

Press Release

Exhibition

Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves

January 21–May 16, 2021



Above left: Elizabeth Murray, *Tangled*, 1989-90. Oil on canvas on wood, 83 1/2 x 66 x 19 inches. Collection Dr. Robert Feldman, Cohoes, New York. ©2020 The Murray-Holman Family Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Above right: Jessi Reaves, *Twice Is Not Enough (Red to Green Chair)*, 2016. Wood, sawdust, steel, foam, silk, leather, and cotton, 39 x 28 x 32 inches. Collection Hope Atherton and Gavin Brown, New York, New York.

#MurrayandReaves
#atCAMH
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Media Contact

For high-resolution images or media inquiries, please contact:
Kent Michael Smith, Director of Communications and Marketing
ksmith@camh.org | 713.284.8255

HOUSTON, TEXAS (December 9, 2020)—Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is pleased to announce the upcoming exhibition *Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves*, which brings together paintings by Elizabeth Murray (b. 1940, Chicago, Illinois; d. 2007, Hebron, New York) and the work of New York-based artist Jessi Reaves (b. 1986, Portland, Oregon). Although Murray and Reaves are generations apart, this exhibition highlights each artist's simultaneously lyrical, playful, and rigorous engagement with the decorative, domestic, and bodily. The exhibition opening coincides with the Museum's public reopening on Thursday, January 21, 2021. The exhibition will

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Jessi Reaves
Muscle Chair (Laying down to talk), 2016
Suede, steel, sawdust, bun feet, resin, and foam
45 x 62 x 40 inches
Collection Paul Pincus, New York, New York



Elizabeth Murray
C Painting, 1980-81
Oil on canvas
109 x 114 inches
Collection Eleanor and Bobby Cayre, New York,
New York
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remain on view through Sunday, May 16, 2021. The Museum will employ comprehensive COVID-19 safeguards to ensure the health of our staff and the public. As always, admission to CAMH is free.

Wild Life takes the form of both a survey and a two-person exhibition. Works by Murray spanning the 1960s to the 2000s will be presented alongside a selection of Reaves's sculptural assemblages of the last six years, including her signature ottomans and a site-specific carpeted platform. In their raucous questioning of so-called "good taste," Murray and Reaves each elevate and emphasize the aesthetic value of the "detail"—historically associated with the ornamental, domestic, and everyday, and thus the feminine—only to violently unsettle and explode such "bad objects."

Murray is best known for her monumental, fractured canvases depicting cartoonish, domestic scenes and still lifes. Her earliest works from the late 1960s, in particular a series of small paintings of the Empire State Building featuring tromp l'oeil borders of rippling fabrics or leafy vines, reflect the influences of Surrealism and Pop, as well as the work of peers now associated with the Hairy Who and Bay Area Funk movements. Murray would soon turn to a reduced visual language of gestural and geometric abstraction. Yet, she never entirely abandoned representational imagery, nor was the domestic sphere far from the artist's mind, as paintings such as *Up Step* and *White Down Step* (both 1973) attest. Over time, Murray's shapes expanded beyond the surface of her compositions to form the frame. In 1980, the canvases—now massive in scale—cracked open into multi-paneled paintings depicting splintering cups, kitchen tables, and fragmented body parts, eventually leading to Murray's signature, monumental constructions of overlapping and interpenetrating shaped canvases.

Despite the significant critical reception Murray received during her lifetime, her work remains an outlier of sorts—avoiding easy categorization and resisting affiliation with a singular historical movement or style. So too does her influence on recent generations of artists, as well as her significant impact on broader conversations regarding the daily and domestic, remain under-examined. Positioning the two artists' work together both reveals Murray's lasting influence and historically contextualizes Reaves.

Reaves's eccentric, garish, and surreal sculptures made of ripped, recombined, and reupholstered amalgamations of couches and chairs—often by noted modernist designers such as Marcel Breuer and Isamu Noguchi—extend Murray's own cartoonish plays into three dimensions. Sumptuous and grotesque in equal measure, Reaves's work both literally and figuratively performs a process of undoing, a laying bare, or laying to waste, of the modernist ideal of form following function. Her often discomfiting assemblages occupy a space

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Jessi Reaves
Idol of the Hares, 2014
Oak, polyurethane foam, silk, cotton, aluminum,
and ink
38 x 28 x 48 inches
Collection Sam and Erin Falls, Los Angeles,
California

between sculpture and furniture, as they puzzle out and defy a history in which ornament (or craft)—traditionally associated, and pejoratively so, with “women’s work”—and modernist design are assumed irreconcilable. Reaves, like Murray, irreverently plays with color and form, high and low cultural references, and notions of masculinity and femininity. In each artist’s work, we find a refusal of rigid categorizations and, instead, an embrace of the nuanced and often ambiguous conceptions of the body and the home, wherein both body and home are continuously coming together and falling apart.

Wild Life is the first institutional presentation of Murray’s work in Texas since the historic 1987 traveling exhibition *Elizabeth Murray: Paintings and Drawings* at the Dallas Museum of Art. It is the first presentation of Reaves’s work in the Texas, as well as the first exhibition to survey her work of the last six years.

Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves is organized by Rebecca Matalon, Curator, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

Publication

Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves will be accompanied by a full-color exhibition catalogue, co-published by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and Dancing Foxes Press. The illustrated publication will feature an essay by Matalon, a conversation between Reaves and writer and musician Johanna Fateman, as well as a reprinted conversation between Murray and editor and filmmaker Kate Horsfield, originally published in a 1986 issue of *Profile* magazine.

Support

Presenting Sponsorship for *Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves* has been provided by Agnes Gund with additional support from Leah Bennett, Gladstone Gallery, The Murray-Holman Family Trust, and Pace Gallery. Other funding provided by Carol LeWitt and Cody Fitzsimmons and Christopher Scott.

Publication support provided by Bridget Donahue, New York.

Public Programs

Please visit camh.org for a complete list of Museum programs relating to this exhibition.



Elizabeth Murray
Night Empire, 1967-68
Oil on canvas
51 1/2 x 48 inches
Collection Arthur and Susan Murray Resnick
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