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*Katie Murray,
Girls in 4/4,
2009 Video still*

Katie Murray

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By Elizabeth Smith

Girls in 4/4

In Katie Murray's video of a high school girls' drill team in Queens, New York, images, movement, and sound converge to offer a riveting collective portrait and commentary on the nature of femininity, urban popular culture, group dynamics, and contemporary ritual. *Girls in 4/4*, Murray's first video, is strongly related to her bodies of photographic work that center on images of youth and family. The drill team depicted is one in which her younger sister participated during her high school years; over this four year period Murray observed and experimented with various ways to portray the team, drawn to the powerful imagery of its precision and focus. First attempting and then ultimately rejecting still photography as too static for the subject at hand, Murray turned to video as a way to best convey the dynamic presence of the team in action and most importantly, the thunderous noise produced by its footsteps.

Seeking to capture the greatest range of effects with the tightest possible parameters, Murray edited the finished work like an orchestra with rigorous interplay between the "solos" of individual figures on whom the camera dwells only briefly and the dynamic of various group configurations. The assertive rhythms of the team's footsteps are punctuated only by the briefest of "sighs" or "hiccougs" when the camera cuts to a different angle or shifts focus to begin another equally intense round of movements. Shot both frontally and from the side, the work offers additional visual contrasts in shifts from rehearsal scenes in street clothes to performances in uniform, and in light effects ranging from bright to murky conditions.

In its seamless tension between form and content, *Girls in 4/4* references larger societal issues involving gender, class, and popular culture in a highly charged but ultimately ambiguous way. While its circular narrative conveys a timeless, universal quality, it is very much of its time and place. The team's step dancing movements, increasingly popular in urban schools and in youth culture generally, have their roots in African-American history from the era of slavery; stepping was originally a male form of coded physical expression. That a girls' team in an American high school of today utilizes stepping instead of the more conventional rituals of an earlier, more culturally-neutral yet gender-specific era signifies the degree to which African-American influence has permeated the larger American youth culture, especially in urban areas such as Queens where diverse populations coexist. Moreover, the team's deployment of the terse, staccato movements of step dancing and the aggressive noise it produces, originally associated with male youth, points to a wholesale reversal of the feminine "cheerleader" stereotype, underscored by the neutral expressions on the girls' faces--a counterpoint to the insistent smiles, high-pitched vocals, and relentlessly upbeat demeanor of another era or cultural context. These girls have "attitude" emblematic of their generation and their moment in time.

Taking inspiration from the people and everyday scenes around her, Murray's work in video and in photographic portraiture persistently interrogates gender stereotypes. A large body of her work, begun during

her graduate studies at Yale [get dates], centers on images of men and boys. An early series depicts unremarkable subjects (Murray's family members and friends) posing casually in ordinary settings. Using the camera to circumscribe intimate, and at times, awkward perspectives, Murray's images appear ambiguous, probing her subjects' vulnerability. While seemingly familiar, they are far from stereotypical--part of Murray's strategy to keep the images open-ended in terms of the readings and reactions they elicit.

Murray's interest in the contradictions of masculinity continued in a series provisionally titled "Lost Boys" in which she explored gender identity among males in the punk music community from 2003-08. Her portraits reveal the paradoxical use of exaggeratedly feminine attire and makeup by young men who embrace a highly aggressive style of music often associated with hyper-masculinity. The languid, uncertain poses of the effeminate boys in this series contrast forcefully with the powerful personae of the girls of the 4/4 drill team and the confident, almost military precision that they radiate.

To a much greater degree than those with whom she came to maturity as classmates at Yale, Murray positions herself clearly in terms of a trajectory of photographic history and awareness of how her work extends its traditions; she cites the work of Brassai and Diane Arbus as precedents. In its relationship to more current practice, her images suggest further affinities with the recent work of a slightly older generation including Catherine Opie's series on subcultural communities, gender identities, and family life and Dawoud Bey's portraits of youth that question cultural stereotypes.

In taking on the subject of movement, ritual, and group dynamics with female teenagers as protagonists, *Girls in 4/4* offers an additional point of comparison to filmmaker and photographer Sharon Lockhart's *Goshogaoka Girls Basketball Team*. The works share similarities in their focus on highly scripted movement and their references to cultural attitudes and stereotypes associated with gender and race, as well as the interplay between shifting camera angles and perspectives from near to far, yet the artists' intentions and points of departure for these two works are vastly different. Offering an intriguing conflation of distance and familiarity, the drill team of *Girls in 4/4* is in fact a part of Murray's own familial and cultural "back yard"; the sensibility of the piece is gritty, tough, and brassy, underscored by such devices as the sharp suddenness of the camera shifts and the striking variations in light quality from one scene to the next—all of which contrasts markedly with Lockhart's precise production values, emphasis on choreography, and sense of anthropological distance from her subjects.

Murray recently commented, "The world speaks to me, and then I respond to it." Finding her subject matter in the people that surround her, she deftly hones in on attitudes and ambiguities that shape contemporary social and cultural life among youth and family. *Girls in 4/4* is part of Murray's ongoing investigation of what it means to be feminine, or masculine, in today's world, a topic which she is continuing to explore in a second video now in progress which shows a punk musician playing the drums wildly, his hair flying and his face obscured. The piece is edited so that his drum solo repeats over and over, inducing a sense of tension and exhaustion that suggests an endless circular, Sisyphean effort. A third video project now in development will meditate further on notions of masculinity and time, once again emanating from material that has caught Murray's attention from the world around her, close to home. A trove of love letters written by Murray's grandfather to her grandmother during their courtship in the 1940s has stimulated her thinking about the radically changed nature of language, expression of intimacy, and discourse of masculine/feminine from that time to our own; the video will present a group of young men of today reading the letters aloud, using the language of yesterday, in a way that promises to cast into relief the dramatically altered customs, postures, and attitudes that circumscribe a continuously shifting notion of masculinity. The portrayal of femininity in *Girls in 4/4* makes equally powerful statement about the massive shifts that have taken place in how gender identity is shaped and socially constructed.

Katie Murray was born in 1974 in Queens, New York. She received her MFA in photography at Yale University in 1999 after completing her

undergraduate studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. She recently exhibited at Kate Werble Gallery in the show Communication Coordination Consideration, reviewed in The New Yorker, and she is co-curating an upcoming exhibition this summer at the Alice Austen House Museum with a catalogue written by Susan Bright. Murray's past solo exhibitions include White Columns and Jen Bekman Gallery in New York. She has participated in various group exhibitions including the International Center for Photography, Queens Museum of Art, the Yale Art Gallery, and Bellwether Gallery. Murray currently teaches in the BFA program at Hunter College. Girls in 4/4 is Murray's first video to date. Highlights of her past work are a photographic series entitled Lost Boys, portraits of teenage boys at punk rock shows. Her earlier works consist of portraits depicting first generation American men exploring masculinity, landscapes of New York and its outer boroughs, and a documentation of the artist's sister at different ages. Murray has done portrait work for New York Times Magazine and W Magazine, editorial work for Newsweek and New York Magazine, and commissioned work for IBM, Volvo and Crest.

Elizabeth Smith is currently practicing independently as a writer and curator following more than ten years as Chief Curator and Deputy Director for programs at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. There, she curated major exhibitions on the work of such artists as Jenny Holzer, Lee Bontecou, Kerry James Marshall, Catherine Opie, and Donald Moffett as well as exhibitions on architecture and installations of the collection. Previously, Smith was Curator at MOCA Los Angeles where she organized numerous exhibitions on architecture including Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses, Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm, and Paradise Cage: Kiki Smith and Coop Himmelblau. While at MOCA, she also co-curated The Architecture of R.M. Schindler, At the End of the Century: 100 Years of Architecture, and a survey of the Cindy Sherman's photographs and presented the work of then-emerging artists Uta Barth, Toba Khedoori, Catherine Opie, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Margaret Honda for the first time in a museum context. Smith has taught at USC's School of Fine Arts and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and publishes and lectures widely on topics in the visual arts and architecture.

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