

# THE UNABASHEDLY MODERN MURRAY ZIMILES

*In his new series of paintings, the artist tackles the traditional sport of foxhunting, radically reimagining the subject matter.*

By JENNIFER B. CALDER

From the window of the home painter Murray Zimiles designed and built in 1982, he watches the spectacle of excited hounds and riders in red hunt coats atop stomping horses gathering across the road.

The house, which he shares with wife, Martha Zimiles, and where they raised their now adult son, Andrei Zimiles, is comprised of numerous planes and roof lines, and it reveals the influence of Cubist and Futurist art movements. These movements not only inform the architectural effort but also his paintings, and it's located smack in the middle of Millbrook Hunt country in Dutchess County, N.Y.



**Art collector and foxhunter Willem de Vogel** acquired Murray Zimiles' *Hunt 1*, which is a 60' x 40' oil and mixed media on canvas.

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**“I have some collectors who ask me how long it takes to create a piece,** and I always say, and I am not being facetious by saying this, it’s taken me 50 years to get to the point I can do what I am doing,” says Murray Zimiles.

Murray watched the hunt gather for years, and last December he had an epiphany: Perhaps he didn’t need to look so far afield for inspiration for his most recent work—energetic yet ethereal landscape paintings—as he had in the past with visits to watch the Palio di Siena in Italy.

Perhaps the field in front of him would suffice.

The pageantry of foxhunting intrigued Murray, despite it being such a traditional sport and subject. Historically, artwork depicting foxhunting veers more towards illustration and realism, and Murray recognized a unique opportunity to evolve that depiction.

“The difference I suppose between art and illustration is in illustration you’ve got to get the story across, and in art, at least the way I think about it, you’ve got to get the form across more than the story,” says Murray. “The form counts far more than the story, even though the story can still be there to reinforce the form. But if it’s formally uninteresting or not an attempt at making new ideas happen, it’s sort of a waste of time.

“Realism doesn’t interest me,” he continues. “There are recognizable aspects in my work everywhere, but I’m interested in light and movement especially. The idea of taking a static, two-dimensional canvas and making it really pulsate and be alive—it’s not easy, and it’s been something I’ve been concerned with forever.”

## DOCTOR, LAWYER, ENGINEER OR BUM

Murray, 76, was born in a tough neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1941. When he was 3, his mother died of cancer, leaving him and his 5-year-old brother Stanley behind with their father.

The responsibility overwhelmed his

PHOTO COURTESY MURRAY ZIMILES

bereaved father, and the brothers were going to be put in an orphanage when Murray's uncle, Boris Margo, intervened, offering to take them every summer and on weekends to help ease the burden.

"He was a pretty well-known artist, so I would be in this Brooklyn environment, which was pretty torturous and gang-ridden, and then on the weekends I'd be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as my uncle lived in Manhattan," he says.

Although he would eventually follow in his uncle's footsteps—Margo was an abstract surrealist—Murray took a circuitous path.

After graduating from public school at 15, he started college at 16 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where his uncle was working as a guest lecturer. Margo helped arrange it, believing it was imperative to remove his nephew from his Brooklyn surroundings.

"I went to study engineering and did that for two years and finally figured out I would probably make bolt #6 on a 747 and figured that wouldn't be an interesting life," Murray says. "I always wanted to do art and then finally decided the time had come to jump. So I lost a couple years of college, but I did jump and went into the art department at the University of Illinois, which was very Beaux art-ish, very formal. They really taught you sort of old school, at that time anyway, how to draw, etcetera, which these days isn't so."

While his uncle was supportive, his father was less so.

"My father said doctor, lawyer, engineer



COURTESY MURRAY ZIMILES

**Artist Murray Zimiles started his series of foxhunting paintings** less than a year ago, and he's now completed 15, including *Hunt 11*.

or bum, so obviously when I chose bum, he was upset," he says with a chuckle.

From the University of Illinois, Murray won a scholarship to pursue his MFA at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

"It was fantastic. The Midwest at that time was the Bible Belt, literally—Champaign-Urbana is the Bible Belt—and then it was like arriving in Sodom and Gomorrah," he says with a laugh. "To say

the least, I appreciated it!"

From Cornell, he won an international competition in 1965 to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris where he focused on lithography.

"I decided I should study something I can't study in America, and at that time lithography was very big in the printmaking world, and very few people knew how to do it in America," he says. "In fact, almost no one knew how to do it."

Upon returning to the United States, he co-authored with Michael Knigin a definitive book on the subject, *The Technique Of Fine Art Lithography*, published in 1970, and he began teaching at the Pratt Institute (N.Y.) and then later at SUNY Purchase, where he would be a professor for the next 39 years, retiring in 2014 and dedicating his newfound free time to painting.

## ANIMAL EVOLUTION

Murray's first commercial success in the art world came from a portfolio he published on birds, which was a combination of lithographs and silkscreens.

"In my former days, I'd always worked with animals symbolically," he says. "Each bird was a symbol. I mean, the obvious ones—hawks are not very kind, owls are wise, storks for babies, all those clichéd sort of interpretations of bird symbols. I made a whole portfolio of that, and that was one of the first things I ever did in my career as an artist that was

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PHOTO COURTESY MURRAY ZIMILES

serious and purchased by museums.”

Interestingly, it was his father’s remarriage to his stepmother, an abusive woman who was not named during our conversation, when Murray was 9 that became fodder for his mid-career work, with the animals progressing from what he called clichéd images to more foreboding symbols.

His stepmother immigrated to Canada from Poland in 1938 when her brother sent one ticket for their family to begin the process of escaping on the eve of World War II. It was intended to be used by her father, who would then work and make more money to afford the others safe passage, but he fell ill and gave it to his daughter. She later found her way to America and married Murray’s father.

Murray’s stepmother’s entire family—the 24 remaining members in Poland—were killed by the Nazis.

“She had this kind of guilt, and it was passed on to her wards, my brother and I, and it wasn’t very pleasant to live with,” Murray says. “So it’s a horrible story, but it was a story that sort of marked me or maybe even scarred me in some ways, and so the only way I could figure out as an artist to come to peace with it, if that is even possible, was all these years of making work about it.”

He worked on the series from 1984–1998, and while it was an academic success—the Museum of Modern Art in New York has a portfolio in their collection—it was not a commercial one.

“Basically if it wasn’t for teaching, I would have been selling pencils in front of Bloomingdale’s at that time,” he says.

“In that series, animals became very important, and they became symbols—like dogs became a symbol of soldiers, at least in my mind. They weren’t universal symbols in many cases,” he continues. “Then at a certain point, all these animals were there, and I kept thinking, ‘Good grief,’ and when this series finally ended, I thought, ‘What am I going to do?’ You can’t paint little pleasant still lifes after that, after you’ve been through that emotional trip. I was a mess emotionally, so slowly but surely animals became animals again.”

## INCH BY INCH

In Italy, for instance, when Murray painted the Palio di Siena race, the horses were once again just horses and not harbingers of fear and panic.

“The Palio was magnificent, all these medieval costumes and twirling flags,”

**Foxhunting as a subject is a departure for contemporary painter Murray Zimiles,** whose work can be found in prestigious collections in the United States and internationally. Here he stands in front of a triptych he created, which was acquired by the National September 11 Memorial & Museum’s permanent collection in New York City.

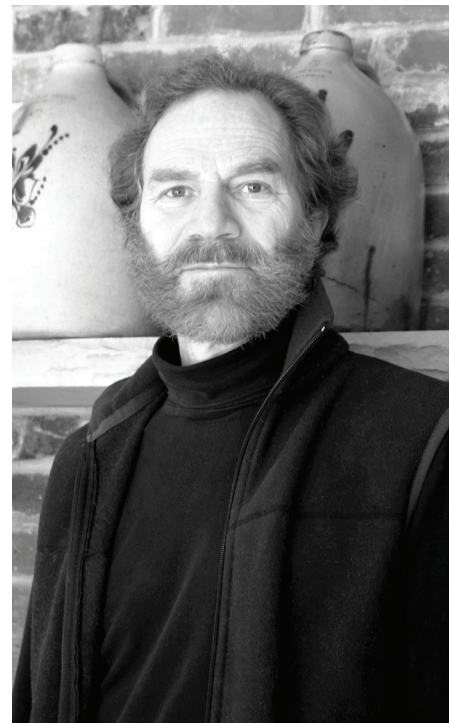


PHOTO COURTESY MURRAY ZIMILES

**Murray Zimiles changed his college major from engineering to art.** “I always wanted to do art and then finally decided the time had come to jump,” he says.

Murray says. “I went nuts over the whole thing, and when we came back after one of our trips, it stayed in the back of my mind and occurred to me, ‘Why on earth am I doing all this stuff about Italy when I can just look across the road and see all the same pageantry?’ Although different of course, it’s more based on the English world than the Italian world, but all this pageantry and the horses and the dogs, etcetera.

“Inch by inch, I worked my way out of it and then ultimately ended up looking around and saying, ‘Look, I live in one of the most beautiful places in America,’ he continues. “It’s time to sort of deal with the

## ON DISPLAY

In addition to many private collections, Murray Zimiles' work can be found in numerous prestigious institutions including:

The Museum of Modern Art (N.Y.)  
The Brooklyn Museum (N.Y.)  
The Jewish Museum (N.Y.)  
The New York Public Library (N.Y.)

The Neuberger Museum of Art (N.Y.)  
The Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Wesleyan University (Conn.)  
The Portland Museum of Art (Ore.)

The Museum of Modern Art (Israel)  
The Tel Aviv Museum (Israel)  
The National Collection (D.C.)  
University of South Wales (Australia)

opposite of what I've been dealing with. Instead of the horror, let's look at the beauty of life.'"

That journey led Murray to the topic at hand: The jubilant foxhunting paintings, some 15 in all at last count. They are all approximately 40' by 60' and turn conventional foxhunting depictions on their heads, inviting the viewer to linger and discover.

"I thought it's time to do a series on the hunt because one, in the art world, it's sort of unknown, especially in the contemporary art world," he says. "And two, the history of the hunt pictures I did look at, like I said, are illustrative and decorative."

## THE PROCESS AND THE RESULT

Working from photographs, memory, sketches, anatomy books and even movable horse figurines he keeps in his studio, Murray creates paintings that are multi-layered, multi-perspective and incredibly fresh, innovative interpretations of the sport, told from all participants' points of view at once.

They capture visually what it feels like to hunt, even more impressive when you realize the artist's experience on horseback consists of a few trail rides as a child. The only time his lack of experience with the sport becomes obvious is in his amusing

*"He creates a sense of movement that regular hunting paintings don't capture."*

– Willem de Vogel

and taboo reference to the hounds as dogs.

"In addition to light and movement, I'm also exploring the idea of simultaneity where you look at a dog running, you see the dog running and see what's behind it," he says. "Or if there is another dog behind it, you see it almost through it, simultaneously because it all happens in an instant. People always freeze frame that in art. You just see the dog, and you'll have the dog blocking what's behind it, so by making these things quasi-transparent you see everything at the same time."

There are the Cubist and Futurist influences in his work, although he executes them with greater fluidity and less hard edges.

"I am much more interested in multiple perspectives, multiple points of light, multiple viewpoints," he says. "You could look at some of the things in the picture from above and from below and directly at them, so all this is happening simultaneously which, to my knowledge,

has not been attempted in art before.

"I am not patting myself on my back," he quickly adds. "I'm just saying I've never seen anyone with those kinds of concerns simultaneously with making a picture. It's all very exciting, and, of course, you look for subjects that have a certain kind of movement in them, meaning animals, horses, people."

This dynamic quality attracted foxhunters Willem and Marion de Vogel to Murray's recent work.

Willem has held numerous roles in the Millbrook Hunt over his 40-year tenure, and he's well versed in the way his beloved sport is traditionally depicted.

"I think the thrill of a full cry chase comes through more in his paintings than most conventional old prints of foxhunting where you see a huntsman and some members of the hunt standing around a pack of hounds standing still," says Willem. "Or if the hounds are running, you don't get that sense because there is such

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an expressionistic approach to painting that Murray has. He creates a sense of movement that regular hunting paintings don't capture. He is just a phenomenal observer."

Painting *Hunt 1* is now hanging in their home.

"Murray is like a mad professor when he gets an obsession about something," says Willem. "He produces a lot. I think his approach to it is dynamic and very expressive."

Traditional landscapes rely on a fixed perspective with a single source of light, and foxhunting paintings are usually rendered with a subject frozen—a hound lifting his nose to sniff the air, a horse in mid-jump over a fence. But in Murray's work, we're viewing both what is happening in the present and the echoes of what just occurred—what is happening to the left and the right, in the foreground and in the distance.

But his attention isn't limited to the living, breathing elements in his compositions; landscapes are given the same treatment.

"It took me a long time to figure out how to make a landscape move," he says. "I'm surrounded by all these fields and all these rows, which become very geometric. Corn rows, you look at them as stripes. So I interpret them as stripes, vineyards as little circles, and stuff like that to create patterns. Yet it still reads very accurately as what it is, meaning fields."

Although done primarily with oils (with some acrylic or stencils added to dirty the paint), the luminosity in the paintings belies that medium with the oils thinned to a glaze and repeatedly layered. Each one takes Murray approximately 2 ½ weeks to complete, painting for five hours a day.

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saying this, it's taken me 50 years to get to the point I can do what I am doing," he says.

Indeed, while many artists find success with one genre or method, Murray has constantly evolved over the past five decades.

"I am not maligning those artists in any way, but I'd blow my brains out," he says and laughs.

"I mean, seriously, a lot of artists, if you look at the history of art, most great artists are one or maybe two image artists," he adds. "Everybody gets their little thing, and then

**"Realism doesn't interest me,"** says Murray Zimiles of his foxhunting artwork, including *Hunt 2*. "There are recognizable aspects in my work everywhere, but I'm interested in light and movement especially."

of course it gets commercialized, and then they repeat it for eternity. I am not that way. My work evolves, and I just let it take me to where it goes and whatever experiences hit me. I just react to them and make pictures."

And sometimes, one just has to look out his own window. 🍷