

## The Eccentric, the Punk and the Maimed

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My first contact with the work of Wil Murray was in the exhibition room next to the bookstore in the basement of the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art. Murray's work loudly screamed out among the sixteen finalists in the 2008 RBC painting competition. His painting *Sexe Maniac Maniac Maniac Maniac Maniac*, left me deeply disturbed— A spectacle of abstraction comparable to an open abdomen, complete with scattered and ripped organs. The canvas was covered in diverse patterns, with strips of acrylic paint hanging off. A huge stretched and bulging protrusion, the colour of bismuth pink gave it the visceral impact of a distended stomach. Total disgust, doubled with a strange pleasure; the overload of patterns and vast array of colours perfectly balanced in this one intense work of art. Never had I felt so strong a feeling before a painting. I was instantly reminded of the work of François Lacasse, where the long lines of a digestive tract are often brought to mind, yet the comparison fell short. Stronger than the simple fascination felt in front of Lacasse's works, *Sexe Maniac Maniac Maniac Maniac Maniac*, left a sensation of sweet disgusted charm

A few months later, I meet Wil Murray by chance at the opening of the *Cloaca* show of Wim Delvoye in Montréal. Hair dyed black and teased, dressed in a vintage suit, Murray's look too stands out. As with his painting the artist embraces disparate elements in order to confront and create something new, unexpected, entirely eccentric. I speak to him about my interest in his work and he invites me to write these words. A series of studio visits follows. My excitement grows.

Murray's practice confronts heterogeneous visual textures. He paints pictorial experiments accumulating various patterns and forms: linear explosions, stripes, polka dots, drips, scrapes, stains, zigzags, mixtures of acrylic paint and gestural brush strokes, hard edge etc... as if the history of abstract painting since the 1950s was compressed into one single dynamic oeuvre, living and imperfect with a total disregard for patterns working together. And while his techniques are well honed, Murray leaves important room for error in his work— His work is, in fact, constructed around these errors. The range of accumulations that his paintings consist of partially mask the patterns painted or assembled underneath, forming a disparate and fragmented lot that disrupts the overall view. Murray affirms that if he doubts an element in the painting during production and a visitor praises it, he will be given to eventually covering it up, erasing it entirely from view. Exit the comfort zone. Murray is here to shake you, him, the work, up.

After a few discussions concerning Wil Murray's most recent production, I began to better understand why the sense of the corporeal was so immediate for me the first time I saw the work. Beyond the pattern, Murray explores the material limits of paint itself: *hard edges* are at times rubbed out, colours abundant, pieces of paint *stuck* on adding volume to flat surfaces of canvas, while other stuck pieces fall in strips. His canvases stray from the conventional rectangle. The paint's physicality both palpable and fragile, renders clear the technique, design, and purpose. In accumulating to the point of saturation, imperfect pictorial effects, Murray shows us an impure painting reminiscent of deflated flesh; burnt and ulcerated, a kind of crippled corpse, ruined and open. One can't help but relate intimately to this altered body. To compare it to one's own, complete and normal.

This organic aspect is accentuated by a series of elements that appear with increasing frequency in his recent work: protruding volumes forming cavities, expanding insulting foam, the reoccurring form of the cells, even the form of a sperm that we see spurting out from the surface of a newer painting. Murray has both talent and a visibly punk attitude. The concentrated rigour of his work destabilises the spectator by situating them in a pictorial language they've not visited before, a space where heterogeneous elements abound and where the painting's cohesion doesn't necessarily come from the logic of a history of painting but as much from a discipline such as literature, (from which the artist is heavily influenced). Murray pushes his painting afield, using disparate influences to break out his own

visual language, reminiscent of his own punk rock disjointed look: ripped clothing, *patches*, leopard patterns, plaid, needles as earrings, *piercings*, tattoos, *studs*, slogans - disparate elements that form a whole, however gaudy and over the top. Will Murray's painting shocks at first sight. When we realize we've become habituated to it, and accept our desire for the strength of the codes in his work and the uniqueness of their execution, we're finally and completely seduced.