

FRANCES
MURRAY

Frances Murray was 30 years old when she started photographing seriously, and when she did, she photographed what was at hand: her twin daughters, her own face, her sun-drenched Tucson backyard, the bright desert light beaming through her dining room windows.

"I stayed close to home," she says. "I brought things into my circle, my psyche. I had no interest in going out. I photographed my children, our pets, still lifes. That was my universe."

But from the beginning, Murray endowed all these familiar subjects with an un-still life. She would pose her young daughters, Star and Becky, against mysterious shapes and shadows traced out by the sun against a wall, as in *Dream Cards: Window (Becky)*, 1982, or she would incorporate the children's playthings into psychodramas that bordered on the surreal.

For her *Dream Cards: Silver Spoons (Star)*, 1983, Murray sprinkled shiny fairy dust on Star and had the child cover her eyes with spoons. The vintage 1930s hat, one of the girls' dress-up costumes, matched the gleam of the silverware for shine.

"I've always been interested in objects and how to use them. I tend to use a few carefully selected objects. Otherwise it's too forced." Without the spoons, it "would have been just a pretty picture," she notes, but with them the image turns into an ambiguous narrative of the sort Murray prefers. "Star looked so alien,



insectlike, as if she were a different species. A question is posed, but you're not given the answer right away. Things are not necessarily what they appear to be."

In *Self-Portrait/Black Hat: Nose*, 1982, Murray posed in vintage costume herself and, playing with illusion, used a mirror to double her own profile. For *Self-Portrait/Shattered: Bird*, 1987, she positioned a dead bird dangerously and mysteriously over her face on a jagged piece of glass.

Murray, who this year is celebrating her 30th year in photography with a retrospective at Tucson's Etherton Gallery, often photographed her daughters as they played naked in the sun. She caught the sensuousness of their perfect young bodies and eventually found the courage, despite her strict Catholic upbringing, to photograph nude women.

Using the natural light that she insists on in all her photos, whether shot indoors or out, she arranges the nudes into austere modernist compositions tinged with mystery. In *Female Still Life: Mirror*, 1983, the shimmering

mirror doubles the figure—and ratchets up the sense of illusion. A woman's body is eerily framed in a nest Murray made herself in *Female Still Life: Nest*, 1984.

The women's bodies have an "elegant edge," as the feminist art critic Joanna Frueh has written, and they're undeniably erotic. "I celebrate the human body," Murray says. Nevertheless, her figures are dreamlike, embodying what she calls an "ethereal eroticism."

A case in point is her image titled *Lumière*, 1990, a riveting female nude whose slender body veers toward androgyny. Posed in Murray's dining room, the figure has her head swathed in a luminous cloth that catches the light. With the cloth billowing out behind her, she's like a mythological being.

Sometimes Murray zeroes in on particular body parts, converting them into corporeal still lifes. *Female Still Life: Hand*, 1984, focuses on the "gorgeous roundness" of the buttocks, and then has an arm "slash(ing)" through the picture plane, its angular straightness a counterpoint to the curve.

Born in Ireland in 1947, Murray was raised in Rochester, New York, in a large immigrant family pressed for money. Her father worked as a carpenter, but he painted by night and told stories, triggering a lifelong love of narrative in his daughter. She knew nothing of fine-art photography until she met photographer Harold Jones, then a curator at the George Eastman House in Rochester. After they married, and

Jones successively headed Light Gallery in New York and the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Murray had what amounted to a continuing master class in contemporary photography. "I was looking at Emmet Gowin, André Kertész, Harry Callahan, Frederick Sommer—it doesn't get better than that."

The self-taught photographer readily absorbed their lessons. "Right from the start I realized I was interested in form," she remembers. An early effort pictured a white bag blowing across her sunny concrete patio in the criss-cross shadow of the trellis above. Murray pinned the image casually onto her kitchen wall, and Harry Callahan happened to come by. "Who does that belong to?" asked the master of line and shadow. "That's very good."

Callahan's words meant everything to her, Murray says. "It was truly the first validation I had."—Margaret Regan

■ PRINT INFORMATION

All are open-edition gelatin silver prints, printed by the artist, and signed, titled and dated. Sizes offered are 16x20 inches and 20x24 inches, priced at \$750 and \$900 respectively. A fully illustrated catalogue is available from the Etherton Gallery.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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FEMALE STILL LIFE: NEST—1984



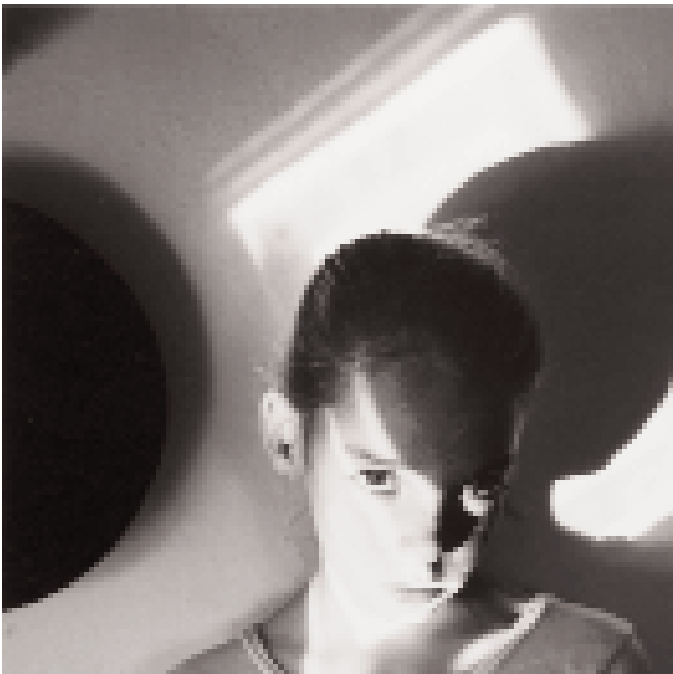
HARBINGER—1998



SELF-PORTRAIT: WINDOW—1992



DREAM CARDS: SILVER SPOONS (STAR)—1983



DREAM CARDS: WINDOW (BECKY)—1982



SELF-PORTRAIT/SHATTERED: BIRD—1987



FEMALE STILL LIFE: MIRROR—1983



INTIMACY/ISOLATION: EMBRACE—1987



FEMALE STILL LIFE: HAND—1984



INTIMACY/ISOLATION: CARESS—1988



MOVEMENT OF LEAVES—1992