



PRINT SUMMER 2022

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Aileen Murphy, *mentality-yatter*, 2021, vinyl and oil on canvas, 78 3/4 × 63".



Aileen Murphy

KEVIN KAVANAGH GALLERY

The leaping dog at the center of Aileen Murphy's *mentality-yatter*, 2021—like many of this Berlin-based Irish painter's subjects—is an exuberantly confusing presence. Murphy's outsize pooch busily commands the more than six-foot-high canvas, while barely registering as a coherent form. Scruffy, smeary strokes of sharp white, salmon pink, honey yellow, and midnight blue congregate loosely as a canine figure, a dog body without fixed physical contours: Scribbled black eyes peer out from an aggregation of energetic gestural marks. More unstable still is the peculiar hurly-burly of the animal's obscure surroundings. Floating in front are a pair of old-style landline telephones, their curling cables—solid coils of tube-squeezed paint—stretching across the painting's hectic middle. In the background are blobs and pools of pink and blue: summery evocations, maybe, of sunburned skin and holiday swims, the curves of bathing, baking seminaked bodies. Physical pleasure—whether animal vitality or sensual indulgence—feels important, but in Murphy's world awkwardness and agitation win out. Around the excitable dog and the pestering phones, a gathering storm of allover scrawls disrupts and distresses the picture. Here, as elsewhere in Murphy's paintings, roughly identifiable shapes and figures coincide with convulsive, anxious visual yattering.



We can surely find more important things to look at these days than pet dogs and lazing bodies, but in her exhibition “Wet Talk,” Murphy made a stirring case for such ostensibly inconsequential subjects. Her art thrives, in part, on tensions between the potential uplift of bodily stimulation and the gravitational pull of a more clumsy, disappointing reality. Teasing, dreamy allusions to assorted states of sensory delight are balanced—or willfully unbalanced—by attention to mundane somatic situations or by the aggressive application of uglifying effects. In *french summer day*, 2021, the breasts, legs, and arms of a classically reclining nude are brightly visible along the small painting’s bottom edge, yet the marker-drawn lines of the exposed body are oddly compressed by an obliterating storm cloud above (a dark-stained color field that also curiously accommodates the separated, benignly smiling head of the figure at the base). The superficially pleasing pink-yellow tones of *gel-makers*, 2021—does the title refer to ingredients for skin-care products?—decorate another scene of partial anatomical display, though here, modestly, only bare legs and feet can be seen. Privacy, in this case, is protected, the unclothed body shrouded by a series of emphatic vertical brushstrokes that form a semitransparent white-pink veil across the full width of the composition. This might be a shower scene—the repeated up- and downstrokes a pale curtain—and so a scenario of ordinary, isolated, unglamorous self-care. But wait: Behind that curtain, almost hidden by the overlapping love hearts Murphy has graffitied on the painting’s right-hand side, do we see lightly sketched hints of a second, much fainter, figure? As always, we can’t quite be sure. Murphy combines romantic suggestion with an urge to cover up and cancel out: the promise of intimacy coupled with forceful expressive erasure.

The painter Amy Sillman, a former teacher of Murphy’s at Frankfurt’s Städelschule, has written of a motivating artistic fascination with forms that are “fleshy, funny, downward-facing, uncontrollable.” She is an advocate of awkwardness, trusting in a “homely, lonely, ill-fitting” sense of the world that sets her art “against the great and noble.” Murphy shares this fidelity to the deflationary truths of embodied being, just as her work, like Sillman’s, seeks to maximize painting’s distinct capacity to channel complex elation. The show’s title synthesizes such issues well. “Wet talk” can be slang for speaking nonsense or trading insults—offering apt associations with absurdity and vulgarity—and the on-the-ear effect of the phrase is sensual. But it might work, too, as a crude, unsatisfactory description of painting itself: liquid expression. As such, it would undercut lofty aesthetic aspirations, thus typifying Murphy’s knowing awkwardness, even as her work itself revels in the medium’s flexible and fulfilling relationship with sensory stimulation.

— Declan Long

