

# **Focus : [brochure] Elizabeth Murray**

**[Sarah Suzuki]**

Author

**Murray, Elizabeth, 1940-2007**

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# FOCUS: ELIZABETH MURRAY



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1. Untitled. 1982. Screenprint, composition and sheet (irreg.): 48 1/4 x 34 1/4" (123.3 x 80.6 cm). Publisher: the artist and Simca Print Artists, Inc., New York. Printer: Simca Print Artists, Inc., New York. Edition: 50. Given anonymously, 1983. ©2005 the artist

Elizabeth Murray (American, born 1940) imbues the everyday with a cinematic sense of drama and action, of emotional power and poetic resonance. In her paintings, drawings, and prints she embraces abstraction and figuration, as well as the spaces in between. She draws on inspiration as diverse as the comics she loved as a child, the Paul Cézanne paintings she saw as a student, and the movements of Pop art and Minimalism, to which she was exposed when she moved to New York City, in 1967. Murray has become well-known for large, boisterous work, often executed on shaped or three-dimensional canvases, and for depictions of everyday objects such as paintbrushes and coffee cups, moving the personal into the realm of the public, and recording the domestic on a heroic scale. Since the early 1980s she has also mined the creative possibilities of printmaking, using it as a fertile tool to further explore concerns of her paintings and drawings.

Murray was involved with printmaking early on in her artistic career: she drew on lithographic stones as a student, assisted in teaching the medium in graduate school, and established a print studio at her first teaching job. Despite this exposure, Murray continued



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to feel constrained by the required technical expertise, fearing that the intricacy of the printing process would hamper her creativity. After repeated requests from her art dealers, however, Murray agreed to give printmaking another chance, and shortly thereafter she became involved with a variety of printmaking techniques that have deepened her artistic exploration.

In an untitled screenprint from 1982 (fig. 1), her earlier, more purely abstract forms have morphed into something more suggestive, alluding to many figurative possibilities—animal, vegetable, mineral. Here, Murray brings her experimentation with shaped paintings—something she had begun in the late 1970s—to a work on paper. Unlike Minimalist artists, for whom the shaped canvas was an outward expression of a work's inner logic, with Murray the rectangle seems unable to contain the exuberance—the chaos, even—within. This print uses three sheets of paper to form an irregular

shape, loosely echoing the forms inside but barely containing them, as they bump against the boundaries, anxious for release.

Printmaking has also provided Murray with avenues through which to further explore her themes and images. The coffee cup made its first appearance in her work in 1981, and since then it has remained an enduring icon. For Murray, this seemingly humble quotidian object signifies multiple roles: the crutch of the artist in the studio, up all night, fueled by caffeine and artistic fervor; the dream of the domestic idyll, of repose with a cup of coffee and the newspaper in the kitchen; the parental reality of

the broken cup, a spill to be wiped up, shards to be discarded—the detritus of the whirlwind and cacophony of life as a working mother. These cups constitute the polar opposite of the classic still-life object, instead bringing an unexpected drama to the traditional idea of the “domestic.” Far from symbolizing quiet halcyon scenes, they suggest the small but loud cataclysms of domestic reality.

The printed versions of Murray's cups demonstrate the ways in which she has pushed the boundaries of traditional printmaking and consistently presented new technical challenges to the master printers with whom she works. Her paintings of this subject have often used shaped, multiple canvases, a visual manifestation of the “breaking” depicted in the image. To achieve a similar effect in an editioned work on paper, such as *Cracking Cup* (1998, fig. 2), the printers gave the work a third dimension by the unusual inclusion of cut and raised paper

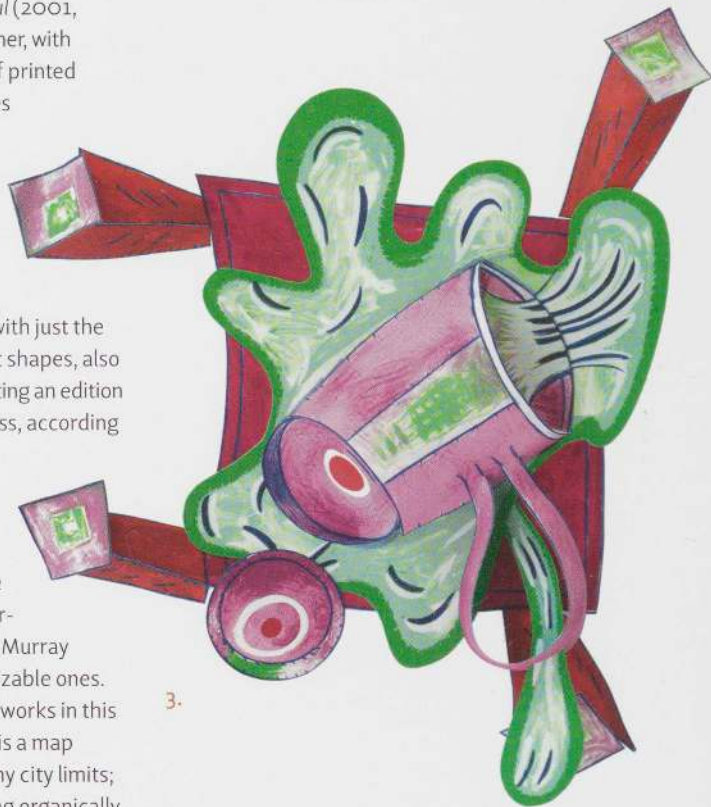


elements. Another cup image, *Body and Soul* (2001, fig. 3), takes this experimentation even further, with irregularly shaped sheets, multiple layers of printed paper, and a three-dimensionality that gives the work a sculptural presence.

Murray's most recent prints, *The Metropolitan Series* (2005, fig. 4), continue forging a trail of innovation and invention in the medium. In a group of twenty-four unique yet related lithographs, Murray began with a white sheet, printed with just the outlines of forms, and a box of loose cutout shapes, also printed with color outlines. Rather than creating an edition by running the work through a printing press, according to convention, Murray created each composition individually, pasting on elements and adding further hand-coloring. The result takes her concept of the shaped support to another level, presenting a tangle of forms waiting to be deciphered and interpreted. In *Eleventh*, a print from this series, Murray embraces both abstract forms and recognizable ones. Named for a street or avenue, as are all the works in this series, it suggests topography. However, it is a map without order, unable to be contained by any city limits; it sprawls out at will, growing and expanding organically. This is both an explosion and a celebration, a freeze frame on the pandemonium of everyday life found in the art of Elizabeth Murray.

Sarah Suzuki

The Sue and Eugene Mercy, Jr. Assistant Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books



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2. *Cracking Cup*. 1998. Lithograph on cut and raised paper, composition and sheet (irreg.): 34  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 39  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (87.3 x 101 cm). Publisher and printer: Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip and Bay Shore, New York. Edition: 45. Gift of Emily Fisher Landau, 1999. ©2005 the artist and Universal Limited Art Editions

3. *Body and Soul*. 2001. Lithograph and screenprint on cut and raised paper, composition (irreg.): 35  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 40  $\frac{11}{16}$ " (90.2 x 103.3 cm); sheet: 45 x 45" (114.3 x 114.3 cm). Publisher and printer: Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles. Edition: 35. John B. Turner Fund, 2005. ©2001 the artist and Gemini G.E.L.<sup>LLC</sup>



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4. *Eleventh from The Metropolitan Series*. 2005. Lithograph on cut-and-pasted paper with felt-tipped pen and watercolor additions, composition (irreg.): 25 1/4 x 33" (65.7 x 83.8 cm); sheet: 28 x 35" (71.1 x 88.9 cm). Publisher and printer: Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles. Edition: one from a series of 24 unique works. John B. Turner Fund, 2005. ©2005 the artist and Gemini G.E.L.<sup>LLC</sup>

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