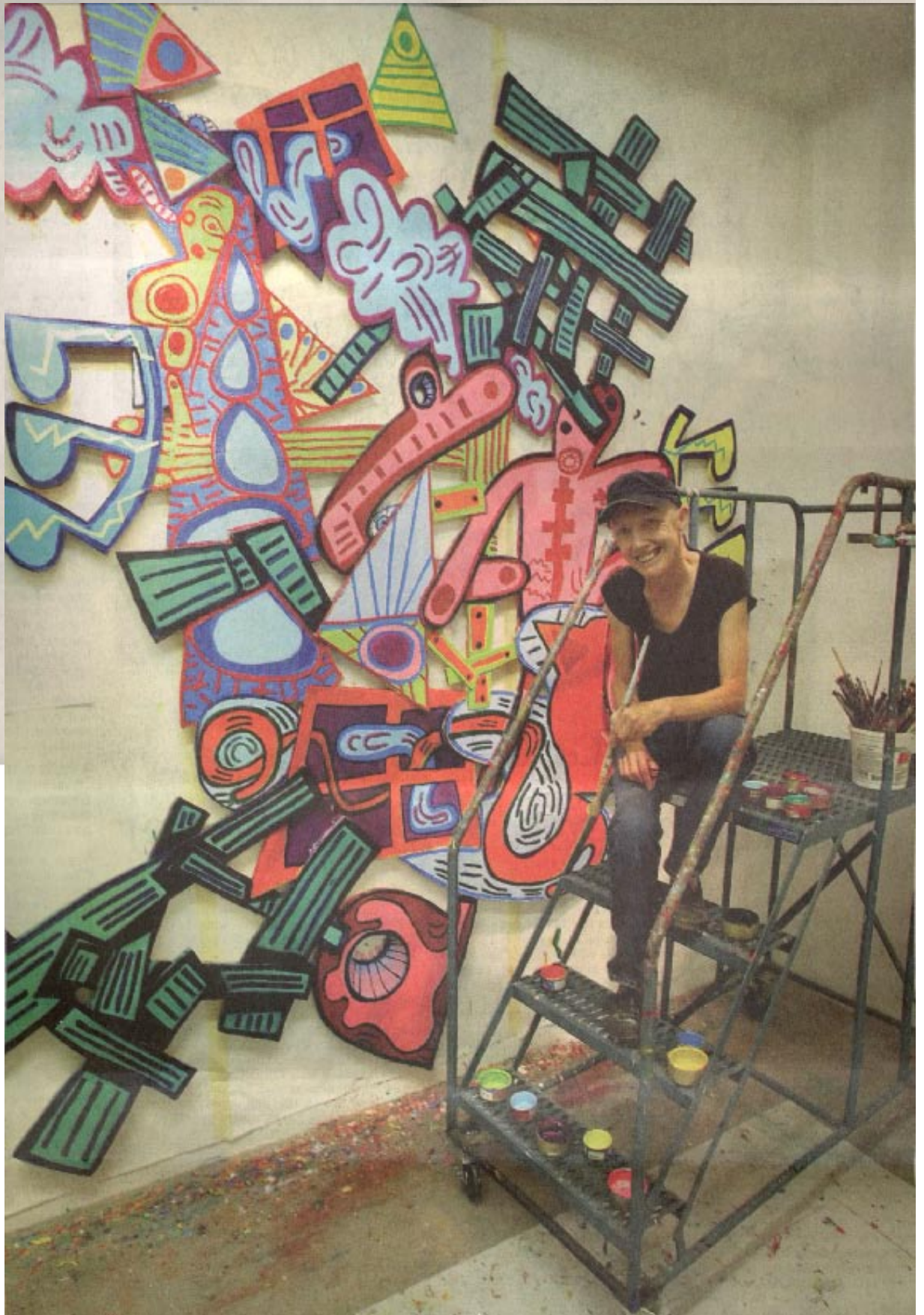


ART

ELIZABETH MURRAY

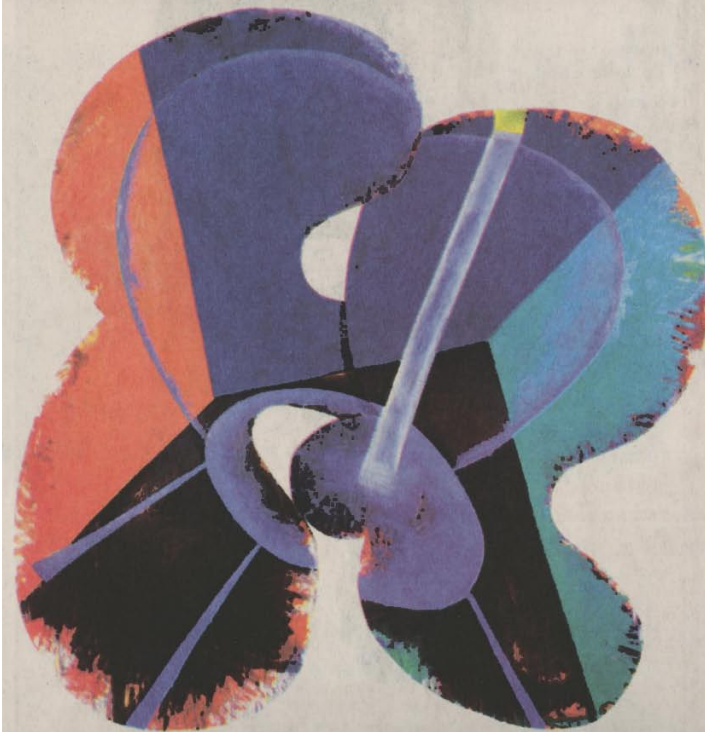
THE MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART
Opening Oct. 23.

Clockwise from near right: the artist Elizabeth Murray in her Manhattan studio, in front of "The Sun and the Moon," an oil painting on canvas on wood, made when she was recovering from surgery; "Drawing for Thinking," 1975, a charcoal drawing on paper; "Join," 1980, an oil painting; and "Deeper Than D," 1983, an oil painting on two canvases.



A Visit With the Modern's First Grandmother

Draw it, shape it, paint it.
What's there to talk about,
asks Elizabeth Murray?



By CAROL KINO

PRESS Elizabeth Murray on the thinking behind one of her multipaneled, jigsaw-puzzle-like paintings, and she is likely to reply in doggedly literal terms.

"I do large drawings of the shapes," she said in a deliberate tone, as if spelling it out for a child. "They go to these two guys that make the canvases for me. They make the shapes out of wood, and cover them with canvas."

Conceptual inspiration is a subject from which Ms. Murray flees, at least in conversation; she seems more comfortable talking about the process of building up, carving away, sanding down and applying more paint.

"I just take my cues from putting the color down and seeing how it works," she said by phone recently after an interview in her studio. Often, while painting, she switches the puzzle-shaped pieces around, or changes the way they overlap; sometimes she orders up new pieces along the way. Only at the very end do her improvisatory "Rube Goldberg contraptions," as she calls them, get bolted into place.

Ms. Murray will allow that her creative process might be described as stream of consciousness — or possibly, stream of action. "It's a very physical thing, painting — you're just constantly on your feet and moving around," she said. Whereas Jackson Pollock's drip paintings evoke the idea of a dancer, she said, "I'm more of a construction worker."

Starting Oct. 23, the public will have a chance to take in the full range of those constructions at the Museum of Modern Art. A decade in the making, the retrospective will bring together 40-odd years of Ms. Murray's paintings and drawings, as well as a selection of notebooks and studies of which few have ever been exhibited. (A companion show of prints opens at the museum on Oct. 19.)

The show's curator, Robert Storr, notes in his catalog essay that since 1982, the Modern's paintings and sculpture department has honored only three other women with a similarly sweeping retrospective at the Midtown museum: Louise Bourgeois in 1982, Lee Krasner in 1984 and Helen Frankenthaler in 1989.

But at 65, Ms. Murray seems to be taking the honor in stride, joking that she may well be the first grandmother accorded such attention.

Among New York painters, she is seen as "an artist's artist," according to the painter Chuck Close, who has known her since the late 1960's, when the two were among the first in their crowd of downtown artists to have children.

"She has been far more important within the

art world than she has been recognized to be in general," he said. "Part of that is basic sexism. It was much harder for her to get a certain sort of critical attention, and her work didn't go for as much money as the guys'." Mr. Close said he and Ms. Murray had often remarked to each other on how the imagery that turns up in her paintings — cups, shoes and other household objects — is often labeled "domestic," although that word is not usually applied to Matisse's goldfish bowls and patterned fabrics, Cézanne's bowls of fruit or the shoe paintings of van Gogh or Philip Guston.

Although sketches of such objects fill the pages of Ms. Murray's working notebooks along with studies for her paintings, so do drawings that evoke Cézanne's "Bather" or Mantegna's "Deposition from the Cross," or that rework panels from comic strips. Sometimes, when she is creatively stuck on a painting, she said, "I'll go get a Matisse book, a Stuart Davis, a Picasso, and just flip through it, see what their ideas were." She added: "Maybe I won't find anything I can use, but it just kind of gets me off the spot. It's all there to be used."

The lone piece that hangs in her studio now, "The Sun and the Moon," was put together a little differently. Ms. Murray painted it while recovering from brain surgery necessitated by metastasized lung cancer. Although she had worked out its basic structure last December, before the cancer was discovered, she only began painting after she returned from the hospital after surgery in March.

Initially, she said, "I was really tottering in there — I could barely climb up the ladder." And, though she usually makes very deliberate decisions about color, fretting over her choices and refining them with drawings, this time she was not able to act on them so easily: she had trouble locating the right tube of paint — even the one she had just put down.

So, she focused more purely than ever on the act of painting, using whatever color or brush came to hand, and adjusting the colors and marks later.

The resulting work — an energetic jumble in which clouds, triangles, a human figure and an orange cat seem to press against one another, and also against the painting's surface — does not proclaim that it was achieved with difficulty.

In fact, Ms. Murray said that in the process of making it, she felt she had managed to free herself from some longstanding inhibitions. "I got into a different frame of mind," she said, "and I hope it lasts."

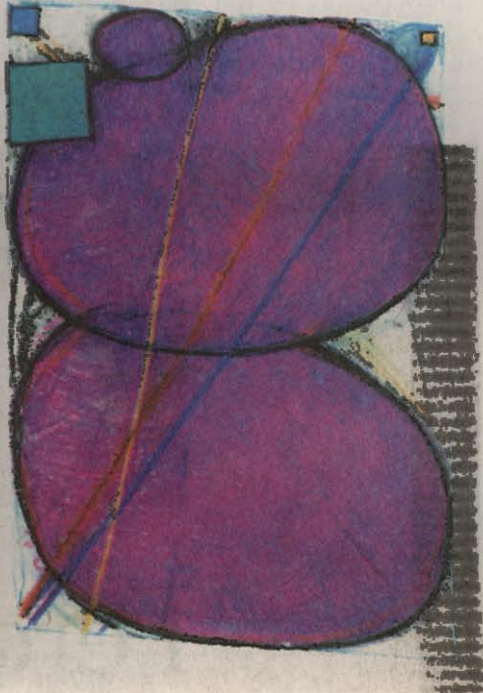
Viewed in sum, her paintings clearly owe much to her own life and surroundings — although, as she says herself, she isn't always able

to articulate or recognize how while at work on them.

Her 1967-68 painting "Night Empire," made when she had just moved to New York and was pregnant with her son, Dakota, now 36, depicts the Empire State Building swaddled in what appears to be a fringed fabric printed with people riding elephants. "That's a good instance of the unconscious," she said. "It took me a while to realize, 'My God, it's a baby blanket!'"

In the late 1980's, after she had given birth to her two daughters, Sophie, 22, and Daisy, 20, her paintings became increasingly sculptural and volumetric, bulging out from the wall. (In the show's catalog, while discussing this issue with Mr. Storr, the curator, she refers to those paintings as "pregnant" and says, "I think they were about my body.")

And certainly, the sense of movement that infuses all of Ms. Murray's paintings seems to reflect the gentle cacophony of her household, a loft in TriBeCa where she lives and works along-



side her husband, the poet and performer Bob Holman. One side of the elevator opens onto his office, with its two assistants, the other into her light-filled studio. A fat ginger cat, Abraham, prowls the house and her studio, keeping Otis, a panting Bernese mountain dog, in line. (Asked whether the big orange cat leaping up from the corner of "The Sun and the Moon" might be Abraham, Ms. Murray laughed and made no reply.)

Ms. Murray said she was hoping that seeing the Modern's show would help her gain perspective on her career, because "it really includes my past."

She did have a midcareer retrospective, a traveling exhibition that made its final stop at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. But while she was pleased with it, she said, it included only about a decade's worth of work, homing in on the shaped canvases she began painting in the mid-1970's. "The only point to having a retrospective," she said, "is to be able

to see all your work together, so you can see where you've succeeded and you could do more — at least that's how I felt about it."

The earliest work in the Modern's show, "A Mirror," dates from 1963-64, when Ms. Murray was still pursuing her master of fine arts degree at Mills College in California and was heavily influenced by Pop Art and the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg. A watershed moment emerges with the more minimal paintings she began making in the early 1970's, soon after she had moved to New York.

When she arrived, she said, "I was completely naïve." She continued, "I thought that people would be painting like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, that Pop Art was still important." But her peers were working with other ideas: her friend Jennifer Bartlett was deeply involved with Minimalism, for example, and Mel Bochner was pioneering conceptual art.

Initially, she didn't get it. "I thought Minimalism was just a bunch of ideas that didn't have any heat or feeling," she said. "But gradually I began to understand there was something in there, and if I was going to move ahead and get people to look at my work, I really had to understand process art."

At first glance, the paintings she produced during this period, like "Heart Beat No. 1," "White Down Step" and "Wave Painting," all from 1973, do look Minimalist, with geometric shapes made with colored lines against a flat colored ground. Look again, and the shapes resolve into ascending or descending staircases, window frames, fans, alphabet letters or Brancusi-esque columns. And the lines and ground turn out to be tonally variegated, compactly built-up layers of paint.

"I was really interested in Zen at the time," Ms. Murray explained. "I had this idea of making something out of nothing, and I thought the way I put the paint down would do that. I wanted to make the paint this physical thing that people could feel, stroke by stroke."

Today, looking back, she suggests that her work hasn't changed all that much. The main difference now is that she's using shapes that are "glommed together," she said: "The way I try to make them connect and work together is a different way of thinking for me."

Ideally, she said, seeing the full span of her output in one place will prompt another creative breakthrough. "Seeing ideas that I could push further," she said. "That would be really wonderful."

