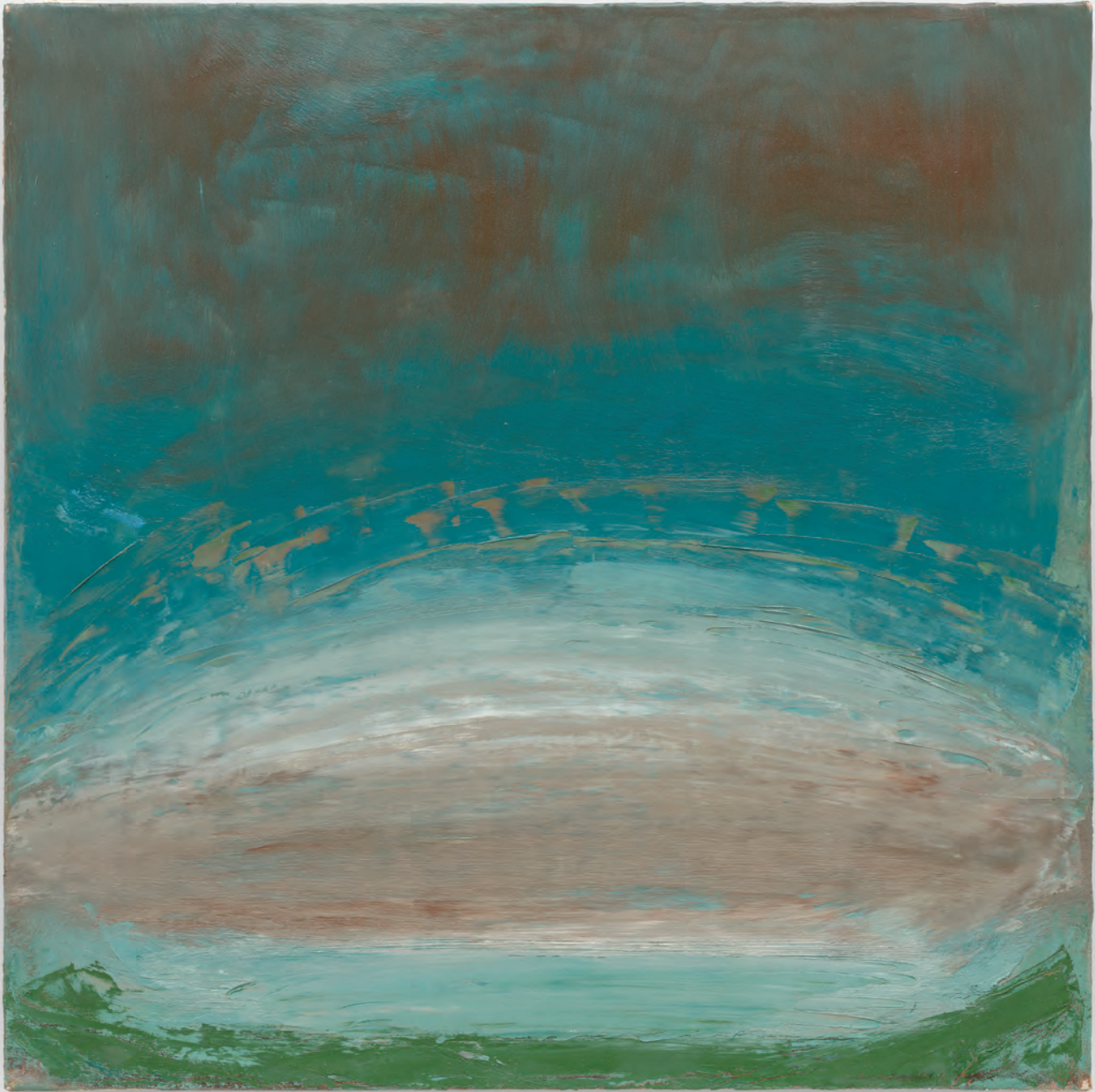


An abstract painting with a textured surface. The top half is dominated by various shades of teal and turquoise, with some darker, almost black, areas. The middle section transitions into a range of earthy browns, from light tan to deep, dark chocolate and near-black tones. The bottom portion features a mix of light and dark greens, with some areas appearing more saturated and others more muted. The brushstrokes are visible throughout, creating a sense of movement and depth.

JESSE MURRY: RISING

NECESSARY ANGELS:
JESSE MURRY &
LISA YUSKAVAGE



Jesse Murry, *Untitled (Rising/Abyss Study)*, 1992. Oil and wax on canvas. 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.

JESSE MURRY: RISING

CO-CURATED BY JARRETT EARNEST AND LISA YUSKAVAGE

***NECESSARY ANGELS:
JESSE MURRY & LISA YUSKAVAGE***

CURATED BY CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

August 26 – December 3, 2022

Contemporary Art Museum
University of South Florida, Tampa



Lisa Yuskavage, *Tit Heaven #2*, 1991. Watercolor on paper. 15 x 11-1/4 inches (38.1 x 28.6 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.

Jesse Murry: Rising and ***Necessary Angels: Jesse Murry & Lisa Yuskavage*** at the USF Contemporary Art Museum are supported in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Arts and Culture and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture; the Stanton Storer Embrace the Arts Foundation; the Lee & Victor Leavengood Endowment; the ACE (Art for Community Engagement) Fund Patrons; Strategic Property Partners and Water Street Tampa; and the USF student organization CAM Club.







Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR12)*, n.d.
Oil on paper. 10-1/4 x 14-1/8 inches (26 x 35.9 cm)
© 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Photograph by Will Lytch



Lisa Yuskavage, *Given*, 2009. Oil on linen. 50 x 26 inches (127 x 66 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Margaret Miller

The USF Contemporary Art Museum (CAM) is honored and excited to present two related exhibitions in the fall of 2022: *Jesse Murry: Rising* in the West Gallery and *Necessary Angels: Jesse Murry & Lisa Yuskavage* in the Lee & Victor Leavengood Gallery. The exhibitions were developed by the museum's Curator-at-Large, Christian Viveros-Fauné, in consultation with art critic, author and curator Jarrett Earnest and artist Lisa Yuskavage. Influences and powerful friendships between artists are rarely explored in exhibitions, and this is only the second time since their 1986 MFA thesis exhibitions at Yale University that these two painters have been shown together. Murry (1948-1993) was an African American poet and painter that believed in painting's restorative and creative powers to ignite the imagination. Visitors will hear the artist's voice and those of his friends in a recording accompanying the exhibition. Lisa Yuskavage is acclaimed for her colorful, groundbreaking paintings and watercolors that explore the female figure, often presented in surreal or erotic environments. Her lush and amazingly crafted landscapes are at once detailed, mysteriously undetermined, and entirely unique expressions.

The exhibitions offer an opportunity to explore the remarkable artistic friendship of Jesse Murry and Lisa Yuskavage and consider their artistic collaboration evident in the paintings installed in the two galleries. Related programs include a tour of the exhibitions with co-curators Christian Viveros-Fauné and Jarrett Earnest, an artist talk with Lisa Yuskavage, a concert in collaboration with the USF School of Music, student led tours, and a film event presented by the CAM Club student group.

In support of the exhibitions, this workbook is available to students and visitors without cost and includes an essay by Christian Viveros-Fauné and a transcription of a panel discussion with artists, critics, and scholars about the life and work of Jesse Murry, edited by Jarrett Earnest.

The exhibitions *Jesse Murry: Rising* and *Necessary Angels: Jesse Murry & Lisa Yuskavage* and related

programs are sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Arts and Culture and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture; Stanton Storer's Embrace the Arts Foundation; the Lee & Victor Leavengood Endowment; the ACE (Art for Community Engagement) Fund Patrons; Strategic Property Partners and Water Street Tampa; and the USF student organization CAM Club.

The ambitious temporary exhibition program at the Contemporary Art Museum is made possible by the commitment and skills of a most talented team. First, I extend my thanks to Christian Viveros-Fauné, Curator-at-Large who continues to develop significant and timely exhibitions. I also thank Randall West, Deputy Director of Operations; Mark Fredricks, Communications Specialist; Sarah Howard, Curator of Public Art and Social Practice; Shannon Annis, Curator of the Collection and Exhibitions Manager; Eric Jonas, Chief Preparator; Alejandro Gomez and Sarah Hughes, Preparators; Don Fuller, New Media Curator and Communication and Technology Manager; Martha De la Cruz, Digital Media Assistant; Leslie Elsasser, Curator of Education; Amy Allison, Program Coordinator; David Waterman, Chief of Security; and graduate assistant Delaney Foy. The ongoing support from Chris Garvin, Dean of the College of The Arts is acknowledged and appreciated.

This exhibition would not be possible without the enthusiasm and generosity of Lisa Yuskavage, Jarrett Earnest, the assistance of David Zwirner Gallery, and loans from The Jesse Murry Foundation and Candida Smith.

MARGARET MILLER

Professor and Director
USF Institute for Research in Art





Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR25)*, n.d.
Oil on paper. 10-1/4 x 14-1/8 inches (26 x 35.9 cm)
© 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Photograph by Will Lytch



Lisa Yuskavage, *Big Bunny*, 1994. Watercolor on paper. 39-1/2 x 40 inches (100.3 x 101.6 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.

THE ART OF FRIENDSHIP: ON *JESSE MURRY: RISING AND NECESSARY ANGELS: JESSE MURRY & LISA YUSKAVAGE*

Christian Viveros-Fauné

How to quantify artistic friendship and the influence of mutual generosity? How do you measure the warmth of trust, love, esteem, time spent together and untold conversations?

Certain friendships help us change ourselves. With great friends, as with great art, our sense of the world—the very essence of what is possible—is transformed.

These are some of the thoughts that come to mind when considering the lasting bond formed between the artists Jesse Murry and Lisa Yuskavage. Both painters met at Yale in 1984 when vying for a coveted spot at that school's MFA program. Among other alumni, the Yale MFA class of 1986 included painters John Currin, Sean Landers, Matvey Levenstein and Richard Phillips. Beginning in the late 1990s, that coterie, with Yuskavage firmly at its head, gained renown for helping return the figure—especially the female figure, radicalized and ungovernable—to contemporary painting.

The first encounter between the two young artists was not auspicious—an anxious meeting in a dingy art school hallway as they waited for their interviews. Murry was Black, gay, worldly, originally from the South

and fourteen years older. Yuskavage was a talented, if frustrated, twenty-two year-old Tyler School of Art senior—an interloper from Juniata Park, a white working class neighborhood of North Philadelphia, who suddenly felt small and intimidated by the ivy-walled privilege particular to her new digs (“I guess it was a class thing,” she remembers, “Yale costs a lot, so I better listen to them.”).

In that academic antechamber thirty-eight years ago, Murry smiled his outsize smile and waved; she thought he was making fun of her and her paintings, which she had broken down, folded and ferried in a hand-painted VW van. Her suspicions were all but confirmed when he kicked off his formal parlay by quoting Bette Davis in *All About Eve*: “I have not come to New Haven to tear the ivy off the walls of Yale!” Note to future grad and college students: when escorted by your parents on a university campus, few things are more vexatious than finding someone you think is prettier, cleverer or more talented than you.

Miraculously—because significant friendships, like miracles, are life-altering—the two outsiders put aside small differences and forged an enduring connection. Post-university penury followed like rain the plow,

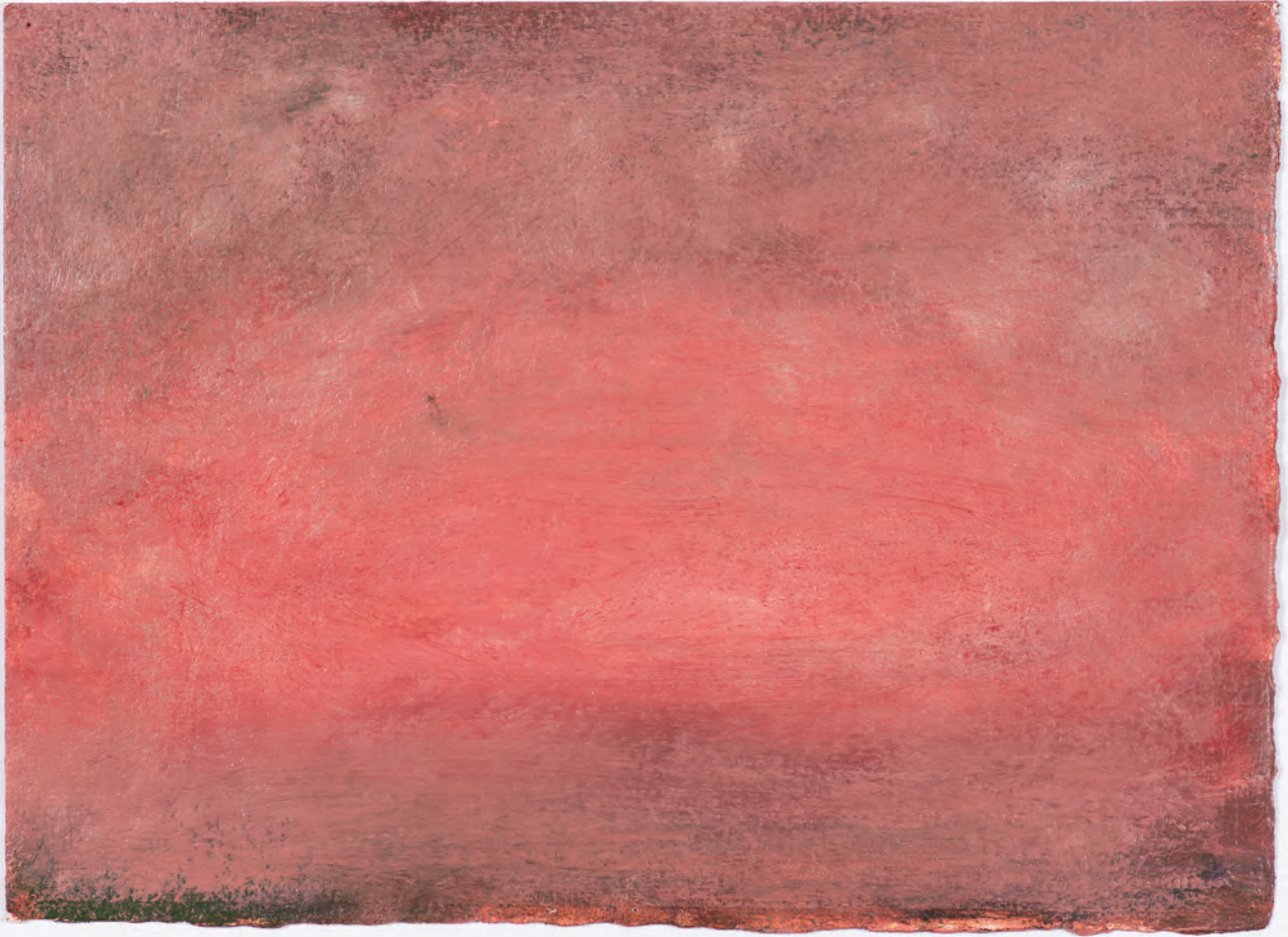




Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR20)*, n.d.
Oil on paper. 5-1/2 x 11-7/8 inches (14 x 30.2 cm)
© 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Photograph by Will Lytch



Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR7)*, n.d. Oil on paper. 10-1/4 x 14-1/8 inches (26 x 35.9 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Will Lytch.



Jesse Murry, *Untitled (PS4)*, n.d. Oil on paper. 11 x 15 inches (27.9 x 38.1 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Will Lytch.

along with mid-size triumphs, early life lessons and no small amount of tragedy. Taking advantage of free health care at Yale, Murry learned he was HIV-positive. Living in New York, the two friends saw each other over the ensuing years on countless personal, studio and hospital visits—culminating in Murry's last night on January 13, 1993. Before dying from AIDS, he gifted Yuskavage an inspired nugget of clairvoyance. She has since deployed it like Joan of Arc armor plate to rebuff misogyny, privilege, alienation (the unproductive kind), and the psychic defeatism engendered by rejection in both the real world and in the parallel domain we call "the art world."

"You'll never flinch," he told her, "You will always be able to stand up to it." For a young artist who struggled to hide her wounds in the confessional early 1990s, Murry's words were a magic salve. "Shame when harnessed is jet engine fuel," Yuskavage says today; "When harnessed."

Artistic friendships come in all shapes and sizes and with matching disclosures. When the highly competitive (not to say bitchy) Virginia Woolf first met Katherine Mansfield, she described the New Zealand-born writer as stinking "like a ... civet cat that had taken to streetwalking." James Baldwin, for his part, honored his older friend, the painter Buford Delaney, by sharing an early joint revelation. After the painter pointed to a street puddle, the fledgling writer puzzled. "Look again," Delaney directed—whereupon Baldwin saw New York City reflected in an oil slick. "He taught me how to see," Baldwin said of that double epiphany later. "Painters have often taught writers how to see."

Murry, a poet and essayist with spotty formal artistic training taught Yuskavage how to see. She, in turn, rewarded him with enduring fellowship, brilliant repartee, and guidance for how to get out of his own way as an artist. "Jesse was really one of my most important teachers," Yuskavage told writer Faye Hirsch in an *ARTnews* article aptly titled "Muse." "I think I had a lot to teach him, about painting, and about letting go of your brainy self when you paint. It is very important to me to totally connect with what I'm doing; that was a struggle for Jesse, to connect. He was so hyperintelligent, so learned—yet so self-conscious, because he was older and in a hurry. He had to be self-conscious, because his time was short."

To paraphrase Hilton Als in *Painting Is a Supreme Fiction*—the recent compendium of Murry's writing and art edited by *Rising* co-curator Jarrett Earnest—one of Murry's most remarkable attributes was his core belief in "attention as a form of active love." The poet-painter lavished laser-like attention on people, poetry, criticism, deep thinking and visual art. That intense focus lives

on, jewel-like, in his writing, but also in his paintings. Part Mark Rothko-like abstractions, part J.M.W. Turner seascapes—I find echoes of the Englishman's *Slave Ship* (1840) in nearly all his roiled canvases—Murry packed his horizontal compositions with allusively layered color shifts and swelling mysterious presences.

In print, but especially in person, Murry's paintings partake of awareness, observation, mindfulness, imagination—until they crackle. To quote Als channeling philosopher Simone Weil, Murry's paintings represent painting as a poetic act, imagination aspiring to form—or, in Weil's direct formulation, attention "taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. If so, it presupposed faith and love."

Love. That is certainly what inspired Murry to push Yuskavage to the limits of her own creativity, beginning with the Tit Heaven watercolors with which she first experimented combining landscape and the female body. In 1990, when the celebrated artist undertook her breakthrough Bad Baby paintings—saturated color field canvases that feature single female figures naked from the waist down—he cheered her on with a line destined for the Yale Book of Quotations. "Mamma," he snapped, "you gotta have your pussy screwed on straight to make *these* paintings." To this Murry added another Bette Davis quip: "Fasten your seatbelt. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

The rest, as they say, is history. Except that history is being rewritten as you read these words—by Lisa Yuskavage, her co-curators (among which I now include myself), the young artistic and critical voices cited in this volume, The Jesse Murry Foundation, David Zwirner Gallery and a few fortunate museums like ours. The fact that Jesse Murry didn't have the future he deserved is heartbreaking. But his great friend—together with her friends, who are legion in this enterprise—have now ensured that the genius of his writing and his art will endure.

CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

Curator-at-Large
USF Contemporary Art Museum

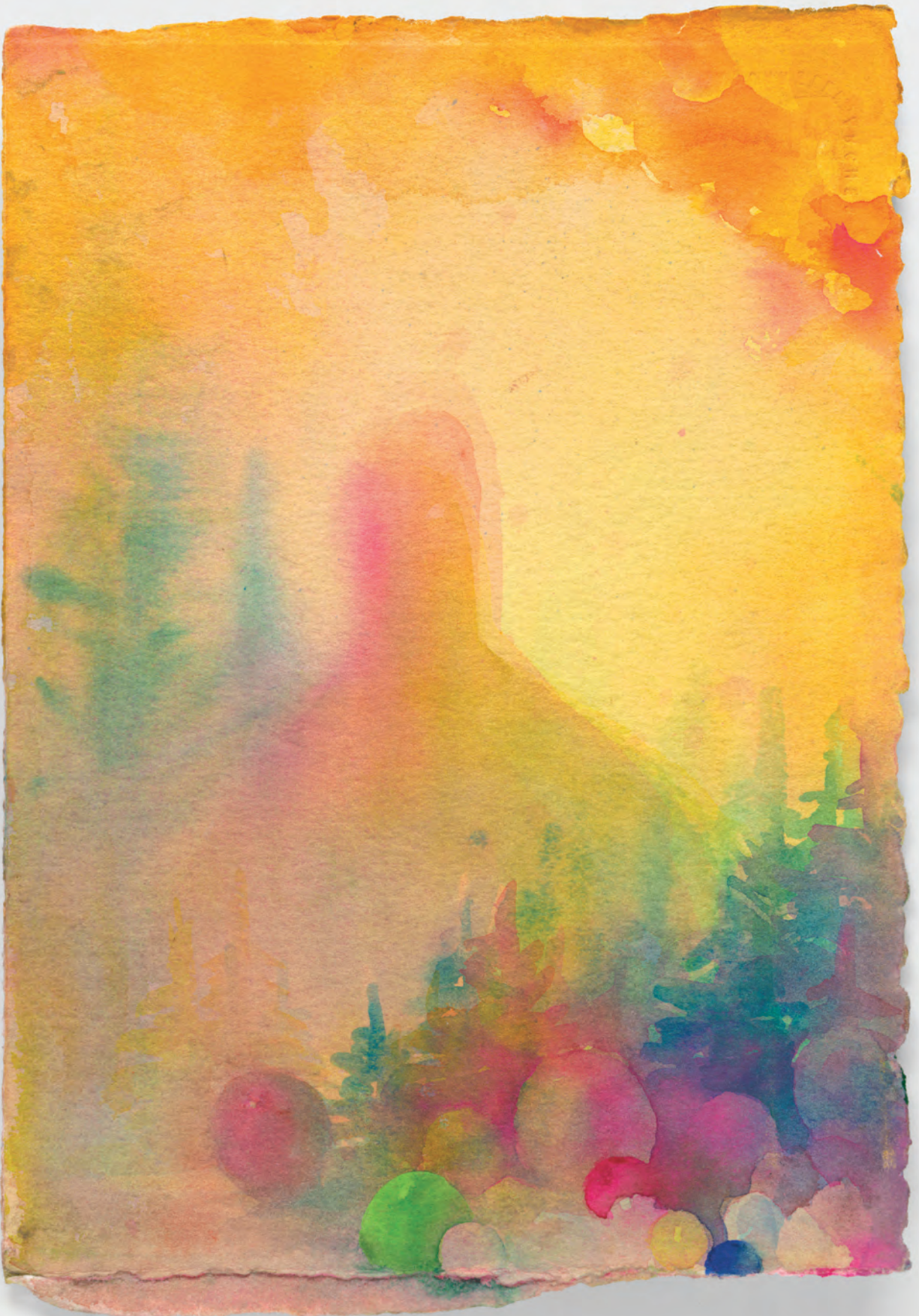


Lisa Yuskavage, *Tit Heaven #21*, 1992. Watercolor on paper. 30 x 22 inches (76.8 x 57.5 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.





Lisa Yuskavage, *Tit Heaven #27*, 1992
Watercolor on paper. 11-1/4 x 15-1/4 inches (28.6 x 38.7 cm)
© Lisa Yuskavage
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner
Private Collection



Lisa Yuskavage, *Tit Heaven for Hippies*, 1993. Watercolor on paper. 11-7/8 x 8-1/4 inches (30.2 x 21 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Rapture*, 1993. Watercolor on paper. 22-1/4 x 22-1/4 inches (56.5 x 56.5 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Hudson Sunset (Coral & Grey)*, 1997. Oil on canvas board. 6 x 7-7/8 inches (15.2 x 20 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Full Moon Study*, 1998. Oil on canvas board. 5-7/8 x 7-7/8 inches (14.9 x 20 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *North Pamet Road*, 2007. Oil on linen. 8 x 8-7/8 inches (20.3 x 22.5 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Snowman*, 2008. Oil on linen. 72 x 57-3/4 inches (182.9 x 146.1 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Tragic Land*, 2009. Oil on linen. 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.



Lisa Yuskavage, *No Man's Land*, 2012. Oil on linen. 77-1/8 x 72-1/8 inches (195.6 x 178.4 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.





Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR5)*, n.d.
Oil on paper, 7 x 10-1/8 inches (17.8 x 25.7 cm)
© 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Photograph by Will Lytch



CLEAR BRIGHT EDGES OF THE HORIZON: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON JESSE MURRY

Edited by Jarrett Earnest

On March 8, 2022, Lisa Yuskavage and Jarrett Earnest, the co-curators of *Jesse Murry: Rising*, convened a panel at the New York Studio School to discuss the life and work of Jesse Murry with a group of younger artists, critics and scholars. Gaby Collins-Fernandez, Alex Fialho, Camille Okhio and Jason Stopa each delivered remarks focusing on one essay from Murry's newly published collected writing *Painting is a Supreme Fiction: Jesse Murry Writings, 1980-1993* (Sobercove Press 2022). This was followed by a broader conversation about how his legacy interacts with the art world of today. Yuskavage introduced the project and Earnest moderated the discussion. The following transcript of that discussion has been edited for length and clarity.

* * *

Gaby Collins-Fernandez: Before the event we mentioned how humbling and wonderful it is to be able to talk about this particular book and artist. In anticipation of this panel we were asked to focus on a section of the book that we connected to. For those of you who have the book with you, I'm going to talk about the section included in pages 201 to 211, where Jesse Murry talks about "color-determined space." The way that he talks about this is with "color as an autonomous instrument of expression," which then relates to the image as an autonomous instrument of expression. He

talks about this specifically in relation to Giorgione's painting *The Tempest*. One of the things about this section, which I connected to emotively, was the way that you can see Murry simultaneously analyzing and digging into semantics, definitions—ways of trying to figure out what an image is, what form is, what content is—to talk about the parts of a painting that are ineffable, the parts of subjectivity which cannot be reduced to content or to anything that is strictly descriptive.

One thing that I thought was really interesting was the way that he talks about and describes the "space of the imagination"—it's something that comes up in a lot of his writing. I think it has to do with his kind of recalcitrant embrace of humanism with a lowercase "h"—where Humanism with a capital "H" was sort of belabored, especially in the 1980s and 90s. We know the ways that Humanism has all of this baggage which could not possibly account for the kinds of social intersections that Jesse himself represented as a Black man, as a Queer man, as a person dying of AIDS. The legacy of Humanism could not account for that particular experience, yet he talks about the way that painting allows him to engage in a kind of imaginative self-deceit. So I was really curious about what that meant. When Murry talks about color as an "autonomous instrument of expression," or talks about "color-created space," I think he's talking about a way of making images that comes from affective reasoning, and of wanting to create a space which has to do with an internal logic that can't necessarily be reduced to content.

In talking about *The Tempest*, he describes how it can't really be reduced to symbolism. Like, why is this naked

Madonna feeding her child in a way that exposes her pubic hair? Who is this man peeping at her and why is he in shorts? How is the scene illuminated? What is that flash of lightning in the background? It seems as though the lightning, light itself, creates the conditions by which we can understand a set of figures that are symbolic but can't be made to construct an intelligible narrative. In looking at the far end of the landscape you can see echoes of Murry's own vision for landscape.

On page 205, Murry writes: "Each moment of our existence is simultaneously and uninterruptedly the end of the past and the beginning of the future." It seems to me that this was his vision of what painting could be; that an image was simultaneously a way of confronting the past, art history, everything that came before, and also imagining the space of the future and what it might mean to have feelings about what was yet to come.

Camille Okhio: There were two parts of this book that really excited me. The first part is the transcription of a conversation Jesse Murry had with several artists on a panel that he organized. One of them was Ana Mendieta. The theme of the discussion was Expressionism; the conversation took place in 1980. The second thing I want to discuss is a trio of poems that Jesse wrote called *A Page from The Book of Light: I, II, and III*. These were written in 1988. In discussing these two different parts of the book I really want to focus on Jesse's relationship to life and death, the earth and the body—both before his HIV diagnosis and after. While I read the book I noticed that there was an uptick in the urgency of the writing after the diagnosis. Before the diagnosis, you see him collecting information, collecting knowledge, needing to express it; once he gets the diagnosis, there is this period of acceptance and then a preparation for the outcome, which was inevitable at that time. Life and death, and the themes of the earth and its connection to the body, weather as the earth, earth as a tomb and a womb. That's something else that Ana Mendieta spoke about in discussing Expressionism, the body and the earth as sites within the context of landscape.

Jarrett Earnest: Would you open up a little bit the nature of that exchange between Murry and Mendieta?

Okhio: In the panel Mendieta talks about something akin to a death wish. She talks about how life is death and death is life, and how both of these are central themes in her work. She speaks about being forcibly taken from the land of her ancestors, and consequently having an attraction to both land and earth as elements in her art. In Jesse's poetry you see a lot of references to the sea and to slavery, to bodies being carried across the sea—lives, narratives, histories engulfed in the ocean—where the sea is simultaneously a tomb and a

gravestone. I thought that was an interesting overlap in their work.

There's a place where Murry asks Mendieta, with reference "to the body and its relation to internal-external space, why did you choose the word 'site' to speak of your work?" In response, Mendieta says: "I've learned a lot about what I'm doing through years of filtering out what [my work] means and why I'm working this way. I know that it has a lot to do with the fact that I was taken from my homeland, and that I have no land, and therefore I was drawn to the earth. I also think my work very much has the death instinct in it, the death wish." I can't help but think that Murry had this theme stored somewhere in his vast brain as he prepared for death. Bits and pieces of that emerge in the poems. In the poems themselves there is a progression from him describing the earth in vibrant luscious tones, he's just kind of drenched in it; and then there's a calmer space—felt with the same intensity, the same urgency, but projected into the future, into the unknowable and the inevitable. It feels to me like he's trying to reconcile both the inevitable and the unknowable, with both things inhabiting death as a concept.

Alex Fialho: I'm going to read an excerpt from an essay I wrote titled "Painterly Impressions of Jesse Murry" that accompanied the 2019 exhibition *Jesse Murry: Radical Solitude* at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. "Jesse Murry's paintings radiate with soft light to luminous effect. Many pictures are meditative seascapes while they simultaneously evoke an interiorized space of abstraction. Murry poetically describes the motivation behind his painting practice in the first page of his notebook, labeled 'Windows, Walls + Dreams,' writing: 'It is a desire to use color to create a space for reverie or for dream in which every part of the painting surface seems to be either emitting or receiving light.' Murry continues: 'The form is landscape, subject, mind or the imagination, themes or idea content range from poetic to the visionary with color as the carrier—also light.'"

Murry's *The Weather and the Giant of the Weather* (1989) takes its title from a line in Wallace Stevens' poem *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. The painting imparts a transcendental environment to the swirling clouds and effervescent ocean that propose a metaphoric form for the weather. The immanence in the sky and heavens is brought back down to earth in the murky quality of the paint and color palette—aquamarine, mauve, dark green, white—and the tactile materiality and texture of the canvas itself. One of the largest canvases in the exhibition, the rectangular painting is still intimately sized. Murry mixed bleached beeswax and linseed oil into his paint, providing possibilities for glossiness and layered transparency. His mark-making primarily involved dabs and swaths of lushly rendered paint as



Jesse Murry, *Deluge—After Turner*, c. 1990-91. Oil and wax on linen. 30-3/4 x 31 inches (78.1 x 78.7 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.





Jesse Murry, *In Ryder's Eye*, 1987
Oil and wax on linen. 14-1/4 x 18-1/2 inches (36.2 x 47 cm)
© 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York
Photograph by Kerry McFate

well as scrapes and scratches with a palette knife. In gesturing towards dynamic motion, a touch of subtlety and softness pervades the artworks.

His painting *Middle Passage* (1989) similarly oscillates between the seeming serenity of the sea and the tumult of the storm. The work's title refers to the harrowing history of the transatlantic slave trade. In this context, Murry's seascape becomes foreboding. The Atlantic Ocean's Middle Passage was crossed by millions of enslaved Africans as extracted labor bound for colonized worlds. Murry's work harkens back to J.M.W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship* (1840), which pictures the infamous slaver Zong while well over one hundred enslaved people are being thrown overboard. As an African American artist creating work that evokes the sea, Murry makes explicit its violent histories through this titular reference. Yet the abstracted seascape contains no direct depiction of these horrors. Instead, as a storm masses on the horizon, intensity emanates from the canvas.

A wide range of painterly and literary references come to mind when viewing Murry's work: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's abstracted pauses alongside her figurative portraits; Mark Rothko's striated yet saturated vistas; Claude Monet's Venetian seascapes; Jennifer Packer's built-up, gestural canvases; John Constable's Naturalist landscapes; Gerhard Richter's layered and smeared abstractions; and Giorgione's smoky, sfumato techniques, to name a few; Christina Sharpe's recent publication *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, with its incisive articulation of Black ontology in the wake of the Middle Passage and its evocation of a climate of antiblackness as "weather." All of these amplify Murry's paintings and life.

The range of Murry's color palette across his many paintings is perhaps one of the most exciting qualities about his work. They include swirling hues of pinks, purples, blues, blacks, oranges and more. *Abyss (Radical Solitude)* (1992) (see page 34) is a somewhat impenetrable painting. Its dark burgundy and blue cede only slightly to bursts of magenta underpainting at the bottom right of the canvas. As one of Murry's final paintings, its title points to his pained and precipitous mood as he approaches the end of his life. But there is a solace in the solitude of this abstracted abyss. There is "the immaterial—the spiritual dimension of color," to use Murry's description of his own work.

I wrote my "Painterly Impressions" essay at Yale's Arts Library. It was early morning, no one else was around, and a soft light raked in through the window. I couldn't help but wonder if this was, at least in part, the kind of radical solitude Murry was indicating. A solitude that begets ideation, being with oneself in the artist studio,

the library, in front of an empty canvas or blank page. It means a great deal to me to be writing about these paintings from New Haven, where Murry completed his graduate work, and where I've recently begun my own. I can say I now sense his history here. I had a similar feeling when viewing Murry's paintings alone at Tibor de Nagy. I wrote the following in my notes: "I am moved, and feel presence sitting in front of these works." The impressions left by Jesse Murry, his life and his work, still moves me, the touch of his paintings, the light of his vision. The fact that his artworks are seeing the light of day again is deeply meaningful. Though he is no longer with us, I sincerely hope that we will continue to be able to sense his spirit and feel his touch and presence through his paintings.

Jason Stopa: I wanted to talk a little bit about outsidership. I'm going to contrast two artists: one selects the stance of an outsider, it's imposed on the other. Take the case of Albert Pinkham Ryder. Ryder was a kind of Romantic poet; he's somebody who rejects European modernity. He adopts a kind of mythic, mysterious and poetic vision of painting. He's aware of what's taking place around him, he belongs to the art organizations of his time, yet he falls into reclusive isolation. Some of the themes of Ryder's works are terror, salvation, love, loss and damnation. He focuses on mythic stories of sailors being shipwrecked. There are paintings that he works on for years; he labors on *The Lorelei* for the last 20 years of his life. Working in a New York City attic, he becomes incredibly reclusive, he sleeps on the floor, boxes pile up—he's a bit of a hoarder, really. He has a few patrons, but is not seen as a central figure in the Romantic tradition until after his death.

Ryder would work and rework surfaces, often applying wet paint on top of wet paint, resulting in surfaces that are materially unstable, fragile and prone to cracking. The man lived through the industrial revolution and its ramifications; in response, he willingly chose a reclusive life. I want to contrast this with the art and life of Jesse Murry, but particularly his painting *In Ryder's Eye* (1987) (see pages 28, 29). Murry is no less of an outsider than Ryder. Poetry inspires him, particularly that of Wallace Stevens. He separates his work into categories: the poetic, the dramatic, the visionary. He has an emotionally challenged mother. He's Black, and despite going to Yale, despite teaching, despite having success as a writer and artist, he's not exactly in lockstep with the principal artistic movements of the 1980s. When we think of the 1980s we think of New Image Painting, Neo-Geo. We might think of a kind of Neo-conceptualism—Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, perhaps Robert Colescott—artists who deal explicitly with issues of Postmodernism and the burden of representation. Poetry is out. It's almost passé, and I think this is why Murry is actually such a fascinating character.



Jesse Murry, *Untitled (PS3)*, n.d. Oil on paper. 11 x 15 inches (27.9 x 38.1 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Will Lytch.



Jesse Murry, *Untitled*, 1991. Oil and wax on canvas. 48-1/2 x 47-3/4 inches (123.2 x 121.3 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.

Murry contracts AIDS in 1985 and undergoes this transformation into a pure abstraction. His outsidership is at once both cultural and artistic, which I think marks an arc: a transition from the bohemian romantic outsider, like Ryder, to being *othered* as a Black Queer artist in the 1980s. Two takeaways from looking at the book and thinking about this panel: I was surprised that there hasn't been a Jesse Murry and Howard Hodgkin show. Murry, of course, writes about Hodgkin. Hodgkin comes out in the 1980s and that's when his paintings actually get really interesting. Hodgkin's paintings have this ecstatic color and a kind of vibrancy to them; Murry, a more melancholy person, responds with his own color sensibility. The thing I wanted to talk about before I run out of time, is that both of those artists have a relationship to climate and the weather. We talked about *Sturm und Drang*, we talked about relationships to nature, we talked about the sense of the body being existentially thrust up against nature in the late 19th century, and we have all of this writing from Thoreau and others. But then there's Murry's relationship to nature, where the landscape almost suffuses the body, or suffuses the self into the landscape, where something almost transitive takes place between the landscape and the self. All of this is so incredibly relevant right now in light of climate change—how these ideas take on a radically different resonance now that we're talking about the threat of all of our bodies being potentially endangered.

Earnest: The work Murry made at Sarah Lawrence was directly inspired by Hodgkin. There is a way that the color goes from the extreme high heat of Hodgkin's color to the color that he works with later. I love that you introduced the concept of outsidership, or as Murry terms it in his notebooks "alterity."

I love Murry's essay on Howard Finster. Talk about an outsider artist! This is a Georgia preacher who, as an old man, has a vision that he's supposed to make visionary art. Jesse Murry writes this incredible essay about Finster and then ends up curating a show of his at the New Museum. The arguments that he makes around Finster are so brilliant, especially with regard to the discursive position of 80s art. What is Postmodernism? What does it mean to have image, text and object all together? I think the deeper impulse driving that essay, which emerges in the poems that Camille referenced and the paintings Alex wrote about, is a kind of deep spirituality in his art. The drive of spiritual art is also to be outside of the self; it's the wish to not be you, to be with God. There is something that is very deep and truly profound in work that is situated exactly at the space that you were describing in relationship to Ryder.

Collins-Fernandez: Murry is such a compelling thinker. His verbal acuity makes it really easy to connect

with him. I think that one of the strengths in reading this book is that the writing is so damn good. One thing to question, though, is this: for many painters the question of "God" or the "spirit" is not something outside of the painting, it lives on the surface, because the function of painting is communing with materiality and the surface of the paint. One of Murry's insights is that there is imminent materiality to deal with, which doesn't ever go away. In his final poems he begins with the direction "repeat this twice"—as though the words have to be recited over and over again as an incantation in order to be understood. It's not just the words that matter, but the form of speech, the timbre of the voice, and—as Alex was saying—the daubs of paint, the quality of color. So I guess something that I'm also thinking about is Murry's belief in art—belief in art as something redemptive which can hold the spirit, but that is also something that is always out of fashion, yet at the heart of why we all engage.

Stopa: I think part of the question is the following: Is painting something that contains or speaks to a certain kind of metaphysics? In the 80s, the general temperament is "No, it doesn't, that's gone," especially after Minimalism, after Conceptual art. The notion that there's a kind of immanence or space behind the space, or that art points both to itself materially and then to some immaterial nature, something that can't quite be articulated or seen, is viewed with deep suspicion. What Gaby had to say about Giorgione and *The Tempest*... these are matters that are not necessarily legible or even entirely communicable, which puts the discussion in a kind of murky gray space that is also a space that can be incredibly generative with regards to questions of selfhood and identity.

Collins-Fernandez: One of the things about that Giorgione text and reading Murry on other artists, is the way that he analyzes symbolism, and how being invested in that as a painter is another way of saving your life. To believe that this is something that can actually sustain meaning and consolidate the feeling of meaning in one's own existence, it's like "Yeah, Jesse, like I'm here with you!" He makes it so clear when he talks about art in that way. And it gives a context for how we could look at old paintings and feel like "This is the most important conversation I'm having today," even given everything else that's happening in the world.

Fialho: A word that comes to mind in thinking about Jesse Murry is *polymath*. He's a painter, he's a poet, a philosopher in some ways; he's a curator, a critic, a professor. He listens to everybody and reads everything. We hear about Humanism, Expressionism, Outsider art. He's in dialogue with so many different types of work through the long arc of art history. It makes me think of something I learned from Professor



Jesse Murry, *Abyss (Radical Solitude)*, 1992. Oil and beeswax on canvas. 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.

Kobena Mercer in her seminar “Blackness and Abstraction”: in art history polymaths often fall through the cracks. An artist who does a particular kind of work can be slotted or understood in one kind of way, but because Murry was jumping or moving through so many different types of work as one singular project, that type of polymathic energy can get lost. As I looked at the *More Life* website and the video that Lisa Yuskavage made featuring the reading of Murry’s last poems—the final clip of him talking about Reverend Howard Finster’s art. To hear his voice, to see his affect, to hear him talking about art in his element, was just so special. It made my heart sing to hear him and to see him actually embodied in that space.

Earnest: We’re sitting here in 2022 talking about the life and work of this man. A lot of the interesting things that have been said situate him within his own time, in the 1980s and early 90s, within the art world and discourse of that moment. But the way that we talk about painting today, the way that we talk about race, the way that we talk about queerness—the complex experiences attendant to Jesse Murry’s life are now captured by a completely different language. So here’s what I want to know: What does it mean to have these conversations about Jesse Murry right now? What does it mean for you to look at his work and connect with it? How do you see it operating within our bigger contemporary conversation?

Okhio: We’re creating legacy, and I think that’s really important, especially for a Black man, a Black person. There were two things that Jason and Gaby said that really moved me. Jason, when you were speaking about outsidership and how anytime we try to create or connect art with anything outside of an emotion, or try to find meaning within it... in the past that was viewed with suspicion by the art establishment. I would say that is a direct product of whiteness and patriarchy. I think Murry inhabits a space—you use the word “murky”—where he indicates a desire to find space for himself. Also, in the “Coming to Terms” section of the book, where he copies bits out of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it seems to me that he is building a vocabulary for himself and expanding an existing vocabulary in a way that is quintessentially Black. We’re constantly shifting language, expanding it, flexing it, in ways that are specific to that culture, our culture. I think that’s a really important part of his writing—the rigor, the knowledge, and the experimentation.

In Hilton Als’s introductory essay he says something really beautiful: “if you have language you have everything you need to express the inner workings of the heart.” You think of Wallace Stevens, the poet that Murry was really moved by. Stevens wrote a poem called *Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery*. I think

what’s really important about discussing Jesse’s work today is that we now have a space for him, whereas there wasn’t a space for him in the 80s. He had to make space for himself, he had to squeeze meaning and beauty out of the writings of people who didn’t respect him, wouldn’t have respected him, wouldn’t have seen him as human. I think a lot of that emotion and expression comes through in the landscape paintings and in the poetry. I think after the diagnosis there was that additional layer of: “I really have to find a space for myself and a space for my spirit and a space for my presence that will exist after my body *expires*.” Lisa mentioned that this was the word she heard from the nurse when she found out that Jesse had passed. I think we’re completing a circle here by bringing his work into a contemporary context.

Earnest: This book is chronological, which plays out in a distinct trajectory. It starts with art criticism, followed by personal/theoretical writing about painting, and this is followed by poetry. There are overlaps between those last two sections, but to your point, I see that as the charge of an imminent death or diagnosis. Murry is no longer writing about other people, he’s not curating other people’s shows; it’s just about his own life and work, about his poetry and his painting.

Okhio: He’s anticipating returning to the earth. I think he’s looking for community in death and I think that comes through when he’s writing about bodies in the sea and bodies in general. In *A Page from The Book of Light: I*, he writes:

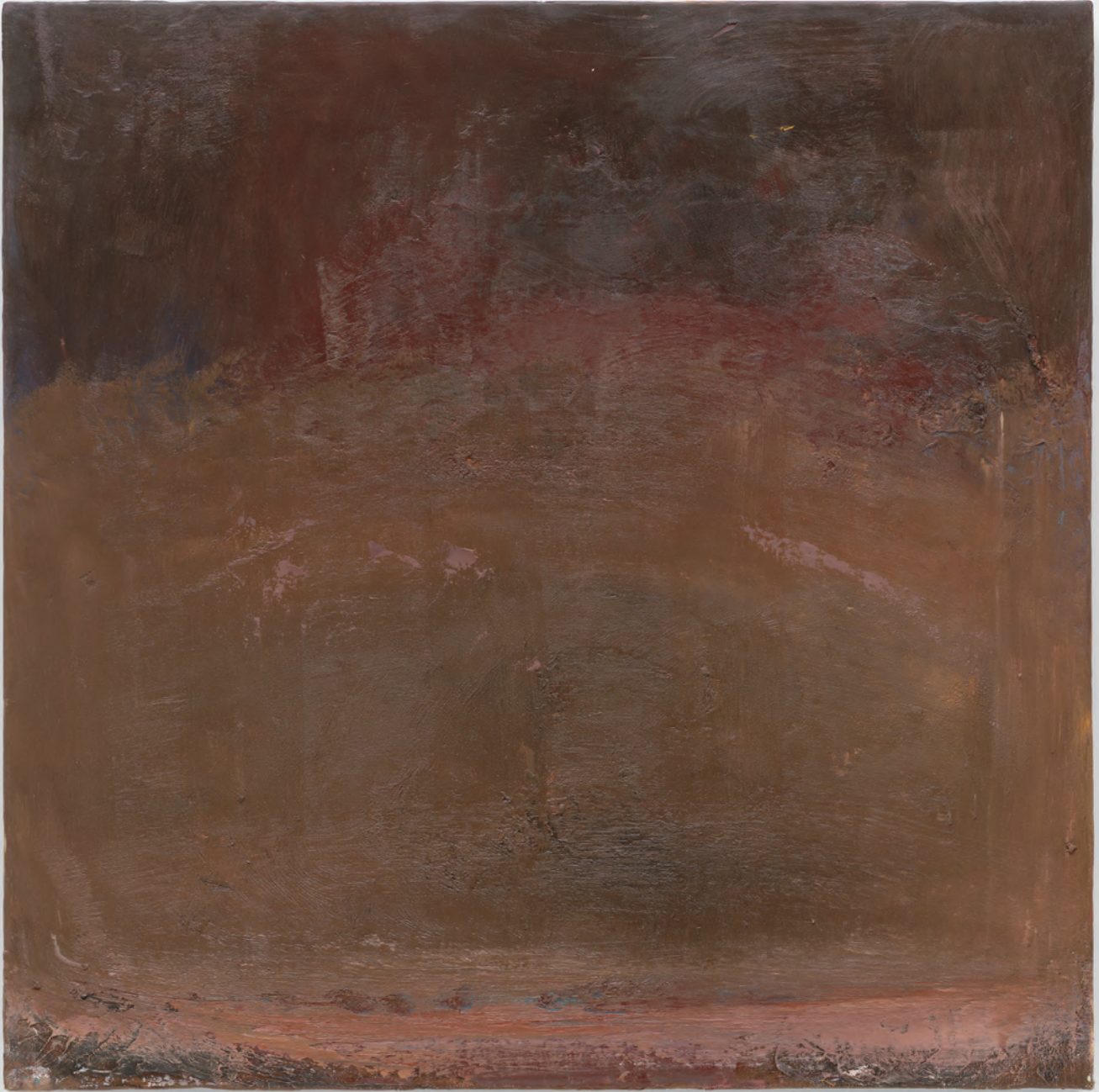
It is autumn.
Threshold between dream
and waking into dream.

Trees stand inflamed.
Cadmiums, bruised russets,
orchards and wine bloods.

Maples are bronze
cured in the sunlight.
Leaves fall
in rivers of leaves.
The ground flows
in gold floods.

Grapes are heavy
in the plump odor of vines,
new bloods, new vintages.
In the burning of leaves,
new fires.

From this vantage
Memory is ripeness burning.



Jesse Murry, *Untitled*, 1992. Oil and wax on canvas. 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.

History is on fire.

Wagnerian hearths.
Fires without gods.
Crematoria.
Ultimate white flash
in the Orient.
Creation and cremation
Forever to be deterred.
Never to be denied.

Elsewhere
in other Autumns —
distant, not too far off,
a torch falls in dry grass,
a hunt comes to an end.
Manacled-ankle,
shackled-arm
in soft dry grass
in flames.

Beyond the commonplace
of raked leaves and small fires
I dream of places
real and imagined:
Cape of the Risen Moon,
Cape of Lost Souls,
Cape of Good Hope.
I drift and dream
in the smoke of risen fires,
in the smoke of tremulous dreams.

This poem encapsulates the trajectory of the entire book. Murry starts off with the vibrancy of life, “the plumpness of the grapes”; things are dripping, things are burning. Then there’s death expressed through fire, expressed through “crematoria” and “hearths”. After that there’s imagination, there’s anticipation, a preparation for what might come next, without claiming to have understanding. There’s an acceptance of not knowing.

I think that there are a lot of connections between Jesse’s oeuvre and a lot of things people are working on right now. When you invited me to be on this panel, I had just finished writing about the painting of Seth Cameron, a friend. I would not necessarily say that both artists share a style, but Seth also paints abstract landscapes. In describing his work, Seth used many of the same words and much of the same emotion Murry does. He was not really familiar with his work, which leads me to believe that there is something here that is common yet not widely accessed.

Stopa: Some artists, some painters, like to assume that being in the world is a given. Other painters ask questions like: “What does being actually mean?”

And then: “Perhaps I need to find this out through the process of painting.” There are lots of abstract painters out there who are more interested in materiality, formal issues, in the sense of “paint is paint,” in ways that don’t speak to these other issues. I connect Murry to Julius Eastman, who was a 1980s figure who made avant-garde music and studied with John Cage. Both were in touch with their respective avant-gardes, but were not necessarily part of that ecosystem.

Okhio: I love the distinction you made between someone who chooses outsidership and someone who is forced into it. I think that Murry did a really beautiful job of using his outsidership to become everything that he wanted to be.

Collins-Fernandez: I was interested in how many times Murry tried to make a case for abstract painting as a way of creating a sense of subjectivity without necessarily defining a subject. That seems like an important conversation; to think about subjectivity, what that even means. Subject to the law, subject to the laws of painting. Subjectivity as a condition of space and color. These seem like really interesting questions that are more complicated than they first appear and which are also pretty contemporary.

Fialho: When I see a beautiful sunset, when I look at the sky, I feel Jesse’s vision and his light come alive in a really meaningful way. One of my favorite parts of the book is his idea of “Shekinah”: a divine presence through light. There’s something really inspiring in the way that he looked to sky, to materiality, to light as material for painting. That just really stands out for me.

Participants:

Gaby Collins-Fernandez is an artist living and working in New York City. She also writes about art; is a founder and co-publisher of the annual magazine *Precog* with Florencia Escudero and Kellie Konapelsky, and a co-director of the artist-run art and music initiative BombPop!Up with Drea Cofield and Jonah Parzen-Johnson.

Alex Fialho (he/they) is a graduate student in Yale University’s Combined Ph.D. program in the History of Art and African American Studies. As an art historian and curator, his research and writing focus on modern and contemporary art, African American art histories, Black feminist and queer theory, and AIDS cultural studies. Fialho first learned about Jesse Murry’s art while working at Visual AIDS, where Fialho served as Programs Director from 2014–2019, facilitating projects around the history and immediacy of the ongoing AIDS



Jesse Murry, *Rising*, 1992. Oil and beeswax on canvas. 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Kerry McFate.

pandemic, while intervening against the widespread whitewashing of HIV/AIDS cultural narratives. Fialho wrote an essay titled "Painterly Impressions of Jesse Murry" for the catalog published on the occasion of Tibor de Nagy Gallery's exhibition *Jesse Murry – Radical Solitude* curated by Clay Hapaz in 2020.

Jarrett Earnest is the author of *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics* (David Zwirner Books, 2018); editor of *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings 1988-2017* by Peter Schjeldahl (Abrams, 2019); *The Young and Evil: Queer Modernism in New York, 1930-1955* (David Zwirner 2020); and *Painting is a Supreme Fiction: Writings by Jesse Murry, 1980-1993* (Sobercove Press, 2021). Earnest curated the exhibitions *The Young and Evil* (2019), *Ray Johnson: WHAT A DUMP* (2021), *Jesse Murry: Rising* (with Lisa Yuskavage) (2021), all at David Zwirner, New York. He is currently editing *Devotion: today's archive becomes tomorrow's future*, to be published by PUBLIC Books (2022).

Camille Okhio is an art and design historian and writer living and working in New York City. She is the Senior Design Writer at *ELLE Decor* and has published pieces in *T Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Architectural Digest*, *W Magazine*, *Apartamento*, *PIN UP*, *Domino*, *Art in America*, *Wallpaper**, *Surface Magazine* and more.

Jason Stopa (b. 1983) is a painter and writer living in Brooklyn, NY. He received his BFA from Indiana University and his MFA from Pratt Institute. Recent solo exhibitions include *Joy Labyrinth*, at Morgan Lehman, NY (2021) and *Hanging Gardens*, at Atelier W Pantin, France (2019). Recent group exhibitions include in *Wayne Thiebaud Influencer: A New Generation*, UC Davis Museum, CA (2021), Miles McEnery, NYC (2021) and Jenkins Johnson Projects, Brooklyn (2021). He is represented by Diane Rosenstein Gallery, LA, and Morgan Lehman, NY. Stopa teaches at Pratt Institute and is a contributing writer to *Hyperallergic*, *Momus* and *Artcritical* among other art journals.



Jesse Murry, *Untitled (CR8)*, n.d. Oil on paper. 13 x 17-1/4 inches (33 x 43.8 cm). © 2022 The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York. Photograph by Will Lytch.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Beach Fire*, 2012. Oil on wood panel. 8-1/8 x 10-1/8 inches (20.6 x 25.7 cm). © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Private Collection.

Checklists

JESSE MURRY: RISING

JESSE MURRY

Abyss (Radical Solitude), 1992

oil and beeswax on canvas
20 x 20 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Deluge—After Turner, c. 1990-91

oil and wax on linen
30-5/8 x 31 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

In Ryder's Eye, 1987

oil and wax on linen
14-1/4 x 18-1/4 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Rising, 1992

oil and beeswax on canvas
20 x 20 in.
Collection of Candida Smith

Untitled, 1991

oil and wax on canvas
48-1/2 x 47-3/4 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled, 1992

oil on wax on canvas
20 x 20 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (Rising/Abyss Study), 1992

oil and wax on canvas
20 x 20 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

NECESSARY ANGELS: JESSE MURRY & LISA YUSKAVAGE

JESSE MURRY

Untitled (CR5), n.d.

oil on paper
7-1/8 x 10-1/4 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (CR7), n.d.

oil on paper
10-1/4 x 14-1/8 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (CR8), n.d.

oil on paper
13 x 17-1/4 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (CR12), n.d.

oil on paper
10-1/4 x 14-1/8 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (CR20), n.d.

oil on paper
5-1/2 x 12 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (CR25), n.d.

oil on paper
10-1/4 x 14-1/8 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (PS3), n.d.

oil on paper
11 x 15 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

Untitled (PS4), n.d.

oil on paper
11 x 15 in.
Courtesy of The Jesse Murry Foundation, New York

LISA YUSKAVAGE***Beach Fire, 2012***

oil on wood panel
8-1/8 x 10-1/8 in.
Private Collection

Big Bunny, 1994

watercolor on paper
39-1/2 x 40 in.
Private Collection

Ditch, 2009

oil on linen
10-1/8 x 8 in.
Private Collection

Full Moon Study, 1998

oil on canvas board
5-7/8 x 7-7/8 in.
Private Collection

Given, 2009

oil on linen
50 x 26 in.
Private Collection

Hudson Sunset (Coral & Grey), 1997

oil on canvas board
6 x 7-7/8 in.
Private Collection

Hudson Sunset (Pink & Grey), 1997

oil on canvas board
10 x 8 in.
Private Collection

No Man's Land, 2012

oil on linen
77-1/8 x 72-1/8 in.
Private Collection

North Pamet Road, 2007

oil on linen
8 x 8-7/8 in.
Private Collection

Rapture, 1993

watercolor on paper
22-1/4 x 22-1/4 in.
Private Collection

Rapture #2, 1993

watercolor on paper
22 x 22-1/4 in.
Private Collection

Snowman, 2008

oil on linen
72 x 57-3/4 in.
Private Collection

Sweet Thing #1, 1993

watercolor on paper
30 x 22 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #2, 1991

watercolor on paper
15 x 11-1/4 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #18, 1992

watercolor on paper
7-1/2 x 5-1/2 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #21, 1992

watercolor on paper
30 x 22 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #27, 1992

watercolor on paper
11-1/4 x 15-1/4 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #36, 1992

watercolor on paper
15 x 11-1/8 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #37, 1992

watercolor on paper
15-1/2 x 11-3/8 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #38, 1992

watercolor on paper
5 x 3-3/4 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven #39, 1992

watercolor on paper
7-1/2 x 8 in.
Private Collection

Tit Heaven for Hippies, 1993

watercolor on paper
11-7/8 x 8-1/4 inches
Private Collection

Tragic Land, 2009

oil on linen
60 x 48 in.
Private Collection

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Cover: Jesse Murry, *Untitled (Rising/Abyss Study)*, 1992
Oil and wax on canvas, 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)
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