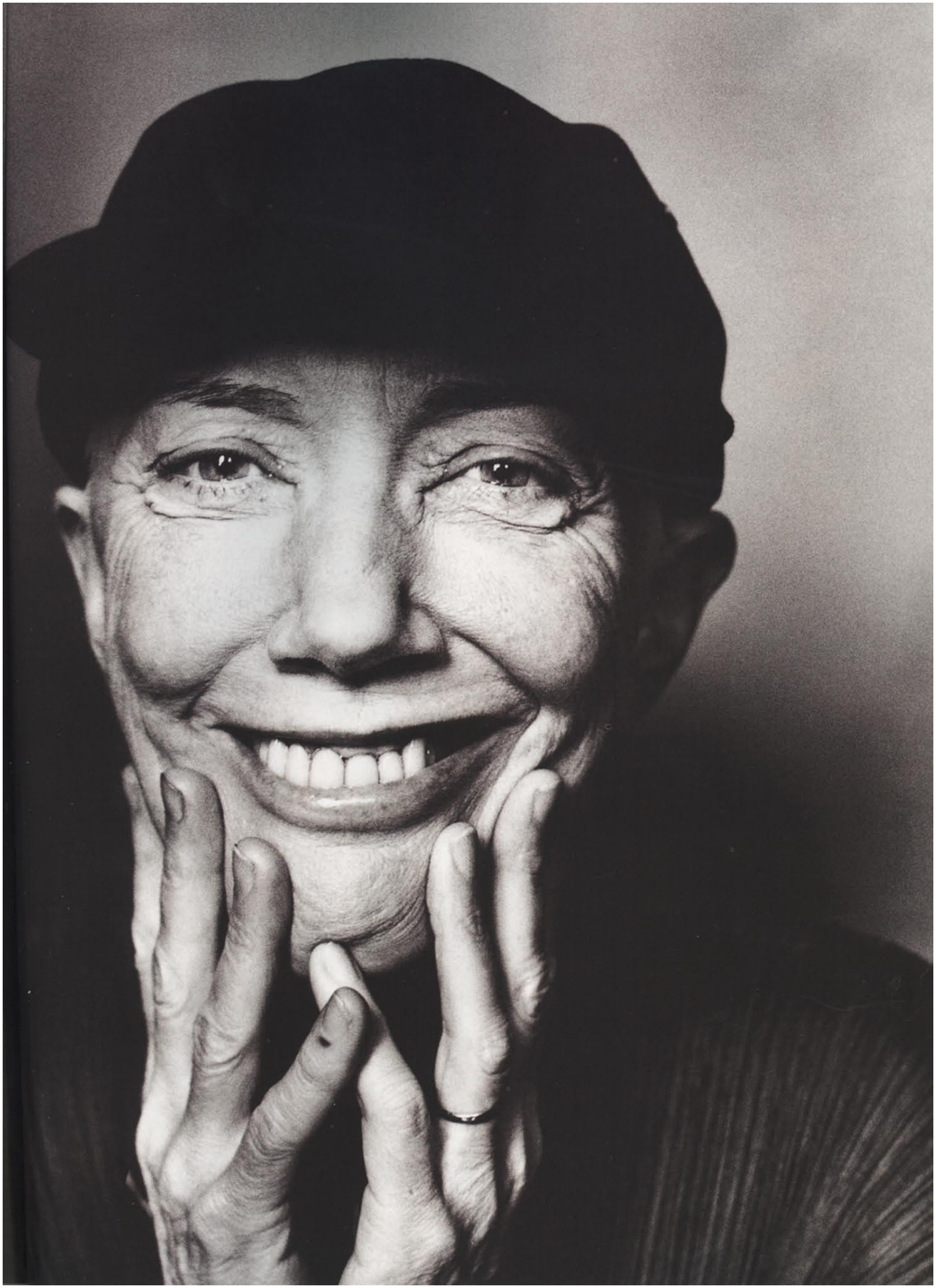


to painting as Elizabeth, it was a confusing time. She tried her hand at some "silly little sculpture things—I was trying to fit in." But combining art and motherhood meant that she had to keep her work process confined to her limited means and space. In 1971, she did a semiabstract brown painting with the clearly recognizable image of a beer glass. It was like coming home. It was also the real beginning of her quirky personal style of abstract painting with homely, recognizable images popping in and out; it was a style whose antecedents included Cubism, Surrealism, and the late paintings of Philip Guston, in which Abstract Expressionist rigor gave way to grotesque, figurative images that carried a blunt, comic-strip narrative charge. "This is what I do—I paint," she realized. "The simplest and clearest thing I can do and the thing I understand best is painting. Painting may have been dead, but it didn't stop me from wanting to do it."

Her friends Jennifer Bartlett and Joel Shapiro, a sculptor, were both showing with Paula Cooper, who had opened the first art gallery in SoHo. They urged Paula to visit Elizabeth's studio. Paula liked the work, and she liked Elizabeth—both of them were single mothers with small sons—but it took a couple of years before Elizabeth had her first solo show there. "I'm a slow looker," Paula tells me. Eventually she was convinced by "the passion and spirit that are so much a part of her work. It's the *(continued on page 396)*

A BRAVE FACE
"I'm glad to be going through this," says Murray of her fight against cancer. "You get insights, epiphanies. You have this new knowledge that you cannot ever get away from." Photographed in NYC, July 2005. Makeup, Carla White using MAC PRO at L'Atelier NYC. Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

Photographed by Irving Penn



FREEING THE SPIRIT

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kind of energy and passion that great painters have." Paula's support meant a great deal to Elizabeth. "It just opened me up. I started to work on a larger scale, with lots of intense color. I was using diagonals and splitting the canvas. I did a painting called *Beginner,* with a big, squiggly, Tweety Bird shape that had a spiral in it—that was in the show at Paula's. I was having an enormous amount of fun, one of those spurts of creativity when you can do no wrong."

She began to break the rectangle of her canvas. Frank Stella, Ron Gorchov, and a few other of her contemporaries were doing this, but Elizabeth made the shaped canvas something uniquely her own. "I wanted to find different kinds of edges and conflicts, with shapes butting up against edges," she says. "I wanted to use the wall in some way." Her new paintings carried a powerful sense of shapes in motion, spiraling and twisting and zigzagging at high speed.

Bob Holman came into her life in 1980, when she was asked to design the sets for an Edwin Denby play that he was directing. They got married in 1982; Sophie was born the same year, and Daisy came along two years later. "It was so much easier this time because I had some money and I was married to this wonderful guy who was totally there." After several one-person shows at Paula Cooper, her paintings were starting to sell, although not for big prices or to high-rolling collectors; but the Museum of Modern Art bought *Painters' Progress,* a breakthrough 1981 painting with the image of three cartoon-like paintbrushes sprouting from a fragmented, aqua-and-fuchsia-colored palette. It was composed of nineteen separate, smaller canvases joined together. "I didn't think about putting something together," she tells me. "I thought about shattering it, as though you threw the canvas down on the floor and it split."

"Like broken plates?" I ask her.

"Exactly." Elizabeth had seen Julian Schnabel's plate paintings—huge works whose surface was composed of broken and painted-over china. "When I saw that first cracked stuff, it pissed me off," she tells me. "I wished I'd done that." Like all good artists, though, she could adapt and make use of somebody else's great idea—in this case, "the psychic idea of shattering." She had great confidence in her work at this point. For the first time, women artists like Murray, Jennifer Bartlett, and Susan Rothenberg were gaining recognition on virtually equal terms with their male counterparts. Elizabeth saw herself as a leader of the new wave of Neo-Expressionist painting, but she found herself eclipsed by the white-hot spotlight that fell on Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, and a new generation of German and Italian alpha males. "Instead, I was over . . . and there these guys were," she recently told Rob Storr. "After all this feminism, the boys were back in town. And the women—'Go back to your places, girls.' "

She kept right on painting, of course. What else would she do? Her pictures grew more and more three-dimensional. The same lumpy, domestic images kept reappearing in them: a coffee cup, puffy clouds, an upside-down table, a lopsided window, a shoe, along with her loopy abstract shapes and cartoon body parts. She never stopped pushing the envelope of her talent, and her reputation as an artists' artist, quietly incorruptible and deeply respected, continued to grow. "As a painter, she has succeeded in a territory dominated largely by men and masculine subjects," the *Times* critic Roberta Smith wrote. "She has put the vocabulary of twentieth-century abstraction to new and different uses. . . . " The Museum of Modern Art included her in its controversial "High and Low" show in 1990. The Metropolitan Museum bought her *Terrifying Terrain* in 1991—"a really tough painting," as she describes it, in the dark sepias and cold grays that she was using then. "It's always interested me that when I felt myself to be unusually happy, I was doing these really dark paintings," she says. "I had my family, I was with Bob, and I was probably happier than I'd ever been in my life."

In 1995, after 20 years, she left Paula Cooper and joined the PaceWildenstein Gallery. It was painful on both sides. Paula had found her paintings increasingly hard to sell, especially in Europe. (There's never been any problem selling her virtuoso drawings, which are a significant part of her total output.) In her ten years at Pace, her prices have always been lower than those of the more successful male artists in the gallery. According to Douglas Baxter, who worked with her at Paula Cooper and continues to work with her as president at Pace, "She's never become a commodity." But painting has supported her, and she takes pride in that. "It's not a fancy living, but it's as much of a living as I need to make," she says.

We're back in the Tribeca studio on a hot day in July. Otis the dog is getting a little too friendly with me, unlike Abraham, one of Elizabeth's two cats, who seems annoyed that his mistress is paying attention to me and not to him. Her daughter Daisy and Cabel Tomlinson, Elizabeth's personal assistant, are next door, packing up books; the living space is going to be painted when the family goes off on vacation to Patmos next week. The painting I saw the first time I came is still unfinished and untitled, but it's changed a lot during my several visits. A red gingerbread-man shape has turned pink. An orange crazy cat has crept in, and two small half circles at the top have become a pair of peering eyes, spying on the painting. "That cat form made me laugh," she says. "And the two eyes at the top really cracked me up. When something makes me laugh, I know I've got it right." There's also a moment when she comes to hate the painting she's working on. "I always arrive at that point, more than once."

She started work on this picture in January and really struggled with it until March, when her illness intervened. What she's done in the last month and a half makes my spine tingle. I'm smiling and giggling and, for some reason, close to tears. "I could never begin to say what I'm really doing," she tells me. "I know there's something I want to see, and I don't understand what it is, so I fool around with these shapes and these colors until I start to feel satisfied that this arrangement is what I want to look at. I want to make a beautiful, beautiful thing, something that gives you ideas about how life can be. That's what painting does when it's really satisfying. With the Velázquez *Las Meninas,* it's like walking into a mind. That's what I'm after. I want this painting to feel like a brain—a brain with feelings, emotions, calculations, all this stuff. It's got ideas and it has directions and it has love and generosity and hate and anger. And they're colorful, and the colors are accidental for the most part. I'm just mushing around, which is the exciting thing about painting, that you can't control it. You make a mark, and it's fine. Then you make another mark, and it's not the right color, and your mark turns to mud. So you have to go back in there and scrape it off. It's a constant process. It's just like life."

She finished a series of radiation treatments in June and has been undergoing chemotherapy since then. The tumors on her lung are smaller. She startles me by saying, "No matter what happens, I'm glad to be going through this. You get insights, epiphanies. You have this new knowledge that you cannot ever get away from.

"I'll say one thing," she adds after a pause. "I want to stay alive for my kids and my husband. But I just could not stay alive if I couldn't work."

The day she leaves for Greece, she calls and says that the painting, is "finished, but not done. . . . It's the future." The title is *The Sun and the Moon.* □

CLASS, PICTURED

(continued from page 360)

since 1997. Now it handles menswear (headed by Keith Warren, another Brit) and a slew of non-runway clothes and accessory lines