DAVID
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GALLERY

Thank You For Your Support: Murray and Woodman at David Kordansky Gallery
By Steve Locke

> Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.
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> Virginia Woolf, "Solid Objects"[1]

I have longed to see the work of Betty Woodman and Elizabeth Murray in dialogue and *not* because they both deal with issues of the "domestic." While I can and do appreciate seeing the work through that lens, it is my belief that it prevents viewers from going deeper into the work and misses so much of what I believe makes these artists two of the most important painters I have encountered. Both artists share an innovative approach to support and a deep commitment to shape. These are the connective tissues of their work.

Paintings have supports. These are made from materials—canvas, wood, paper, etc.—that hold the paint on the surface. They literally *support* the material of the paint and allow the ideas of the painter to take form. Seen in this way, a support can be understood as a container for material *and* as a container for ideas. For the most part, in Western art, the painting orientations have been rectangular. *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* tells us that "In France the dimensions of canvases and frames are standardized into 57 numbered sizes, 19 each of three shapes called *figure*, *paysage*, and *marine*,"[2] translated to *portrait*, *landscape*, and *seascape*. These have become well established modalities regarding how the shape and proportions of the support as *a rectangular container* could impact depiction and literally frame what kinds of ideas are possible. And as supports, they were meant to be subordinate to the image—not to be noticed.

Elizabeth Murray is best known for her multi-panel works on shaped canvases. These are structures that came out of her drawing practice. Fabricators (Robert Gober and later Mary Carlson) worked with Murray to translate these drawings into supports for the paintings. This is a very different approach to painting than starting with a rectangle and putting shapes in it.

Murray changed the shape of the support over and over again and in so doing, she altered and re-altered what was possible to be contained in a painted form. Rather than coming up with a singular shaped format (think of the flexing lozenges of Ron Gorchov) *each* painting posits a new format and thus new possibilities. The canvas was no longer an invisible circumstance that supported and contained an image—Murray's shaped paintings are images in and of themselves. And to further complicate the situation, her paintings *still* act as containers for images and ideas. Expanding the shape of the support meant an expansion of the kinds of ideas that it

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[1] Woolf, Virginia. "Solid Objects." Short Story. In *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, p. 88. Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1975.
[2] Mayer, Ralph. "GROUNDS FOR OIL AND TEMPERA." Section. In *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, 188. London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1975.

press@davidkordanskygallery.com
www.davidkordanskygallery.com
Los Angeles: 323.935.3030
New York: 212.390.0079

could contain. I think that is one of the things that gives Murray's work such an extreme and radical weight. It moves beyond depiction into embodiment. She finds the actual shape of the idea—not just by depicting it but by making a container for it that has a direct reference to the idea itself.

Like Murray, Betty Woodman expanded the language of the support and the container. Of course, the latter is prominent in her oeuvre; her commitment to wheel working and functional pottery remained evident throughout her career—and the history of pottery *is* the history of containment and support. Here, I want to consider her as a painter, like Murray, who uses the shaped support as a container for images and ideas.

For starters, every ceramic work by Betty Woodman begins on the wheel. She throws everything—even the flat shapes that are reminiscent of vase profiles have their origins as slabs of clay that are thrown on the wheel and stretched out on the floor of her studio. Her supports all begin with the basic tenant of wheel working in ceramics: centrifugal force pulling the clay into a shape.

Working in clay is probably one of the oldest processes known to humans and has changed very little over the millennia. Shaped on a spinning wheel, clay with water and a deft hand is pulled into form by touch married with centrifugal force. Left to dry it is then subjected to the heat of a kiln to transform the clay into its permanent vitrified state. It is then glazed (or, as I propose, painted) and fired a second time to bond the colors to the surface.

Woodman was trained in this traditional process where ceramic glazes are applied to completely realized forms. Her work is made in relationship with the wheel and the studio floor and comes from the trial and error of ceramic assembly. This means that, like Murray, Woodman establishes the form of the support first. She establishes the support and then paints it.

Woodman is making containers, for certain, but in addition to being vessels, these works are supports for paintings. As posited above, the support for painting can be thought of as a container for images and ideas, and altering it expands the kinds of ideas that support can contain. On a very immediate level, we can see Woodman demonstrating what happens when ceramic glazing is no longer dictated by a commitment to form-affirming decoration. What she posits are multiple opportunities to explore the relationship between a physical form and a painted one.

The above can be clarified by looking at a pair of works by the artists. Murray's *Flying Bye* of 1982 and Woodman's *Oribe Tray: Montelupo Pitcher* from 1988 are good examples. Both are paintings on shaped supports. Murray's support is an arrangement of quadrilateral shapes (decidedly *not* rectangles) that are connected to each other and then attached to the wall. These connected shapes create a singular surface for the painting. Woodman's support takes the form of things used to serve—a tray, pitchers, and cups along with handles for lifting, pouring, and carrying. In both cases, the artists established the forms first. Murray by building, joining, and securing canvas to wooden chassis, and Woodman by throwing forms on the wheel and manipulating them on the floor of her studio and firing them in the kiln. In both cases, the shape of the support is established before the application of paint/glaze.

Flying Bye contains an image of a wine glass tumbling off a little red table with spindly legs. The glass falls in uncertain space on a support that is composed of uncertain spaces and overlapping planes. More than an image of a falling glass, the work itself embodies the idea of uncertainty—it is affirmed in the facture of the multi-panel support itself. In Woodman's case, *Oribe Tray* shapes the support to contain vessels and images of vessels. The

work deals with the idea of function without actually being usable—even though the pitcher forms are thrown on the wheel, they are flat. In fact, their shape hides the actual vessels that are visible when one moves to the other side of the arrangement. Just like *Flying Bye*, *Oribe Tray* is a support made of connected elements.

The uncertainty of space is reflected in the way Murray has painted the support. The painting may be made of separate elements, but it is painted as a singular image. The table legs (vermillion on one side and moss green on the other) telescope across the support—they are not interrupted by the distortion of the planes. Murray also obeys ideas about illusion where table legs and glass stems interact to provide a notion of things being in front of or behind. The bell of the glass is fragmented by its intersection with three of the four panels in the painting, but is painted as a singular form. All of this creates a terrific sense of movement where Murray's muscular use of color holds all the elements in tension.

While Murray's supports embody uncertainty, Woodman's embody function. Painting in Woodman's work does not follow the form or affirm the shape of the vessel. Radically, she uses her ceramics as supports for painterly mark-making and invention. Color does not stay local to each vessel or even each form. It moves across the surface of *all* the forms. It pools and drips as it moves across the surfaces of the fired clay. Woodman's color connects forms, even if the forms occupy different sides of the support. Her color moves around and through the arrangement. It does not stay within the confines of the ceramic shape. She toys with the visible and the invisible; if one were to place flowers in the vases on one side of *Oribe Tray*, they would appear to be coming out of the flat pitchers on the other side. The marriage of function and illusion is complete.

Both artists are using supports to make new forms that become containers for the embodiment of ideas, expanding our notions of what painting can contain. These supports are not subordinate to the images they carry but assert themselves as forms and objects in their own right. Both artists complicate the work by using these supports as painterly arenas that can, and often do, contain images of other things.

Because both artists share such a deep commitment to innovation in the support, it stands to reason that each of them has a complex understanding of shape. In Murray's case the relationship to Pop Art is clear but it is important to connect this to her early exposure to the Chicago Imagists when she was at the Art Institute of Chicago. Her shapes embrace the funky, awkward, bulbous, and somewhat goofy essence of the Hairy Who and comic strips. Her work often elicits a smile—much like watching a Saturday morning cartoon. Her shapes reference speech bubbles and contain the cartoony violence of things splitting apart. (The figure in *Sandpaper Fate* is a great example of this. The more one looks, the more shapes turn into a cartoon personage.) These shapes are vigorously developed by Murray through drawing—she has said that painting did not come as easy to her as drawing did.[3] In the crucible of drawing, re-drawing, and re-re-examining these shapes, she arrived at her own visual language. The achievement of that is not small. Like Picasso, Murray's work is deeply invested in coming up with new forms for painterly consideration. This investment has led to paintings that still feel original more than 40 years after their creation. Her work does not look like anyone else's.

Because Woodman comes from the world of ceramics with its openness to cultural exchange, she has been able to mine the history of vessels across time and across cultures in her development of a vocabulary of shape.

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[3] Storr, Robert. "Interview with Elizabeth Murray." In *Elizabeth Murray*, 170. New York, NY: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2005.

The vessel forms: bowl, cup, amphora, pitcher, vase—these have been with us forever, as have different techniques in firing and glazing. Part of the education of a potter includes learning and mastering these forms, and because it is a functional medium, the practice of learning forms from other cultures is not looked upon as appropriation. Woodman's achievement in shape comes from her deep understanding of wheel working's impact on form and from her painterly ability to marry forms in two and three dimensions within the same work. A work like 2000's *Scandinavia* is useful to examine here. The work is a diptych and *also* has two faces. (While Woodman eschewed the idea that her work had a front and a back, I am inclined to agree with Barry Schwabsky in his suggestion that the work "takes on two distinct faces."[4]) Each face has a vessel on the left and an image of a vessel on the right. Each face contains shapes painted in a dramatically different manner. One is akin to folk art where the other owes more to Franz Kline than to any ceramic artist. This is evidence of the range of depictions to which Woodman has access. Everything in history—still life painting, Roman vase painting, folk art, high Japanese ceramics, Matisse—it is all available. Woodman reminds us that vessels are made to carry things and one of the things they carry is history.

Because both artists are so engaged in the support and shape, their work explores and explodes figure-ground relationships. In looking at Murray's *Sandpaper Fate*, it is immediately clear that this shaped support is aggressively non-rectilinear. Placed in any environment structured by regular geometry—for example, the gallery—it would demand attention as a thing in the room that disobeys the proposed logic of the architecture. Murray also works at a large scale: *Sandpaper Fate* is over eight feet tall and comes off the wall by nearly a foot. Like many of her shaped paintings, this work takes up a lot of space—essentially becoming a *figure* on the ground of the wall. Murray's shape vocabulary is in direct contrast to the rectilinear structure of the room. Nothing in the work suggests the vertical plum line or horizon. This work seems to float in the expanse of the wall—as if the wall has in turn become the support for the image. This gives the viewer the multilevel experience of seeing the work at a distance as a *shape* on the wall, and the experience of seeing the work closer as its own internal world.

Woodman's work engages the pedestal and the floor in addition to the wall. The *Balustrades* are the clearest example where we see her exploring the wall as the ground for her painted supports. As with *Scandinavia*, the *Balustrades* consist of two- and three-dimensional elements, but rather than a singular form on a pedestal, these elements are deployed on and around the wall. The forms all bear the markings of the wheel. Woodman uses the wall itself as the ground of the work—again, making it the support for the larger image. In *Balustrade Relief Vase: 97-9*, 1997, she reiterates the form of the thrown vase resting on the sculpted shelf on the wall, using ceramic supports to frame the negative space of the wall into the physical form of the vase, so that the vase is present and absent at the same time. The activation of the space between is a hallmark of Woodman's wall paintings with paired vases, showing her interest in the painterly concerns of figure-ground relations. It is also visible when and where she paints images. In her hands, the basic forms of ceramics take on a pictorial quality—not just being seen in the round but also having sides. The *Egyptian Mirror Image Vases*, 1999, can be seen in the round of course but they have a definite front and back. And they have a particular placement that activates the shape created by their pairing. In addition, they contain swirled planes as the ground for images.

Woodman and Murray create painterly space with depth and movement without relying on the perspectival conventions of the Renaissance or even the coterminous space of the Baroque. Both artists exemplify what

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[4] Schwabsky, Barry. "Betty Woodman and Modernist Painting: Beginnings." Essay. In *Betty Woodman*, 42–43. New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2006.

Mira Schor has posited: "Between figure/ground, there is imperfection, there is air, not the overdetermined structure of perspectival space, or the rigid dichotomy of positive and negative space."[5] Murray fractures and assembles space and creates an environment for her funky shape language informed by collision and connection. Woodman pulls apart and reconstructs known forms and functions and reconfigures them as sites for painterly investigation. Neither is content with what is given.

In the work of Murray and Woodman, we see things that we can identify and recognize but these things are altered in a way that suggests that they have agency. We can see the tables and the wine glass in *Flying Bye*, but these objects are behaving in a way that seems distinctly different from the way that I would experience them in the "real" world. The same is true in Woodman's work, as in *Egyptian Mirror Image Vases*, where the vessels contain images or seem to sprout additional arms or handles or hide behind shields that take the form of pitchers. It is funny because I really do get the sense that the work of these artists is in motion and I have caught it in the act of becoming. I am very much aware that I am looking at the work of two great artists, but I often get so caught up in the things that they have made that the crux of my engagement is with their paintings. And their paintings seem to be in the act of doing something.

Because of this suggested agency of the things in the work, I am led to believe that I am looking at more than just these objects—perhaps these artists are giving me an entry into the way the objects see themselves. Maybe the paintings are a revelation of what the object is thinking or doing? Murray may be asking us to wonder, "How *does* a wine glass feel when it falls off a table?" And "What does my bed do after I wake up and leave it?" Woodman's *Balustrades* allude to certain places as much as her vessels connect us to history and culture. But in works like *Interior-Exterior*, 2015, there seems to be more to the arrangement. A vessel occupies the floor area in front of a rectangular canvas that depicts an interior. In the painting on the wall, Woodman gives the suggestion of perspectival space—even making the ceramic image of a ceramic vessel on a shelf obey the vanishing point of the painting. Rather than the painting being a backdrop that continues the illusion of the vessels in an environment (as in *Santa Barbara*, 2005, where the vessels on the floor seem to cast shadows onto the painting), the vessel on the floor is separate from the illusion of the space of the painting. The right side of the vessel gestures upward, in relation to the ceramic shape in the wall painting—as if it is waving at another version of itself. The work seems to be the memory of the objects—they are looking back at silhouettes of themselves.

If Virginia Woolf is correct, then the objects in our lives are repositories for our gazes. The coffee cup we use every day contains a history of use—it has been with us on bad days and good. We may look at an empty vase and recall the flowers that once filled it. In our mind's eye these things can be as real as the physical objects in the room. Form is the catalyst for this experience—forms we can see and forms we can hold. Expanding the language of form creates room for more ideas, more memory, more history.

The expansiveness of Murray and Woodman cannot be overstated. Through support and shape they created their own paths of invention through form and they did so without abandoning imagery and connection to history and lived experience. Their respective practices remind us that meaning is *made*—assembled out of the known and the unknown.

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[5] Schor, Mira. "Figure/Ground." Essay. In *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*, 155. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977.