

Brenna Murphy: The archaeologist of meditation | Oregon ArtsWatch

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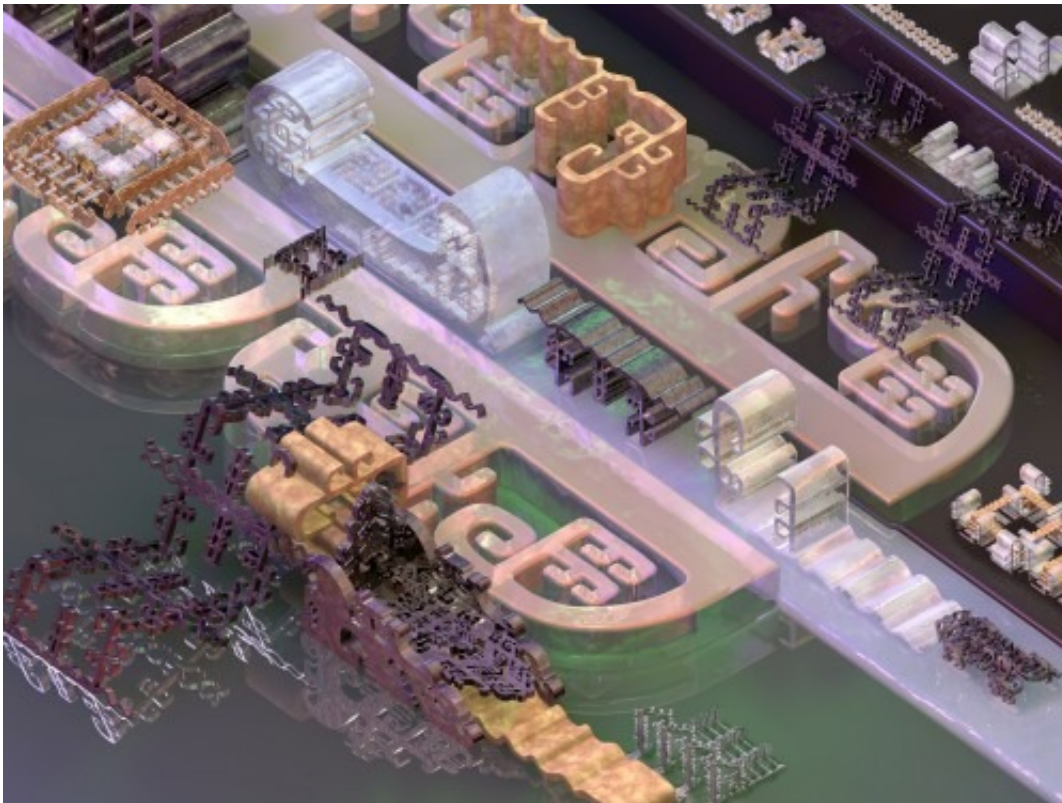
[Brenna Murphy: The archaeologist of meditation](#)

At the new Upfor gallery space, Oregon Painting Society veteran Brenna Murphy constructs a portrait of the human mind.

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By MATT STANGEL

Brenna Murphy plots where she'll install fields of colored sand, filling in the floorspace between mirrors and sculptures and prints of digital work. Light ambient music makes a blanket of peaceful, exploratory synthesizers. Patterns of sound come up for air and duck back into the auditory lake. She slowly walks between the objects assembled in [Upfor's exhibition space](#); those composing an installation she calls "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant."



Brenna Murphy's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant." at Upfor gallery./Courtesy of the artist

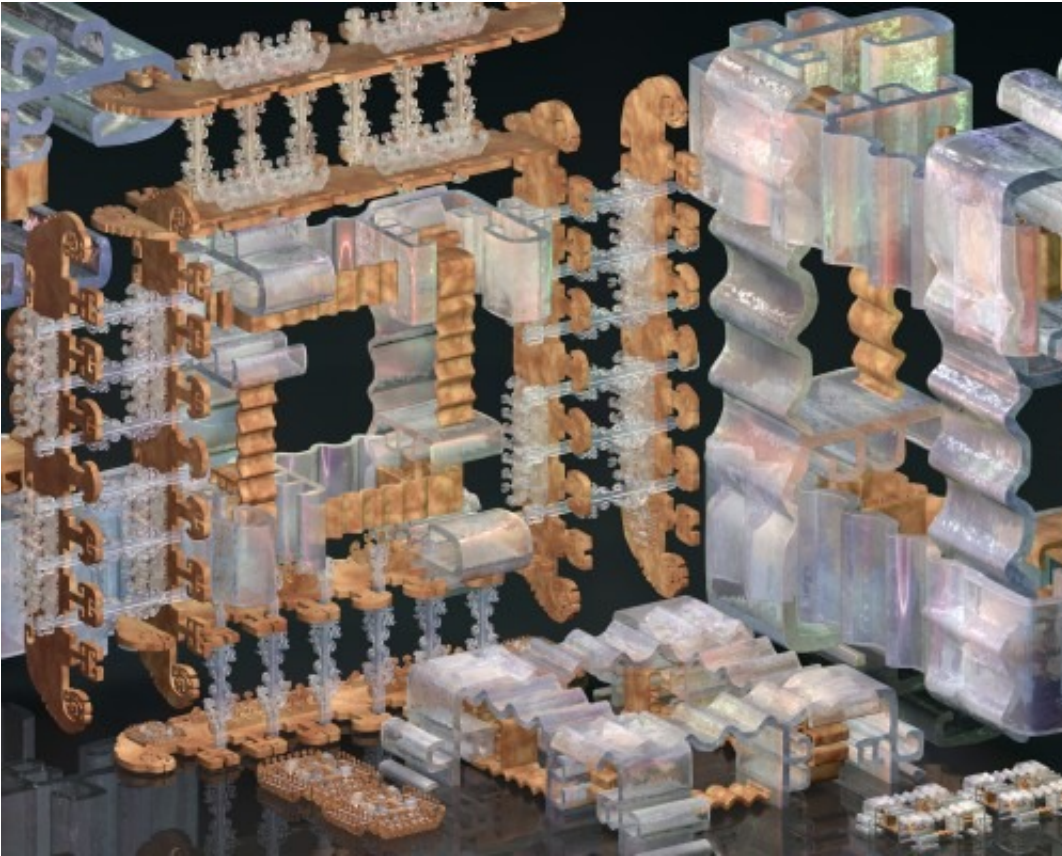
Unconstructed sculptural components are piled by like form and size. Some of the pieces have already come together, mirroring the abstract, shape-based compositions found in Murphy's expansive universe of digitally manufactured environments; those translated out of their native electronic mediums via laser cutters and 3D printers to live with us Organics for a little while.

Something about Murphy is reminiscent of a kid making repairs to a seasoned treefort.

She talks of production.

"For the last year or so I've been having a lot of art shows all in a row that kind of come up, so I've been sort of generating all these shapes and then translating them into different forms as the opportunity comes," explains Murphy, her dark blonde hair swooping across her forehead and down her back. "[It's] completely intuitive and depending on what the program allows. So I just spend a lot of time just doodling, basically. Just sketching forms out of nothing, you

know? And then doing it a bunch, I start to kind of make families out of the different shapes, and they sort of take on meaning. Like, I like to think of some of them as entities or insects or animals, and some of them as vehicles or tools.”



Brenna Murphy's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant." at Upfor gallery./Courtesy of the artist

She hasn't always been the in-demand workhorse she is today. Murphy started getting noticed as an artist through her work with Portland-based collective Oregon Painting Society. Shows like [OPS's Hexenhouse](#) at the Portland2010 biennial brought together technological experiments, interactive sculpture, and installation techniques to create a witch's cottage at the edge of a black hole, and performances at venues ranging artist-run galleries to nightclubs, contemporary art festivals to upper-echelon institutions like the Tate Modern, gave the collective an opportunity to bring their trippy, haunted-house-space-odyssey brand of retro futurism to audiences large and small.

Over the past few years, Murphy has produced collaborative work with OPS-alum Birch Cooper as MSHR, and her solo efforts have been shown nationally and internationally, most recently at the [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#) and currently as a featured component of [Phillips' first-ever digital art auction](#) (co-curated by blogging platform Tumblr).

A [crash course](#) in Murphy's digital work can be put together through web-based nodes both archival and native to the internet wilds: experimental video work, free-to-download video games, and expansive web pages housing the artist's arabesque online environments.

["Inward Conch ~ Upward Spiral."](#) described on the project's website as a "carved channel with four realms," is an interactive video game offering exploratory play. Starting on a platform that seems to float in outer space, the player uses directional and jump keys to navigate four distinct levels.

A cavernous, rainbow-hued shape of vaguely-damask design acts as a portal to a room skinned in black-and-white checkerboard—reminiscent of a blank file in an image-editing program—where weightless personages drift in the air. A spiral staircase ascends between the levels. The player's exploration of these various worlds is punctuated by Murphy's signature abstract-shapes-gone-architecture, those skinned in an experimental melange of textures: pulsating psychedelic rugs, ribbons of overlapping color, screen shots of image-editing software, photographs of the artist herself; textures are folded, overlaid, and fractalized, generating an uncomfortable terrain where the digital and the organic—and the tools that mediate connections therein—become inextricably interwoven.

Where Murphy's digital works incorporate varying degrees of immersion, her installations like Upfor's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant" extend that immersion into physical space. The shapely motifs that repeat across Murphy's websites,

video games, and various digital terrains are made tangible when extended into the gallery.

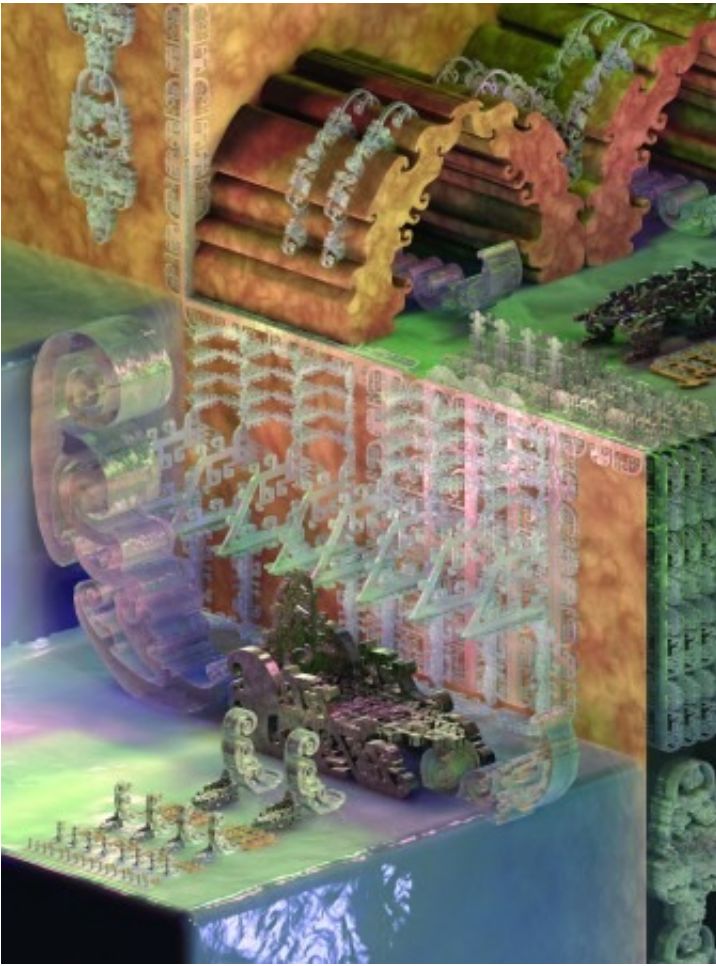


Brenna Murphy's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant." at Upfor gallery./Courtesy of the artist

On the floor at Upfor, she explains the process of generating her shapes, how she chains together a laundry list of image-editing programs to produce structures that come off both architectural and organic, suggesting dead languages, alien fauna, ornamental circuitry, nanobots and molecules responding to a single mating call. I'm tempted to think of this process as a workflow, but that implies production as intent, which isn't quite accurate.

"[I think of the shapes I make as] human-mind portraiture," says Murphy. "I'm trying to always build a model of reality or of the architecture of human mental frameworks."

"The purpose... is a tool for meditation. Meditation as in focusing your mind into a resonant shape, or into a shape that opens up different doors. Like, you know, every step of the way is an important point in that. Like, creating the shape and lighting the shape, making the texture; making the shape into a real thing and then this stage of organizing everything into some kind of circuit board or map, labyrinth; all of those steps are part of that."



Brenna Murphy's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant." at Upfor gallery./Courtesy of the artist

Murphy explains further: "The labyrinth, I think about that a lot. And, like, a yantra, which is a tantric method for meditation of drawing a geometric shape and the act of making it and also afterwards you can look at it; both of those are forms of meditation. And also, creating a labyrinth, and then being in the labyrinth, and navigating it. I think those are, for me, both important forms of meditation. That's kind of how I think of this," gesturing to her in-progress installation.

So production of an exhibition is secondary to Murphy's meditational goals.

Considering artistic intent, *Lattice-Face Parameter Chant* shows Murphy working an awful lot like an archeologist, approaching her meditational shapes and environments as realms unknown even to herself. Physical objects are lifted from digital environments, much like artifacts; value and meaning is only applied after she unearths and explores these objects past their intuitive beginnings. Titles like "Insects, Vehicles, and Lattices" are retrofitted when the artifacts have had some time to breathe.

"For me, it's basically a mode of engaging with reality constantly, and I hope, for other people, I hope it can be an interesting experience to navigate and to look at different things," says Murphy.

"I hope it can act as some kind of mandala for other people, too."

Bonus Material

Upfor is a new gallery that took over the room previously held by PDX Across the Hall. The space opened last month with an inaugural exhibit from Frances Stark, titled, "My Best Thing." ArtsWatch caught up with Upfor Founder and Director Theo Downes-Le Guin to get details on the space.

ArtsWatch: What inspired you to start Upfor?

Theo Downes-Le Guin: I reached a turning point in my prior career and took an opportunity to follow my passion for the visual arts down a new professional path. I wanted to spend my time handling art, talking and thinking about art, and

working with artists, collectors and others passionate about art.

Q: Between Upfor's inaugural Frances Stark show and the current installation from Brenna (as well as future programming with MSHR, etc.) there seems to be a new media thread running between things. What do you hope to focus on with Upfor and how does new media fit into that constellation of focal points?

A: I am interested in art of our times. Our times are heavily shaped by new media and high technology. So that is reflected in the gallery's program, both in terms of the means of artistic production and thematically. But like most of the artists I talk with, I am sensitive to being limited or defined by medium. If an artist chooses to say something relevant about high technology using oil paint, I'm not going to ignore the work because it wasn't created on a computer.

Q: Often when I come to know a new space, curators and directors talk about "filling holes"—providing venue for underrepresented artistic styles/cultures/etc.—and I was wondering if you're thinking in those terms. If so, what holes do you see in Portland's galleryscape?

A: I try not to think about holes because it leads to market-driven decisions that don't add to the artistic conversation, and in any case are likely to be proven wrong in art historical perspective, which won't help the gallery in the long run. There is always one hole, even in a vibrant arts ecosystem like Portland's, which is the need for another venue to present adventuresome work by artists who have not yet reached a high level of market or institutional exposure.

Q: What do you hope to achieve with Upfor?

A: Support the creative voice of our artists, provide exemplary service for collectors who make the artists' work possible, and create a welcoming environment for the many diverse tribes of contemporary art supporters.

Next month at Upfor Brenna Murphy will present a collaborative installation with Birch Cooper.