Wild Life: Elizabeth Murray & Jessi Reaves
Jessi Reaves

**Idol of the Hares**, 2014
Oak, polyurethane foam, silk, cotton, aluminum, and ink
Collection Sam and Erin Falls, Los Angeles, California

After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 2009, Reaves moved to New York City and took on a variety of odd jobs—sewing curtains, upholstering pillows, and eventually working in a furniture design studio centered on mid-century modern reproductions. Given free reign to work on her own projects after hours using the shop’s tools and discarded materials, she began making art after many years without access to space and resources.

The earliest work by Reaves included in this exhibition, *Idol of the Hares* (2014) alludes to the human body through the use of lumpy and bulging raw foam which resembles a body sagging with age. The work’s likeness to a body is heightened by the beige hue of the foam, which resembles the color of Caucasian skin. Like skin and bones, the foam is itself unstable and prone to disintegration. Materials like foam, as well as the staples and seams that dot the surface of *Idol of the Hares*, are usually hidden inside couches and chairs, but Reaves tends to jumble such distinctions as inside and outside.
Elizabeth Murray belongs to a generation of artists who emerged with force in the 1970s. Following studies at the Art Institute of Chicago and Mills College in Oakland, California, Murray moved east. *Night Empire* (1967–68) is part of a series the artist made of the Empire State Building shortly after arriving in New York City in 1967. Made while Murray was pregnant with her first child, Dakota, *Night Empire* is one of several early paintings to reference blankets, including *Dakota’s Red* (1971) on view in this exhibition.

Jessi Reaves

**Stubborn half dome lamp**, 2020
Sawdust, wood glue, lamp wiring, steel, brass, driftwood, and wicker basket
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York, New York
Elizabeth Murray

**Dakota’s Red**, 1971
Oil on canvas
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Marvin Rappaport

In the years preceding her son’s birth, while she lived in Buffalo, New York, Murray made massive, and sometimes kinetic, sculptures. But raising a child in a small apartment in New York necessitated a change in scale and materials. She started to paint again and she described this experience “like coming home.” The first painting Murray made following the birth of her son in 1969, *Dakota’s Red’s* (1971) has a reduced visual vocabulary and repetition of form that reflects the influence that monochrome painting of the period had on her early work. Yet, Murray never entirely abandoned representational imagery nor was the domestic sphere far from her mind as *Dakota’s Red’s* repeated pattern of a house and reference to a baby blanket attest. Rather, she infused the cool, pared-down aesthetics of minimal painting with distinctly domestic, decorative, and personal content. This is the first time *Dakota’s Red* has been on view since it’s inclusion in the Whitney Annual in 1972.
Murray's role as a mother shows up throughout her work. Starting in 1973, Murray made a suite of small paintings that she titled *Heart Beat*. In each, wobbly, almost-vibrating black lines extend from a small, curved form at the painting’s bottom edge, as if radiating outwards from a body’s core or womb. The following year, in 1974, Murray began a series of similarly scaled works depicting Mobius strips, as in *Mobius Band*. In the work the twisting forms become a metaphor for the physical passage of a baby experienced in childbirth, the inside becoming outside.
Jessi Reaves

**Muscle Chair (Laying down to talk)**, 2016
Suede, steel, sawdust, bun feet, resin, and foam
Collection Paul Pincus, New York, New York

From the outset, Reaves’s works, as outgrowths of the design studio where she once worked, have routinely incorporated modernist furniture—sometimes as fragments and sometimes whole. *Muscle Chair (Laying down to talk)*’s black leather surface was sourced from a sofa designed by the Brazilian modernist Percival Lafer, another fragment of which was used to make *Twice Is Not Enough (Red to Green Chair)* (2016), on view in this exhibition. As with her use of raw foam, visible seams, and staples, Reaves questions “good design” by drawing attention to the blemishes and idiosyncrasies of her domestic objects. She asks: Why do we cherish some objects and others end up in the trash or at a thrift store? Who is design for? And why do certain aesthetic styles, such as mid-century design, remain popular while others fall out of favor?

Elizabeth Murray

**Twist of Fate**, 1979
Oil on canvas
Collection John and Lisa Dorn, Houston, Texas

Jessi Reaves

**Red Eyelashes**, 2019
Wood, leather, enamel, paint, glass, plexiglass, vinyl, and lace
Collection Paul Pincus, New York, New York
Starting in 1976, Murray began to play with shaped canvases, exploring interior spatial illusions and the more literal shapes of her canvas constructions, such as *C Painting* (1980–81) and *Wake Up* (1981). Her works also start to take on increasingly monumental proportions and biomorphic forms.

Although abstract, her paintings of the period often reference biologically female bodies and reproduction. Murray identified the comma form used in both *C Painting* and *Fire Cup* (1982) as a “birth shape.” It can be seen as an almost cartoon-like rendering of sperm as well as a fetus during the early stages of pregnancy. Throughout her career, Murray was acutely aware of the ways her use of imagery related to birth, sex, and other body parts proved difficult to viewers. As early as 1977, she suggested the comma symbol and its associations might “disturb people.”
Elizabeth Murray

**Wake Up**, 1981

Oil on canvas

Courtesy The Murray-Holman Family Trust and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

During the 1980s, cuts and voids played an increasing role in Murray’s paintings as she continued to violently render domestic space in shards by fracturing her canvases. In *Wake Up* (1981), a cup and saucer fly apart. Murray returned to the image of the cup throughout her career, identifying it as “an extremely female symbol” in its allusions to female genitals and reproductive organs. She also spoke of the cup as a “male symbol,” in its relation to a trophy. While gendered stereotypes posed by Murray remain problematic—women, too, win trophies—it is not uncharacteristic of the basic and divisive ideas around gender that dominated white feminist discourses of the 1970s. Complicating her own speech, she also asserted that her work is “androgynous,” continuing, “Art is about the male and female components in all of us.” Contradiction marks her account and these works.
By her own account, Murray created work that “viewers can look [at] for a long time and not see any image at all.” And when they do, the references are often intentionally multiple. For instance, when viewing *Fire Cup* (1982) you might see fluids pouring from the mouth of a tipped-over chalice or sperm penetrating a cream-colored egg. Murray gives you clues about which images to see. There is a startling frankness to her use of language and the ways it serves almost as a key, each painting becoming a rebus.
Jessi Reaves

**Silver Pitfall Ottoman**, 2018
Multiple upholstered components, Mies van der Rohe chair on its side, glass, wood, polyurethane foam, fabric, acrylic, and hardware
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York, New York

Jessi Reaves

**Melted Natural**, 2020
Wood, foam, plastic, paint, trim, sawdust, and wood glue
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York, New York

Jessi Reaves

**Blue flower table**, 2020
Wood, chrome, steel, sawdust, wood glue, and glass
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York, New York
Elizabeth Murray
**Making It Up**, 1986
Oil on canvas on wood
Collection The Murray-Holman Family Trust, New York, New York

Jessi Reaves
**Cleaved Table Shelf with Storage**, 2018
Plexiglas, plywood, wood, sawdust, wood glue, fabric, batting, driftwood, metal, and ink
Collection Marguerite Steed Hoffman

Reaves’s surfaces tend to be blemished, pocked with staples and seams, or encrusted with paint or homemade wood putty. Wood putty is traditionally used by woodworkers to discreetly fill imperfections or mend joints. While the material is meant to remain invisible, Reaves slathers it across the surfaces of her works such as **Cleaved Table Shelf with Storage** (2018), both retaining the substance’s standard function and transforming it into a decorative, almost grotesque, flourish. Like Murray, Reaves often uses her titles to insist on “what something is,” as we find in **Cleaved Table Shelf with Storage**. Yet, even when the artist employs language to hint at an object’s potential use, her titles reflect the ways in which she humorously plays with any singular idea of functionality.
Reaves’s *Twice is Not Enough (Red to Green Chair)* (2016) is a bulging and lumpy form, overstuffed and ready to rip at its seams. One early reviewer remarked on the work’s “tumescent” and “pregnant” appearance. Indeed, it seems engorged and, with its curved interior, as though capable, like a womb, of encasing a human body. Like *Cleaved Table Shelf with Storage* (2018), the work reflects the hybridity and indeterminacy of her objects—part sculpture, part furniture—as well as the unsettling, calamitous, and fantastical image of the body and of domestic life that they conjure.

Murray’s use of the void and allusions to being turned inside out are heightened in *Tangled* (1989–90), which takes on the swollen shape of a uterus. Murray’s depiction of reproduction wildly departs from the idealized images of prenatal bliss that accompany many ideas of motherhood. In contrast, she explodes women’s reproductive organs, depicting a woman’s (maternal) body on the brink of obliteration.
Like many of Reaves’s works, *Emotional strategy sconce* (2020) is made of a mix of found objects and fabricated elements. According to Reaves, the overlapping metal objects that form the work’s armature were made to look like “sliced-up” versions of artist and designer Isamu Noguch’s Akari Lamp of 1951. Onto this central structure the artist has fastened skins composed of textiles sourced from fabric stores or second-hand shops. In their juxtaposition of non-traditional art materials and objects, Reaves’s works become part of a long legacy of practices of assemblage that have emerged (and reemerged) over the 20th and 21st centuries.
By the time Murray painted *Bare* (1999–2000), she had abandoned the massive, overlapping shaped canvas works for which she is best known, settling into a new approach to the multi-panel works wherein each canvas shape and painted surface forms its own unified image within the larger picture. *Bare* depicts a series of jumbled body parts—head, foot, hand, arms, breasts, womb—that suggest a figure precariously holding itself together. A woman, perhaps, bearing the weight of her body for us, and, against the odds of gravity and the chaos of daily life, keeping it together as she falls to pieces.
Silver Pitfall Ottoman (2018), the site-specific carpeted platform at the center of this installation, and European yellow couch (2018) do double duty as artwork and seating for gallery visitors, providing places for viewers to stop and sit. The carpeted platform references mid-century interior design, specifically sunken living rooms of the 1960s and 70s. Conceived as sites for communal lounging, they often included built-in, wrap around seating, and emphasized a radically informal idea of social space within the home. This shared seating area gains another layer of complexity in this time when sitting together and gathering can feel transgressive and, in some places, forbidden. The shape of Reaves’s platform is modeled on CAMH’s own iconic architecture, designed in 1972 by the Latvian-American architect Gunnar Birkerts.

These works offer a mode of viewing that emphasizes slow looking and prolonged engagement while also playing with the idea that traditional museum furniture should never distract from the artwork. Further, they function as vantage points, asking us to consider how a retrospective view of Murray’s work through Reaves’s might offer insights into and new interpretations of each.