

Neither Hats Nor Unicorns: Judith Murray at Sundaram Tagore

by Lawrence Osgood

Judith Murray at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

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Judith Murray's current show at Sundaram Tagore presents a stunning departure for this boldly original painter with a significant body of work dating to the 1970s. She could be classed as a latter-day Abstract Expressionist in that her work is always abstract and also deeply expressive. But there the similarities to other American painters ends. The '70s paintings exhibited stark, incisive, and often brooding or aggressive forms in red, white, and beige against a black background. Their effect was exhilarating and disturbing. A thin stripe down the right-hand edge of the canvas that first appeared in these works has become a permanent element in all her paintings, in effect anchoring the rest of the canvas to the picture's frame. Over the years, she has remained faithful to the use of only these four colors, mixing and combining them to produce a seemingly infinite variety of shades and shapes. The discipline of restricting herself to this palette has given a kind of subliminal, even invisible, stability to the body of her work.



Judith Murray, *First Day*, 2011. Oil on linen, 72 x 77 inches. Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

In more recent years, Murray's style developed into often-large paintings of slightly increased palette in which mostly short brushstrokes are seen literally scrambling and chasing each other in lively patterns across the canvas. In these most recent works there are still the backgrounds mostly of black; and there are the masterful assemblies of Cézanne-like short brushstrokes into lively patterns that sweep across a painting's surface, as if a wind had blown into the painting and rearranged all its elements. But there is something else that is very new. Scattered among the animated brushstrokes are small, abstract forms in Murray's basic colors that recall, in miniature, her '70s canvases. They seem to be there at random, flying around on their own on the background of myriad

strokes brushed against a deeper background of black or another solid color. But of course their placement is artfully chosen. In *First Day* (2011), a canvas of 72 by 77 inches, I counted fifteen of these mischievous gremlin shapes that give the impression of having invaded the more mature, even serious, world of Murray's signature patterns. In some of the paintings they are not immediately apparent, lurking somewhere until the viewer suddenly thinks, "Oh, there's *another!*" He may also think, "What the hell are these?" A measure of Murray's skill is that none of these forms, of which there must be close to a hundred throughout the paintings in the show, make any reference at all to common shapes. There is no "That looks like a hat" or "That looks like a unicorn."

The message of these powerful paintings is ambiguous. Are these miniature shapes sinister little invaders of the canvases' otherwise expansive and essentially stable overall patterns or cute little devils disporting themselves gleefully against backgrounds that are often more dire, even threatening? The ambiguity only adds to their power.

Judith Murray is an unjustly neglected American painter: there have been no false moves in her career, only a steady progression toward assured next developments. Her hand has always been steady and authoritative. And as always in Murray's work for many years, the new paintings may be called beautiful.