

The **DUST DEVIL**  
is in the **DETAILS**



MARILYN MURPHY

by Peter Frank

Marilyn Murphy is a daughter of the center – the very center of America. She grew up in the southern Plains, and has lived and worked in the South for most of her adult life. Still, her art is a product not of two places, but of one continuous spirit, if one modified locally. Oklahoma and Tennessee are separated only by Arkansas; Tulsa and Nashville are practically at the same latitude. This, the solar plexus of the country, is where southern culture transforms into the pioneer spirit – and the ghosts of the past mingle with the ghosts of the present. Murphy captures the strange anomie of this extended region, a place where personal dreams and memories fixate on homegrown myths and anxieties.

Murphy, manifesting the no-nonsense empiricism of her country, is a maker of pictures. She subverts the American doctrine of realism, though, by making pictures of people and places and things whose credibility – whose purpose, whose function, whose very shape and existence – are altered, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, so that they look as if they are undermining or escaping their initial purpose. Murphy's chefs



(left top) **Man of the House**  
graphite  
4 x 4in., 2009

(left bottom) **Haunted by Tradition**  
graphite  
22 x 30in., 2010

(facing page) **Storm Chase**  
colored pencils  
30 x 22in., 2014



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and homemakers and scientists seem as intent and purposeful as they do in those mid-century industrial documentaries they once populated (and which Murphy clearly references, with as much fondness as wit). These dedicated Americans clearly continue their contribution to the relentless March of Progress. But their actions, and indeed the laboratories and kitchens they inhabit, don't look quite "right." Often, it takes more than one glance to pick up on the peculiar situations. But there they are. A cabinet or beaker may go flying off into space. A baked good or chemistry experiment may yield illogical results. A housewife's smile or the poker face of an intern may betray the glimmer of something more sinister. Never mind the boardroom or the bedroom; have the workplace and the kitchen been infiltrated?

The luminous radiance that inflects Murphy's pictures, rich as it may be with nostalgic frisson, adds to the unease. It may reflect, figuratively and literally, the glossy tonality of postwar film and photography, and certainly befits the long skirts and tidy haircuts of the Truman and Eisenhower years. (Truman and Eisenhower, of course, were products of Murphy's literal Middle America.) But it is a bit too vivid, too real, shiny to the point of hallucinatory. It gives everything, no matter how ordinary at first glance, an aura that makes everything somehow heavy

and weightless at the same time. Buildings seem lighter than air; sheets of paper descend like flocks of birds; forest fires break out in oscilloscopes.

It is easy to declare Murphy a home-grown fantasist. Clearly, her work derives from dreams and the skewed perspectives of childhood. These are, among other things, the reassembled impressions of a mid-American baby boomer, brimming with free-floating anxiety (and thus with free-floating objects), haunted by sneaky Communists and weightless astronauts. All that's missing from Murphy's vocabulary are poodle skirts and mushroom clouds. But not only does Murphy studiously avoid the more clichéd images of her youth – no gingham-clad kids doing duck-and-cover here – but she also gracefully avoids the predictable strategies of suburban surrealism, the attenuated narratives, the photo-album/golden-age sitcom quotations, the Poplux citations, the incessant conjuration of tract-home alienation and enforced patriotism. To be sure, this kind of stuff dances in the shadows cast by the vast machines looming in Murphy's backyards and the storms brewing in her desserts; but she focuses her attention on these rather more universal apparitions. Her weird world is indeed specifically American – and in certain places, specifically part of her childhood or her present – and specifically mid-century; but it refuses to rely on the inside jokes

of her nation or generation. Rather, Murphy invents images and sets events in motion that could exist and happen now as well as then, and perhaps even a century ago. The toasters would be different, but the toast would not – and neither would the cryptic markings the toast might bear.

Still, Murphy is a surrealist (if more of a small-town than suburban one), and key to her strategy is the cognitive clash between her pedestrian pictorial elements and the absurd circumstances in which they engage. In this respect, one could situate Murphy stylistically – spiritually, intellectually, formally – halfway between René Magritte and Mark Tansey. The Belgian (capital-S) Surrealist and the New York neo-neo-classicist establish between them a continuum of cockeyed storytelling, a continuum on which Murphy locates comfortably. It is a manner of picturing the world so that the world turns in on itself, retaining all its components but profoundly upending the logic according which those components interact. Magritte reduced his imagery to flat, almost cartoonish ciphers, illustrations of – even proposals for – credible and incredible events. Tansey, relying on the techniques of "traditional art" not just for pictorial credibility but for artistic authority, describes elaborately staged, highly climactic moments – grand reveals, sight-gag punch-lines, seemingly

historical turning points – that turn on a conceptual phrase or philosophical conundrum. Murphy is (quite deliberately) less rhetorically ambitious, and more comfortable with the domestic and personal implications of her choice of visual tropes. She thus argues for a feminine sensibility, more intimate and less driven to prove a point. But she is no less pictorially ambitious, and no less concerned with the human condition, especially as it manifests in the modern age. Murphy is just as adept – as deft, as self-aware, as knowingly handy – as Magritte and Tansey are at universalizing specifics, elevating the banal, and ultimately sabotaging our sense of the quotidian.

Finally, it can be said that Marilyn Murphy disdains entropy. The world she re-creates out of the world she's known does not fall into routine, but constantly falls out of it. The normal keeps springing a leak. Its diversions and misbehaviors are ominous, but never quite as ruinous as they threaten to be. Neither nature nor culture may be on its best behavior in Murphy's pictures, but she allows them mischief almost as if to dissuade them from anything more catastrophic. We already know the bad results of the world going topsy-turvy, Murphy figures; let's see what the good results, the fun and even beneficial results, are. Murphy's Law has been amended; if anything can go wrong, it should.

<http://www.marilynmurphy.com>



(top) **The Getaway**  
graphite  
30 x 22in., 2006