



Judith Murray: *Continuum*

by Lilly Wei

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Judith Murray is a New York-based abstract artist who, in the course of her long career, has shifted from a graphic, hard-edged style and sensibility to a more painterly mode, increasingly enamored, as is abundantly evident, by the luminosity and versatility of oils, her preferred medium. *Continuum*, her recent solo exhibition at Sundaram Tagore—which followed an exhibition of the same title this past March in the gallery’s Beverly Hills space—is the latest iteration of her embrace of luxuriant materiality.

Murray has essentially used only red, yellow, black, and white since the beginning, although in this show, flashes of other colors appear fleetingly—a whirr of green, blue, or violet in paintings such as *Nomad* (2008) or *Glimmer* (2007), one of the darkest works here—interwoven into the fabric of brushstrokes or dabbed lightly onto the surface. They add an extra reverberation

to the overall rhythms, like a darting, barely visible hummingbird. Over the years, the reds, yellows, whites, and blacks have also changed, from straightforward hues into more complex ones, mixed and modulated so that roses, grays, creams, oranges, golds, and silvers co-exist with the original four colors.

A band of varying width, color and brushwork extends the length of the right side, a recurrent motif that is more attenuated in this group of paintings. It functions, it seems, as an ordering device, a counterweight, a line that co-exists with the gestural, a drawing in the painting and a reminder of the trajectory of Murray’s art. The final constant in her work is her use of natural forms, from the exotic biomorphic shapes of the 1970s to the recent all-over compositions whose explosive, complex, imbricated, rhythms conjure up landscapes in flux, worlds in transition and the roiling energy of the cosmos.

The space in these canvases is discontinuous, deceptive, with multiple points of view, both Western and Eastern in its rendering, a kind of impressionistic or pointillistic technique merged with the voids of Chinese painting. Gradually built up, the strokes rise and fall as if on water or air, coalescing, breaking apart, spilling over, erasing edges, thin in some areas and so thick in others that the surfaces approach bas-relief.

Murray’s frequent use of gold and silver paint (in addition or in place of yellow or gray), each with its own shimmer, lends a sumptuous and tapestry-like tactility to her painted fantasias. The brushwork of *Transport* and *Continuum* (both 2008) also suggest cut paper—indeed, some of the paintings look collaged—with high, bright surface colors contrasting a dark ground. On the other hand, paintings such as *Wilderness* (2008) and *Breath of Air* (2008) are mostly light, buoyant, giddy, their darker tones providing ballast but not sobriety for their golds, whites, yellows, and pinks. Another group tends toward red-violet, warmed and cooled; the strokes seem outlined, etched, the interior almost transparent, the colors elusive, ethereal, held in place by short, choppy opaque whites and creams. Almost every mark is discernible, like a kind of writing, as if the attentive viewer could follow the process, stroke-by-stroke, of composing the work as an empathetic, meditative ritual.

Murray’s radiant paintings present a case for the perceptual and the tactile, as well as for an inclusive, open-ended formalism. They look easy, and not, to make, the result of spontaneous bursts of creation as well as arduous structuring and re-structuring. Their ambiguity and darkness are overridden by a fierce optimism powered by a belief in beauty that is both canonical and disident, idealized and lashed by intimations of mortality.