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Ming Smith Murray

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IT'S a rare thing for me to step foot in Harlem. There's nothing wrong with there (technically), but as a Brooklyn raised denizen, I don't strain myself to travel there. All that changed with the introduction of the subject of this piece, Ming Smith Murray, who embodies fully the theme of this issue, culture.

Sitting in her studio in Harlem filled with her art covering the walls, and some corners, you witness the full scope of a photographer who has been practicing the art form longer than I, or photographers I've known, have even existed. "It's

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like the camera was always a friend ,or it was a part of me,” Murray said. “It was my intimacy away from being a mom, a wife, it was being in the arts, which has always been my salvation.”

Murray speaks softly about her long running love affair with photography. She has the voice and mannerisms of someone who’s better versed in expressing themselves through their chosen medium, more so than they ever will through spoken word.

Murray keeps it old school with her 35MM film camera. While she owns digital cameras, she believes a big part of photography, as an artform, is done in the darkroom. Murray’s style can be described as personal, whether it’s photos of cultural icons like Alvin Ailey and Grace Jones, or her street photography of cities and landscapes from around the world. The themes of her pictures are an extension of her surroundings, photos of California’s natural beauty versus the brick and mortar photos she would take while in New York. “A lot of times I would wake up really early and go photograph Rome if I was in Rome by myself.” Murray said. “It’s just that I photograph whatever was around me.”

She describes her photography as an artform of shooting in the moment. While she speaks about waiting for that critical time to shoot that can never be repeated, I imagine Murray as a sniper laying in wait for her prey, no movement, no noise, all there is her prey, that one moment. “I literally shoot,” Murray said. “Meaning that word shoot is how you would shoot a bird, you shoot a basketball. You wait for that precise moment to get the ball in the basket, well that’s how photography is.”

Murray attributes her love of black and white films as one of the influences of her photography style, “I was influenced by the great filmmakers because I love black and white films,” Murray explains. “When I first came to New York, I would go to all the film houses and I would look at all the films.”

Murray expresses her style as more feeling based rather than technical, which she says is the opposite of other photographers, like her father. “My father was much more mechanical and that never interested me at all. He would take portraits of me, sit there and take lights readings,” Murray said. “I couldn’t breathe and look, I don’t like that.”

One of the identifiable traits of her work is the use of paint. Murray enjoys painting over prints that she considers to be subpar, and not good enough to be canvas, in an attempt to add more to the picture. It’s a form reminiscent of the arte povera style of art, “it was something to emphasize whatever it was, the feeling in it more.”

While photography is now one of the leading artforms in the world, the concept of photography was completely different from when Murray was first starting out in the medium. Having an interest in photography since childhood, she used her mother’s camera to imitate her father, who took pictures during family trips. Murray decided to take photography classes while attending Howard University for pre-med, “I started taking pictures ever since I was in kindergarten. I didn’t really know about photography.” Not soon after, she learned that photography taught in the school was more technical than artistic.

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At that time photography wasn’t considered a form of art, like drawing or painting, because of how new it was in comparison, it was considered a means to an end. “You know I liked it, so I asked the teacher what could I do with it, and he said oh ‘you could be in pharmaceutical or you could work photograph machinery.” While slightly discouraged,

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Murray's belief in photography as an art form didn't change. She speaks on how multiple photographers can all take the same picture, but they will all come out different based on the view of the photographer; which is one of the traits that makes it an art. "Photography is definitely an art form. You're using light, you're composing, even to the type of print paper you're using."

While the debate on the subject of the artistic nature of photography was going on, the perception started changing and bearing fruit towards the end of the 60s. This was due to the Museum Of Modern art (MoMa) being in the forefront with their photography department, which Murray was able to showcase her work in after an unorthodox application. Finding out the MoMa had days where you were able to drop off your art portfolio, Murray decided to take the plunge and submit her work. After an exciting call back from the Museum, Murray was in the Moma, "I knew my work was good, because it's like the god in you kinda. That's what the true relationship to me is. Art is your conversation with the spirit, the god in you."

After graduating from Howard with a degree in microbiology and a minor in chemistry, Murray moved to New York, where she started modeling as a way to pay the bills. Still harboring an interest in photography, she took photographs for herself and her need to create art. It wasn't until an overheard conversation introduced Murray to the the side of photography that she's always been looking for. While having portfolio photos taken at Photographer Anthony Barboza's studio, Murray happened to overhear a conversation between him and an unknown Japanese photographer about the nature of photography. "I could just hear them talking and they were saying, 'well photography was all nostalgia.'"

Bringing up the overheard conversation during the shoot with Barboza, Murray was able to showcase her knowledge on photography, which lead to her and Barboza becoming friends. Murray says that while these professional photographers had careers in marketing, and other aspects of the corporate photography world, their interests lay in the artistic side of photography. From Hugh Bells, who started in advertising, to the aforementioned Barboza, "they were fashion photographers and advertising photographers. They were trying to feed themselves."

Through her friendship with Barboza, Murray was introduced to Lou Draper, and other members of Kamoinge, a Harlem-based photography group whose goal is to curate positive black images; which was in contrast to the images shown at the time. "They were like a militant group, but they wanted to be in charge of the images," Murray explains. "They didn't photograph the negative images, no they photograph the beauty of Harlem, that's what they were trying to capture." It was during this time that Murray learned all that she could about photography as an artform, "I looked at all the books, I took classes at the students art league." She also met the photographer whose work she loved, like Imogen Cunningham and Brassai.

It was with the help of Lou Draper that Murray created one of the staples of her style, jagged edges on her prints, which is now known worldwide as sloppy borders. While creating prints in the darkroom. Murray and Draper realized that they didn't have a lens holder. Not being discouraged, they made one out of cardboard which ended up producing what she called "weird" edges, "someone had called when I sent in my portfolio and asked if I had a nervous breakdown," Murray said. "But then you saw it with other photographers in the Village Voice, and then later on you saw it on TV."

While being able to thrive in her art, it was still difficult for women photographers to be taken serious at that time. "Everybody really wasn't interested in looking at my photographs or anything like that. Even to this day, I have problems you know with macho whatever." The petite Murray describes multiple instances where she was assaulted or berated while taking pictures, "there was so much violence and anger towards me. It was like, I was just going to take a photo."

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Murray never allowed the violence and negativity affect her, a trait she has from the a long line of women in her family, one that didn't allow the times and society to control their actions and lives. "I came from where the women were kinda always outsiders." She talks about an Aunt that lived with her grandparents when she was young, who would have sporadic stays at mental institutions. One night her Aunt was brought in by the police, curious as all young children are, Murray asked her family what did her Aunt do. Her Aunts crime? Going to clubs to listen to jazz. "At that time Jazz was fast life, low class, etc. I don't think she was as crazy as she was just very strong willed," Murray laments. "Back then as far as women, they couldn't deal with that."

She also describes one of her older cousins, who was a lesbian, which at that time was something completely taboo. This cousin painted and played the Saxophone, and was planning on creating one of the first ever women jazz bands. Unfortunately, things fell apart when she couldn't convince her band mates to leave their husbands and families to tour, "she was a drinker, it seemed like she was drinking because she really wanted to have this band," Murray said. "There was always this pain there growing up that I didn't quite understand."

While occasional having shows and being in the MoMa, Murray's art career didn't experience a drastic change, "that was like getting the academy award and no one knowing about it. I didn't know what to do with it either." A big part of the art business is socializing and making connections, which wasn't really in the nature of the shy laidback Ohio girl. "I didn't know once I hit MoMa, I didn't know how to use that," Murray explains. "I didn't know how to approach galleries."

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While on a visit to California, Murray and her agent attended a photography lecture on Ansel Adams conducted by John Szarkowski, who was the director of photography at the MoMA at the time Murray's work was selected. At the end of the lecture Murray's agent introduced her to Szarkowski, they had met once years ago when her work was selected, and he was excited to meet her again because of how much he loved her previous work. "He was like, 'you're a good photographer, are you still photographing?' and I said of course yeah, in fact I'm doing new work, painting on my photographs." Szarkowski suggested that she should show her work in the MoMA again and in other galleries in New York. Murray took that encounter as new affirmation that she was on the right path and art is what she was placed on this earth to create. "I really do think that spirit works through me. A lot of times I wasn't trying to get something, it just happened."

Murray has shot Muhammed Ali, James Baldwin and Grace Jones, cultural icons. It's that same culture that's given her the drive to do photography for so many years, through the good times and the struggles of an artist, "all though I didn't know it at the time, my motivation is my love of culture." A love of culture and also a love for her family, who instilled rituals and pride in her as a child. Her family taught her that life wasn't about money, recognition or what you do, it's about how you do these things and for what reason. She wants young photographers to know that while everyone wants money and big shows, you should do it for yourself, the love of photography should be your main drive and motivation. "Sometimes you might get money, sometimes you may get love and Fortune," Murray said. "I know a lot of 90 year olds, they're still around, they haven't received that. So the greatest thing you have to do be true to yourself."

While this might seem cliché, Murray says you shouldn't compare yourself to anyone else's success, a statement that has been uttered for probably thousands of years, it's still true to this day. While she has had rough times, the reaction she got from people seeing her work is all the confirmation that she needs, "my father seeing something that I created, empowered me and made me more secure in myself, made me feel that I was worth something."

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Murray believes that photography, and all arts, are a form of healing. Able to heal someone else's pain, even the artist pain, "I created a lot of things out of the pain, it was a way of avoiding pain," Murray said. "A lot of times I did work was to avoid confrontation, to find some way to escape the reality of life." Murray would one day like to see troubled kids using art as a medium to express themselves. When gang fights break out in Chicago, instead of picking up a gun, they'll pick up a camera instead and have fights over who can take the better picture, or who's lighting and composition is better. "Ok, let's have a fight with our camera, who can get the baddest image. Let me tell me my story," Murray said. "Let's try to put that energy into creating something." With art programs being cut in schools throughout the country, and after school programs closing down one after another, who knows if Murray's hope will ever come true. Although, minorities and underprivileged people seem to have a knack for creating things from the murky depths of life, from Jazz to hip-hop. So maybe one day we will see kids running around the hood with little canons, it's a nice thought to have.