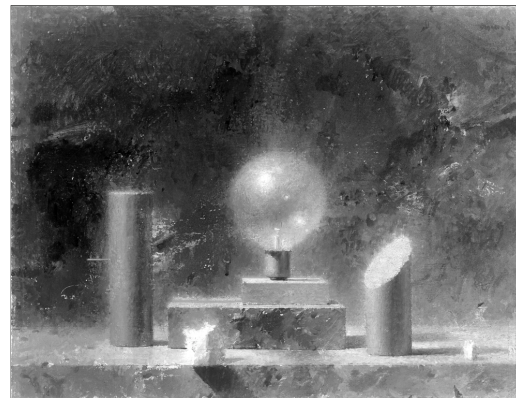




Left: Walter Tandy Murch, *The Wall*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 21½ x 31 in. The Butler Institute of American Art. Museum Purchase, 1968.

Below: Walter Tandy Murch, *The Light*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 16½ x 21 ¼ in. Albright-Knox Art Gallery. George Cary Fund, 1959.



## Walter Tandy Murch: *An Introduction*

By Michael Grimaldi

An unfortunate tendency of documenting art history is that it often overlooks and marginalizes artists who cannot be conveniently categorized into a movement or genre. The twentieth century poses a particular problem for the historian. The ever-changing nature of artist's modalities and their role within contemporary society makes a linear analysis of artistic movements a complicated endeavor in itself, while the individual that fails to be defined by (or defines) an artistic movement or school of thought, is all too frequently obscured. This presents a challenge to artists who wish to form their own perceptions of art, who must be encouraged to seek out these gaps in history independently and find those artists who inspire and provoke serious thought. Walter Tandy Murch (1907–1967) is an artist who possessed a rare ability to assimilate and utilize many of the prevailing influences of the time towards creating works with an uncommon degree of individuality. Despite his being a pivotal artist of the past century, Murch is difficult to place within an immediately accessible and discernible category; as a result, Murch's hauntingly poetic work has been obscured in the current survey of American art. By highlighting a few of Murch's pieces and giving this basic introduction, it is my hope to bring attention to and inspire in the reader further exploration into this unique artist's work and life.

Walter Tandy Murch was born in Toronto, Canada where he studied with Arthur Lismar at the Ontario College of Art. In 1927, he moved to New York to study with Kenneth Hayes Miller at the Art Students League, eventually enrolling in the Grand Central School of Art to study with Arshile Gorky. For the next two decades, Murch supported himself and his family by taking freelance commercial art jobs, working as a department store window designer, book and magazine illustrator, and an assistant to a stained-glass designer, while continuing to paint and study art. Betty Parsons offered Murch his first solo exhibition in 1941 at the Wakefield Gallery. When Parsons opened her now-famed Betty Parsons Gallery in 1946, Murch joined her, mounting solo exhibitions every two years until his death in 1967.

Murch received a major retrospective in 1966 at the Rhode Island School of Design. Murch was an active educator, teaching and lecturing at the Pratt Institute, New York University, Columbia University, the Skowhegan School, and Boston University.

I think a painter paints what he thinks about the most. For me, this is about objects from my childhood, present surroundings, or a chance object that stimulates my interest, around which accumulate these thoughts. I suppose you could say I am more concerned with the lowly and forgotten object, the one people discard because they are finished with it or see it in a certain logical automatic way that I would like to break.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Murch, 1973

Throughout his artistic career, Walter Murch focused almost exclusively on still lifes, favoring machines, tools, and architectural fragments as his objects. Murch's idiosyncratic concentration on the ordinary object often placed incongruously alongside more traditional, organic still-life elements, coupled with his great sensitivity to tone, color, and compositional balance, allowed him to find infinite variety and inspiration from a relatively small range of subjects for his paintings and drawings. His often frontally centered compositions are notable for their simplicity of design and complexity of execution that often approaches abstraction in their economy of means.

Perhaps due in part to his long-lasting friendship with his former teacher and mentor Arshile Gorky and the other contemporaries he admired and exhibited with at Betty Parsons', which included Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, Murch was able to adapt many of the elements of abstract expressionism towards the realization of representational still life. Murch shared his colleagues' formal concerns with the inherent qualities of paint itself while juxtaposing and applying them to his chosen form of personal expression that maintained a high degree of fidelity to aspects of the seen world. In combining these elements with an acute

awareness of the transcendental requirements of picture-making, he became a pioneer in the abstraction of the representation of the visual field through a process of changing expected context and challenging the definitions of abstraction and realism. In a 1965 interview, Murch discussed his analysis of reality, "I must not paint the thing itself, but will paint the air between myself and the thing and beyond. I will accept and reject, be logical and illogical; to create, I will recreate."<sup>2</sup>

This desire to elevate the subject into a "paint-object" (as Murch referred to it) is strikingly clear in his works. Murch considered his paradoxical control of ambiguity:

When I am in the painting, I don't know what I am doing. After a period of getting acquainted, I begin to recognize that the painting has a life of its own. If I lose contact with its life the painting is a mess and if I keep harmony with it, it turns out well. It is possible to discover a work of art in the process of creating it. Beyond that, whatever emotional results may occur in the mind of the observer, I can't control nor would I want to. I remain only the artist.<sup>3</sup>

For further reading

Walter Tandy Murch. Papers, 1916–1970. *Archives of American Art*, Washington, DC.

Winslow Myers. *The Recreated Image: Walter Murch at Sixty*. Winslow Myers.

<http://www.winslowmyers.com/main.php?page= writings&page2=murch> (9 October 2007).

Patricia Boyd Wilson. "Collection of Mrs. Susan Morse Hilles." *Christian Science Monitor*, November 17, 1966.

Notes

1. Judy Kay Collischan, "Walter Murch," (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1972).
2. Allen S. Weller, *Art USA: Now, 1962*, ed. Lee Nordness (New York: Viking Press, 1962).
3. Jane H. Kay, "Paint or Perish," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 26, 1965.

