

# The New York Times

**ART & DESIGN** | What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

## Catherine Murphy

By JASON FARAGO 24 January 2018



Becalmed, 2017, oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches

Quietly, one American painter — unconcerned with trends, unhurried by the market — has created an oeuvre of such phenomenological sophistication that she deserves to be called a master. Her art can be found in the collections of the Met, MoMA, the Whitney and more than two dozen other major museums (though too rarely displayed); her students, including Ellen Altfest and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, have risen to prominence (though their teacher's influence is subtle); and she just keeps at it. She is Catherine Murphy, and her first show of paintings in five years reaffirms that no one sees with a keener eye.



Working without a camera, Ms. Murphy paints expressly choreographed still lifes and landscapes, and her paintings appear as both windows on the world and bluntly flat physical surfaces. In “Becalmed” (2017), a persimmon-colored inner tube floats in a lake, and both the toy and the water reflect nearby foliage: In the plastic doughnut, reeds appear as ghostly spindles, while the surface of the lake is splotted with upside-down pine branches. In the intricate “Flat Screen” (2016), we see a blotchy, impressionistic forest on a lovingly rendered Samsung television; the green and yellow TV leaves echo the wallpaper of the background at left, while the brown of the TV tree trunks is echoed in the burlled wood planks on the wall to the right. Both these paintings get their force from the counterbalancing of reality and reflection, image and object, canvas and screen — and, more than their narrative overtones, it’s their perceptual complexity that makes the greatest impact. Her closest contemporary may be Vija Celmins, another meticulous observer, though Ms. Murphy differs in her use of extreme perspectives and her prepainting scenography.



Flat Screen, 2016, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 49 1/4 inches

Though Ms. Murphy had an exhibition at North Carolina’s Weatherspoon Art Museum in 2012, a full-dress museum retrospective has so far eluded her. Sometimes I want to scream at curators: An heir to Manet is here among us! But Catherine Murphy knows that there are as many virtues in discretion as in fame.

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