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HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Painter Susan Taylor Murray makes masterpieces from mad science.

When Susan Taylor Murray makes a painting, she's as likely to wield a torch as a brush.

Don't call the fire department; no canvases were burned in the making of this article. She uses her torch for heating and mixing, in a process that she happily admits is beyond her control.

Here is Murray at her studio in Bridgeport's Nest Arts Factory explaining how she created "Roots Grow Deep," a mixed media painting on glass.

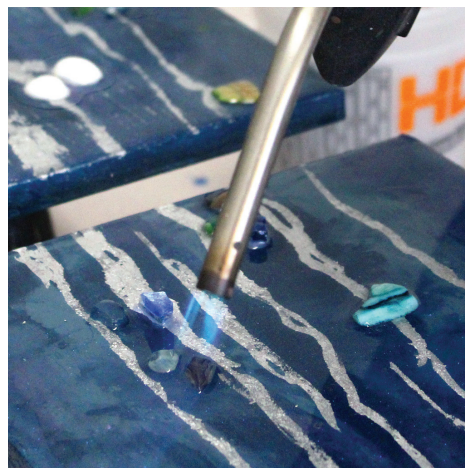
"You pour the colors first and then you use the torch because it's very fluid when you're pouring the colors. You're fighting it with the torch. You're creating this reaction with the torch. It (the paint) starts to mix and move. I can't explain it, but that's what it does.

"Then you let it dry for 24 hours. I'm never really sure what I'm going to come back to the next day. Then I pour epoxy on top and I fire it again. I use the torch (this second time) to blow the bubbles out. And that's what happened, which I thought was stunning."



Credit: Catherine Conroy.

Left: Liquid Sunshine, Mixed Media on Hard Board, each panel 12" x 12". Credit: Susan Taylor Murray.

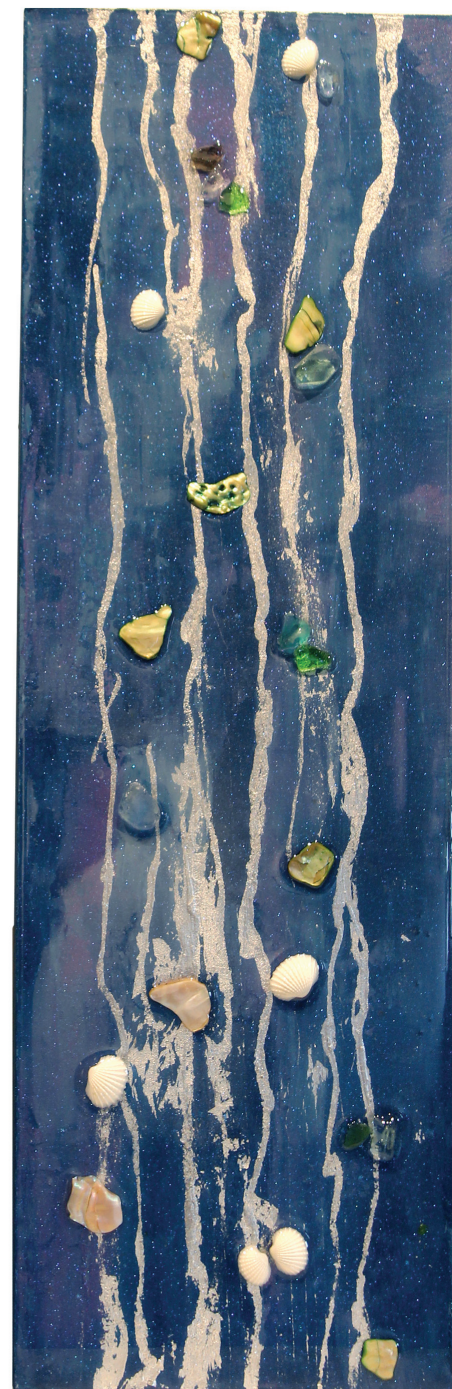


Top: Beach glass is placed and glued on a base of shimmering plaster.

Middle: Pouring the epoxy which is then leveled with a foam pad.

Bottom: The torch phase clears the bubbles in the epoxy. Depending on the pigments placed in the epoxy, the color is affected by the heat. Credit: Carol Mihelik.

Right: Untitled, Mixed Media on Hard Board, each 8" x 26". Credit: Carol Mihelik



The finished "Roots Grow Deep" shows a leafless tree, with zebra-striped bark, against a background that Murray agrees looks like dried out parchment paper. But that was not her intention. "I was just thinking autumn," she says.

The painting is part of Murray's "counteraction" series. Many are pure abstractions, like the "Earth Nebula I" and "Earth Nebula II" pair that just as the titles suggest are galactic clouds of color. Except they have hard, polished surface from the epoxy/resin coating

Murray gives them. Some quadrants of the Nebulas look to be inlaid with marble.

Another in the series, "Earthspace," won entry into this year's installment of the prestigious Faber Birren Color Award Show hosted by the Stamford Art Association. The show closes Oct. 25 at the gallery of Stamford Arts Association. It is done in swirling hues of greens, whites and browns and is flecked with what appears to be golden stars.

In the abbreviated labeling on her

website, Murray describes her "counteraction" paintings simply as mixed media done on glass or more often hardboard. A fuller description would be too complicated.

She may spray or pour or even throw pre-mixed blends of paints or pigments at her surfaces. The coloring agents have various properties that when heated cause them to sink or disperse or remain in suspension. She may infuse her coating with pigment. The coating may be glassy smooth or dimpled,



This piece won entry into the prestigious Faber Birren Color Award Show. *Earthspace*, Mixed Media on Glass, 10" x 22". Credit: Susan Taylor Murray.

as if imprinted with the finest Braille. The stars in "Earthspace" are actually flakes of a metal leaf called tamise. She resorts to a brush if she wants a figurative image, like the tree.

Besides her torched paintings, Murray has another series called "reactions" that again relies on processes she does not fully



Earth Nebula II, Mixed Media on Hard Board, 36" x 48". Credit: Donna Callighan.

control. They are achieved by applying acids to metal based paints. Yet another series, "reflections," uses holographic foils that change color with the viewer's movement.

"I want people to do a double-take," she says. "Someone called me an artistic alchemist, because I'm always experimenting with different mediums. I'll use any medium I can get my hands on."

Murray's own story is one of personal alchemy. She came to fine art late and has had many transformations. She traces her willingness to experiment to her work painting children's murals in private homes and then to a more diverse decorative arts business, Finished with Style, she

still runs with a partner, Tracey Anderson Kollar.

"Walls, ceilings, floors, windows: You name it, we painted on it," she says.

Their work is in homes and businesses. One public example is the ceiling above the bar at the Hub and Spoke restaurant (formerly the Field) in Bridgeport's Black Rock neighborhood.

But Murray's narrative differs from that of other older artists who ultimately break away from commercial careers. She did not get sidetracked after art school. She not does not even claim to have envisioned herself as an artist growing up in Westport.

"As a kid every single craft known to man was put in front of

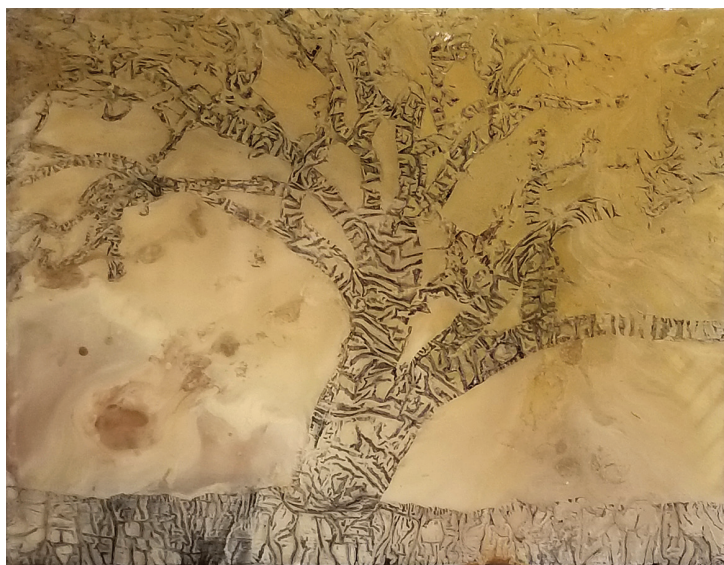
me to keep me busy," she says, but nothing really took. As she matured, she says, "I think I thought you couldn't have a career as an artist. It didn't seem serious enough to me."

In high school, she worked with hearing-impaired children, helping them learn movement by blasting beats from a 'boombox.' So she went to Southern Connecticut State University intending to get a degree in their hearing-impaired program. But then Southern dropped the program and she switched to art. It wasn't a moment of self-discovery though. Instead, she dropped out. At age 19 she was back home, working at a copy shop in Westport.

"People would come in and say, 'I need a logo designed,' and I would say, 'Sure, absolutely,' having no idea what I was doing," she says.

That led to a junior art director's job at a small ad agency, and to another attempt at art school. In her early 20s she went to an open house for art schools in the Boston area.

"I stood in line at this long table and everybody was standing there with their portfolios and I only had this tiny portfolio of logos and some photography. Some of these kids were phenomenal artists and they were still in high school and I thought I'm never going to keep up with that," she says.



Roots Grow Deep, Mixed Media on Hard Board, 10" x 8".
Credit: Susan Taylor Murray.

Embarrassed, she left the line - "I chickened out," she says - only to return when someone suggested that her desire to learn might actually be a selling point. She ended up applying to all the schools and getting accepted at every one. But she decided she couldn't afford her top choice, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Instead there were more detours. She backpacked through



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Above: Formal Dining Room — Easton, CT. This ceiling was finished with a customized pattern embedded in a shimmering plaster. Gold leaf accents were added to the chandelier medallion and recessed tray to frame the art. The pattern also continues on the four corners of the ceiling. The transom windows were filled with a custom pattern and finished in gold leaf. Credit: Susan Taylor Murray .

Below: Autumn View, Verre Eglomisé on an old barn door, 24" x 20", Credit: Carol Mihelik.



Europe. She got a job as a location photographer's assistant, lugging equipment and piloting a 37-foot RV to corporate assignments. She moved to New York and became studio manager for a photographer.

In 1986 at the invitation of a cousin, she moved to Dublin, Ireland to design logos for a drug store chain. One of its founders was her maternal grandfather. While there she was introduced to the Macintosh computer and also to Liam Murray, a beverage company lab technician who came in to visit his sister. They married after a six-week romance.

A stolen Green Card compelled them to move back to

Connecticut, first to Westport, then to Fairfield. They now live in Monroe and have two grown children, ages 26 and 20. Professionally, Murray kept up her career in graphic design, aided by her early Mac experience.

Ultimately, she became a senior art director with clients like Duracell, Gillette and the NFL. For a few years in the early 1990s, she also was the managing partner of a clip-art company with an online catalog of 900 images. Again she was an early adapter. At the time, the internet barely existed for the general public. Installing modems was one of the ancillary services her company provided for clients.

When Murray finally quit commercial graphic design work



Top: Fayerweather Lighthouse, Mixed Media on Glass, 12" x 10".
Credit: Carol Mihelik

Bottom: Penfield Lighthouse, Mixed Media on Glass, 12" x 10".
Credit: Susan Taylor Murray.

around 2001, she shifted to her phase of painting children's murals. She already had taught herself more traditional art skills creating set designs for the Clan Na Gael Players, a theater group based at the Gaelic-American Club in Fairfield. (The faux woodwork inside the club is another inside job done by Murray and Kollar, her Finished With Style partner.)

Murray's personal portfolio now includes realistic paintings on glass, which may require working in reverse, painting the background last. She does mini-paintings on 3-by-3 inch canvases that she says sell quickly. In just the first half of this year, she's had work at group exhibits at the Westport Art Center, the Carriage Barn Arts Center in New Canaan, and the University of Bridgeport.

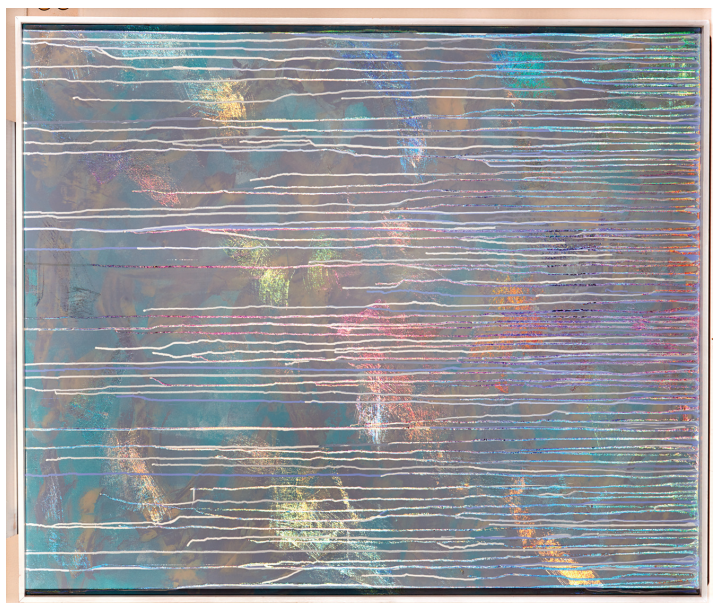
She has to pause to recall the first time she exhibited her "counteraction" torch paintings. It was in 2014 at the City Lights Gallery in Bridgeport. She thinks her first piece using reactive metals was an abstract landscape titled "Lake Reflection." She confined the metal work to just one corner of the painting.

From graphic design to photography to painting interiors to her fine art, Murray has worked in so many places and mediums and styles that her description of one bleeds into another. She says she's grateful for her support system and also to be a breast cancer survivor. The diagnosis 10 years ago was yet another interruption in pursuit of her own art.

Looking back at her youthful attempts at art school, she gives a verbal shrug: "Yeah, you get disappointed a lot, which is why you keep adjusting your sails," she says.

She says that by the time she broke away from advertising, she never wanted to look at another computer screen.

"I just wanted to play with paint. I loved the feel and smell of paint,



Magic of Calm, Mixed Media on Hard Board, 49" x 41".
Credit: Donna Callighan.

getting sloppy with paint. And if you don't like it, you can paint it out. I don't get discouraged if something doesn't work out, because it will work out the next time." www.susantaylormurray.com

Joel Lang is a freelance writer for the Hearst Connecticut Media Group.

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