

Serge Murphy *Tohu-Bohu/Tumult*

Nadja Sayej

Number 80, Summer 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9388ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sayej, N. (2007). Review of [Serge Murphy: *Tohu-Bohu/Tumult*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (80), 36–36.

Serge Murphy: *Tohu-Bohu/Tumult*

Nadja SAYEJ

Serge Murphy, one of Canada's leading sculptors, returns to Ontario with a solo show for the first time in fourteen years.

Tohu-Bohu/Tumult, on at the Oakville Galleries' Centennial Square location, is curated by France Gascon and focuses on four key works in Murphy's career that provide the long-awaited opportunity for new viewers to catch the glimpse of an important contemporary sculptor from the heart of Montreal.

Although none of the pieces in the show is new (the work ranges from 1991-2002), the work is shown in a new way. How they are brought together and arranged in the space animates Murphy's ideas further as a poet working with objects and images.

And a poet he is exactly. Not a poet like Edgar Allan Poe, Gwendolyn MacEwan or even Octave Crémazie. No. Murphy obscures objects from their original meaning in play, just as how poets treat words: turning them upside down, dumping ink on them, and transforming the broken and dead as alive once again, even if not physically, at least in spirit.

This can best be exemplified in his 2002 piece, *Sculptor les jours* (*Sculpting the Days*), where Murphy has attributed meaning to sixty-six found objects lined up on thirteen freestanding wooden planks. Sitting on one plank is a broken white rocking horse made of porcelain. Although it started as a shattered toy devoid of use or meaning, Murphy glued it together, and sat it as a composed element for the installation. But don't get me wrong: he's not trying to be some readymade hero. We've heard Duchamp tied to his work again and again. But what is behind that? It's in the way that Murphy brashly glued together the broken porcelain toy, disjointedly fitting together pieces that don't belong beside one another—like a puzzle with unfit pieces. With this kind of selective and rehashed togetherness, Murphy has located a newfound unity, one that acknowledges imperfection—of not only objects but also ideas. And in this broken crevice is where we find



that Murphy really is a poet (not just because he claims himself one in the by-line of the Oakville Galleries interview with Nathalie Caron), but one that plays with the alphabet of found objects as if they were his own.

The wall works *Le Bel Arpenteur* (1999), *Fossoyeur, Martyr*, *Boulangier* (2000) and *Hourglasses and Lachrymatories I, II and III* (1996) in the show are not necessary, because Murphy thinks in three dimensions. The collages, drawings and prints only show down what stands in the centre of the gallery—the sculptures.

This makes an interesting case for *Le Magasin monumental* (*The Monumental Store*), a 1991 wall works that signals his use of poetic attunement in both two and three-dimensional ways. The nine wall pieces of a fourteen piece series

capture a period when Murphy was using found objects as wall works. Although the work is in some ways an unrealised collection of works that hints at *Sculptor les jours*, they also show a space between painting and sculpture, something that looks to have bored him quickly. One of the strongest pieces is a yellow circle with an old tattered, wooden typography letter organizer hinged on the wall. Some of the openings (think: mini mailbox cubicles) are sealed up with red wax, while others are left open. Innocently, an unlit red candle sits coldly atop perched in an iron rod holder. Although completely unrelated to the wax below, the presence of the dichotomy is almost comical or sinister, something distracting and cruel but connected silently and inevitably, like family.

In this we see that Murphy is not only a poet of objects but also a novelist. He has configured a way to channel life through art in a continuing narrative in his work that alludes to real life without dipping too much into it.

Sure, anyone can be a poet. An art critic who uses frilly language to cozy up meaning beside an artwork can be one, as can a playwright who uses a fiery display of drama to shake the audience in their seat. But it takes a true poet, like Murphy, to channel life through art that lets the former speak louder than the latter, indeed.

Serge Murphy, *Tohu-Bohu/Tumult*
Oakville Galleries, Oakville (ON),
Centennial Square
November 18, 2006–January 21, 2007

Nadja SAYEJ is a journalist who writes for *Border Crossings*, *C* and the *Globe and Mail*.

Serge MURPHY, *Sculptor les jours/Sculpting the days*, 2002. Installation: 63 elements, mixed media. Collection of the artist. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.