

## WAYNE MORRIS

*On the Porch, 1974*  
Oil on canvas, 55 x 65 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## YXTA MAYA MURRAY

### The Method

*“In 2010 and 2011, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) conducted interviews with individuals who had formerly worked at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) to learn more about historical operations at the site.”*

*Santa Susana Field Laboratory Former Worker Interviews, November 2011*

*Interview with Viola Singer, March 18, 2020, New York, New York, via Zoom*

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I always wanted to play Hamlet. That’s why I became an actress. After I saw Richard Burton starring in the Gielgud production at Grauman’s Egyptian in ’69, I could not get that character out of my mind. Most women actors want to play Lady Macbeth. And of course, I wanted to play Lady Macbeth, too. But Hamlet, that was the real prize. There’s no better role for an actor on earth than the dreary and deadly prince.

The reason I burned to play the poor Dane was because Burton got it all wrong and I knew, even at sixteen years old, that I, a girl, could do far better. Burton was delectable, I’ll admit, as he stalked about the stage gassing on about whether to be or not to be. It was not his *oomph*, precisely, that was the problem. All roles require a soupçon of minge. But Hamlet was not suited by Burton’s particularly caveman sex appeal. Burton stormed around the stage barking about bodkins and all you wanted to do was let him paddle you with his big hard hand. And that’s not Hamlet, is it? Hamlet needs a languorous, nervous, tetchy sensuality, as if he would stop all that talking and squirming if Horatio would finally get the picture and take him to bed.

It’s not as if a man couldn’t do it. Olivier. Rylance. Whishaw, that upstart, certainly. But Hamlet is an especially female role. Sarah Siddons was the first to don the unbraced doublet, then Bernhardt. Hamlet is a woman’s part because he can’t decide what to do, and as long as we have to get our hearts broken by all of these men, well, we can’t decide what to do, either.

So Hamlet seemed perfect for me, particularly as I was a girl who had lost her father and was well aware how confusing that could be.

*[disappears from the screen while fiddling with something]*

*One delves back into memories of pain and joy and then gives them as gifts to the role. You remember not the emotion itself but the context in which it was created—the color of the sky on the day your father died, let's say.*

Can you hear me on this thing? It's so inhuman, conversing like this. When will this bloody business end?

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I ached to get out of Simi Valley. I moved to New York as soon as I could. After my father's funeral, my mother begged me to stay, but I couldn't take it. You know how brutal young people are. I wanted to fly, fly! That's why we become artists, to be able to do something with our memories. You make your grief into a piece of art and then you can just give it away. Not for very much money, usually.

I went to New York. I've been here for fifty years, when I wasn't in London. Live on Jane Street. Rent-controlled apartment. It once was perfect heaven, though after the eighties and Giuliani and Bloomberg the soul went out. Back then, the place crawled with folk musicians, so there was an awful lot of warbling. I loved the gay scene, the writers. In the early 1970s you could still see James Baldwin on the corner, smoking his cigarettes. Norman Mailer plumed

about after he had stabbed his wife. Warhol wafted through the streets like a madman. My people obviously were the actors—Cindy Bradzillian, Lou Floyd, Madame Q. You wouldn't by chance have heard of them, would you? Or, on the off chance, even, me? I had my moment in the sun, you might have come across my name once or twice . . . No, no problem at all. That's how it goes. But, Lord, that crew. They were perverts, all of them. Oh, my god. How I loved them to death! So many nights did I stay up until 3 a.m. at an off-off-Broadway insane asylum where the Madame or Lou floated about the stage naked and dripping in honey or setting themselves on fire. Endless days and nights of sex and love and art and acting and lunacy. Greenwich Village.

That's where I got my start, Greenwich's off-off-Broadway. Ya Basta, the famous theater. The great Ellen Sweetzer founded it. In '76 I was cast in an Ionesco knock-off called *The Plaid Pig*, which was about how a senator with a taste for Burberry is turned into a honking swine while eating a breakfast of pork chops and stewed pears. He goes into such shock at his new beastliness that he begins to wear his raincoat inside out and dashes around his apartment quoting the preamble to the United States Constitution while his wife goes slowly mad. The fourth act ends in a denouement where the little missus takes off all of her clothes, kills her grunting husband with a breadknife, covers herself in blood, runs for Congress, and wins. I played the wife. I still remember the lines.

*Should I turn you into crackling, or are you a truffle pig? Very cheeky.*

What? Oh. The thing you emailed us all about. Your study of the lab workers. The follow-up business. Yes. See, when I wrote you back, I was in a nostalgic, sad mood. There's no men around here that you could get your hands on. I haven't seen anyone, really, for a week. It's the worst. The paper keeps screaming about people over sixty-five getting it and, then, poof. So, I thought, well, I have the time, I'm a little lonely. I'll talk to this girl about my father, you know, finally come to terms, give you government people a good piece of my mind. See if there's any money in it, which I know there's not. I looked up that thing, the statute of limitations for the lawsuits. I found that the deadlines have long passed.

He's why I wanted to play Hamlet, is what I was saying before. Daddy. Because Hamlet's tragedy is that he

can't forget Big Hamlet becoming The Ghost, or becoming Nothing, which is the puzzle and the genius of the play. That's why he's such a mess. And I could relate. Even back then, when I was rubbing fake blood all over my tits, I could never really get past it. When you watch someone you love die like that, it's just utterly . . . you know . . . just so awfully. . . .

*[pauses, adjusts her scarves]*

But they had no interest in putting Hamlet on off-off-Broadway. Not my group, anyway. Even if you set Shakespeare on Mars, the Bard wasn't sufficiently avant for Rob Link or Bill Mitchell. Molière, on the other hand, sometimes. Mostly, we put on Doric Wilson, Genet. *The Maids*. And Edgar, Edgar Gutiérrez, the writer-director. The Mexican! He was the wildest one of them all, though he believed in the Method. *The Method*, dear. Stanislavski? Strasberg? It's an acting system. It's absolutely horrid. One must find the motivation for the character through psychology, one's past experience. You have to dig deep and give birth to yourself through your psychic vagina. Lots of screaming, so much sobbing. One delves back into memories of pain and joy and then gives them as gifts to the role. You remember not the emotion itself but the context in which it was created—the color of the sky on the day your father died, let's say. The temperature of the air. The birds that sang in the trees. The scents of perfume or rubbing alcohol. The feel of skin on skin. And then the feelings come rushing in and you have a nervous fucking breakdown.

Edgar wrote a one-act for me called *Messalina*, about the Roman Emperor Claudius's wife. She was an infamous nymphomaniac. Had a sex competition with a Roman prostitute and won with a grand total of twenty-five swains in one night. The preparation for that one was easy, as my emotional recall system amounted to pretty much just remembering what I'd done the night before. I had to get in touch with my beast side, Edgar said. My animal nature. I didn't tell him that my animal nature was already in fine working order. You have to let directors believe that they are really corrupting you if you want to keep them in proper pique. Edgar would dress me up in these gorgeous gowns from Halston, which he got from a boyfriend who dressed Bianca Jagger, and we'd swan into Studio 54 and start with the cocaine. Oh, my god. Rubell knew everybody and I had my pick. I fucked [redacted], and [redacted,] [redacted,] and

[redacted], the last one in a bacchanalia at a mansion where I ate too much pecan pie and got sick.

*Messalina* had barely any dialogue. It was more like a silent movie. We communicated with our bodies and our eyes. And it was very sympathetic to the protagonist. I played her as a feminist getting in touch with the forbidden. Trying to become unshackled by these men, homophobic man-society. I refused to actually have sex so we fitted me with a prosthetic and I went at it. It was fifty sports on the stage wearing nothing but Christmas tinsel. I was covered in gold body paint and my co-star, Shelly Danzinger, who later had the bad taste to accept a regular role on *Dallas*, wore a furry bear suit, which was much worse than the body paint because the costume got so wet and hot. It was disgusting and perfect. Edgar supported me, so much. He listened to me, and held me, while I cried over the process. "You are a woman of deep reserves," he would try to convince me. He would say that even though it wasn't true at all and everyone else in the city knew that I wasn't anything but a perfect flibbertigibbet. He insisted that I could be a serious actor. That I shouldn't play *Messalina* for the prurient value. I took his direction and determined to play *Messalina* as very dark, very Judith Anderson. He wanted me to think about my childhood but of course I wouldn't do that. Secretly, I abandoned the Method and instead just did a lot of shrieking. "You can do it, Viola," Edgar would say, holding my harness. "My little lollipop, my precious jewel. The flower of New York theater."

Edgar believed that somewhere in my depths I was a real artist. I will say that with his help, I emerged from my chrysalis as a sexual monster who maintained a perfect command of her dialogue rhythms. I also got bronchitis, and the attention of Harold Connolly, the son of the peer and industrialist Sir Harold Connolly, Sr. Junior was a bit of a Dashing Dan with his foulard and brilliantine and money, money, money, it was said. He sat there glittering in the first row on our last night and I acted so hard that my prosthesis flew across the room. In '72, Harold had famously directed Beckett's *Happy Days* as a rogue action, as it was staged secretly in the basement of the Old Vic until the management fuffed things by calling the law. Inigo Triste had been in the role of Winnie. Instead of being buried in a pile of earth or sand, she was covered in a huge mound of tennis balls that went rolling everywhere

and kept getting dumped back on her head by Willie and thrown about the room by the audience. It was supposed to be a metaphor *on top* of the metaphor. It got mixed but really quite blazing reviews and I had heard the rumor that Harold intended to best that triumph by directing a very sort of vortacist *Hamlet* in the East End.

After Harold caught me in *Messalina*, he took me to dinner at La Grenouille and I told him that I wanted to play his *Hamlet's* lead. He wouldn't have anything to do with that idea. He was no Edgar. That's the thing that you learn about the avant, is that it can be a lot more conservative than you'd expect. I was thirty-one by this point, and as lovely as a tulip. I had Warren Beatty trying to get in bed with me but I wouldn't because *please*. I was more for a man like Rip Torn or DeNiro. Jesus Christ, DeNiro. I was, in other words, a hot tomato. But Harold wanted me to play Gertrude. Absolutely not, I said. You must be joking. How fucking old do you think I look? If not the Dane himself then obviously Ophelia. Harold laughed and allowed that it might be interesting to stage an Ophelia who does not flower-drown herself in the river because of Polonius, but rather because of her subtextual fading fertility. I told him to strangle himself to death, then jumped at the part. It was in London. I'd never been yet, except with Haji once, but we stayed at the Connaught and never saw the light of day.

Harold promised to refund the cost for my ticket and I packed my panties and flew to Heathrow. For four days I lounged at the Mayfair, smoking every cigarette in sight and waiting for him to come and collect me. But Harold had run off to Egypt with Quentin Crisp and a six-foot-tall female modern dancer called She, like the Rider Haggard heroine. It turned out that while Harold's father was very rich, he was not.

I smoked hash in Chelsea until I was hired for *All Creatures Great and Small*, which was a BBC vehicle about an English country veterinarian named Dr. James Herriot who dewily euthanizes innumerable heifers and is an absolute snore. My role as Clementine Taylor-Gibbon, a morally reprobate femme fatale and goat owner who finds herself fishily out of water in the Yorkshire Dales, was supposed to be a one-off, but it went so well that they devised a small quasi-adulterous love interest C plot and extended me for three seasons. The British barely pay anything at all but it was a living. I sleepwalked through Thatcher's

Britain until they fired me and I moved back to Greenwich in 1982. I'd been gone for so long that the New York I knew was already vanished. I'd been subleasing to a male ballet dancer and so at least was able to return to my old apartment and try to help my friends.

AIDS had hit, see. I did a lot of nursing. Me and so many others. It was the end of the world. The absolute end. Different than right now, with everyone screaming about this new virus. Then, the focus was on gay men, so the government didn't care. Edgar died. Michael Bennett. Later, Leigh Bowery. Geniuses. I took care of Edgar. I bathed him and fed him and held him, as he had held me, when he had told me that I could be an artist and pull off that dark reading of *Messalina*. I wanted to help him in the same way, though it was impossible. [voice cracks] I can see you're too young to really understand. What their dying meant, what was lost.

[excuses herself and leaves for five minutes so that I am left looking at a wall hanging of a facsimile of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon]

What you do is identify the emotional state that your character will embody and then you remember a time when you had that emotion, too. Say, love. Is love an emotion? In acting it is. In acting, in art, everything is emotion. So let's say you want to remember a time you felt deep, deep love. Perfect love. First, you have to close your eyes. It's called emotional recall. Sense memory. Close your eyes, come on. There you go.

Remember the time that you felt that love. Who were you with? You don't need to tell me if you don't want. Where were you? The bedroom. *Who* were you? A child. Yes. What was it like in there? What color was your room? Pink, white. What you were wearing? Try to remember. A striped dress. What was the other person wearing? A long blue dress. Bare feet. Could you smell anything? Ah, L'Heure Bleue. So delicate and sweet. Cigarette smoke. White wine.

And what did she say?  
And how did you feel?  
You felt . . . tell me.  
You felt . . . say it.  
Oh, dear, darling.  
Darling, darling.

It's all right. It's all right. It's perfectly all right.  
[the remainder of this portion of the interview is redacted for space and relevance]

So you see that acting is a madwoman's profession, because you have to go through that. The Method, though, is dangerous for the mind. I only pretended to do it in *Messalina* and I certainly never went there for *All Creatures Great and Small*, even when my character was jilted at the altar by a strapping farmhand named Sven, or in AMC when I was playing the clown stalker. It just wasn't worth it. But then, when I appeared in *Hamlet* finally and had to play a person in deep, deep mourning, I reconsidered. Only for *Hamlet* would I have risked such a thing. Because the memory, it can tear you down. It can tear you down until there's nothing left. So one must be careful in the remembering.

My father's name was Maury Singer. He worked at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory. He was a janitor. Part-time. Only about twenty hours a week or so. His other job was as a line cook at restaurants—Louie's, Cole's, the Tam O'Shanter in LA. Or whatever came along. He did dry-walling, gardening. My mother, Marla, was a waitress and a house cleaner. She had been a beauty contestant in 1950s Long Beach, but then she fell in love with my father and let him ruin her life, she said. She and I didn't get along.

My father was a man capable of giving love. He wasn't a frivolous person like I turned out to be. I had or I suppose still have three sisters as well but, *blech*, I don't want to talk about them. I loved my daddy. He was short and fat and ugly and nice. He had terrible teeth. He would listen to me, very intently. I chattered to him about all of my plans of being a beauty queen like Mother, and whatever I rattled on about, he would act as if I were the most fascinating person in the world.

"Of course you'll be a beauty queen," he said. "You're my beauty queen, right now."

He liked to sing me that song, "Sweet Sue."  
*Every star above, baby,*  
*Knows the one I love:*  
*Sweet Sue—just you!*

And that's what he'd call me. "Sweet Sue," he'd say, kissing me on the head and hugging me when he came

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home after work while my hideous sisters bitched and seethed at how I was his favorite.

It's a story like every other person's story. Every other person who has ever loved someone. Sounds like nothing when you tell it out loud, but it's everything to you. And that's what an actor remembers, the everything. What's beyond language. Because an actor must rise above the text of the script to deliver that which is truly human.

Daddy worked at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory, which had a nuclear reactor, not ten minutes away from where we lived. And there was some sort of problem there. I never really figured it out. I did read the news reports. There had been an enormous blunder in the 1950s but they hadn't fixed it. As you know. An actual nuclear meltdown. How was that possible? In the heartland of California? Sorry—not to say that it would be less horrible if it had occurred somewhere else. Edgar's death taught me about that.

But there was real nuclear waste there. And other chemicals. Things. Toxics. They threw the men who worked at the lab at the poison and then just let them live

with the consequences, without any sufficient warnings or protection. I never saw my father wear any protective gear.

And in '69, evidently, there was another accident. Who on earth was in charge of that thing? I remember how that night, very late, Daddy came home and was moody. It was unlike him. He went to the bathroom immediately and took a shower and then carried his clothes out to the garbage and threw them away.

"What's going on?" my mother asked. She, my three sisters, and I had come out of our bedrooms, rubbing our eyes and complaining. My mother was upset that he had binned his clothes. "What are you doing?"

"There was an accident," my father said. His face was shut. That's the best word for it. Usually, his face was open to us, like an outstretched hand. Plain and good and without mystery. But now it was tied into a knot. He took out a cigarette and started smoking.

"What do you mean, an accident?" my mother said.

He said it was a fuel breakage or something. It let out radioactivity into the laboratory. My father's supervisor told him to clean the walls and the floors with soap and water. They needed to decontaminate. It took hours and hours. He hadn't understood, at first. It was only when he looked at the scientists and how scared they seemed that he began to get nervous. One of them had run out of the room as if the building were on fire. That's why Daddy had showered and gotten rid of his clothes when he came home.

"Daddy." I'd come up to him and tried to give him a hug. He shook his head and moved away from me.

"Don't," he said.

He got sick a year later. Throat.

His hospital room was white. His gown was blue. I was wearing a brown dress. My mother wore a flower print. My sisters were so horrified, they had ceased bathing. They all had greasy hair and faces that hung down from their faces like rags. As did I. Smell of antiseptic. Nurses. No window. Artificial light. Sounds of machines.

The cruelty of it.

He couldn't say Sweet Sue. He had bandages, all kinds of gear around his neck.

He mouthed it, though. I could read his lips.

I left about six months after the funeral. I wanted to forget. Off to New York I went. I buried myself in beauty. Because that's what experimental theater was. Pure, pure beauty. Beauty and not remembering what had happened to you. Becoming someone else entirely. I mean, I wasn't born a Viola. My parents named me Martha.

So I ran off to Manhattan and met Edgar and pretended that I was an actor. And then I ran off to London and then I came back and then Edgar was sick and I took care of him. But it was very strange, because when I took care of Edgar, I also took care of my father. The past caught up with me. I was taking care of Edgar and my father at the same time.

I'm not making sense. What I am telling you is that I loved Edgar Gutiérrez. Edgar was a passionate person. He would sing opera. He would cook crêpes. And when he had directed me, he held me in his hands like I was a turtledove. He was always patient.

"I want you to feel what you want to feel," he had said, as I stood in the rehearsal for *Messalina*, crying. "And I want you to feel more than that."

"I can't," I'd said.

"You are a woman of deep reserves," he'd said, over and over.

When I was nursing Edgar, I finally found my deep reserves. I bathed him, I gave him water. I gave him medicine. I fed him. We held hands. He called me "my little jewel" and "my lollipop" like before. We laughed. I brought him flowers.

At the same time, though, while I was with Edgar, I was also with my father. Time merged. It didn't exist anymore.

Edgar's room was painted pale blue, and he had Piranesi prints on the walls. He had an authentic pink Fortuny lamp. I spritzed Chanel No. 5 everywhere. There were other scents. I played him Chopin. The nocturnes. A slight and melancholy music. We watched musicals on television. I'd be in the room, wiping and kissing his face, and we'd be listening to *Babes on Broadway*.

But I was also in the white room with my father and my sisters and my mother. The brown dress. The flower print. No window. Nurses. Sweet Sue.

It's a relief when they die. But I went crazy. There was a long time when I would find myself stranded in

a supermarket, or on the street, unsure about where and when I was. The past kept leaking in, and it made me confused.

Anyway, too few cared. Not Reagan, he wouldn't even say the words out loud. *HIV. AIDS. Gay*. I became so angry I thought that I'd die, too.

After Edgar, I tried to pull the same trick as when my father passed away. I made an effort to "move on." This was now '89. I was thirty-six. Experimental theater was in shambles. No work. I had lost twenty-five pounds and I looked like a croney old witch. I found Haji, who was still alive in the lower East End, and she told me how to get myself back into fighting condition. I ate cheese, nuts, bread, milk, chicken, salads, and lots of water. No alcohol. That's all anyone wanted, was to drink. But it ruins the skin. Soon, thank God, my face and tits returned. You can still come back at thirty-six.

Edgar left me fifty thousand dollars. I bought myself a Furstenberg and dyed my hair. Soon, I was going to parties again, but I was angling for TV, not the boards. I thought I'd had it with theater, there was no money in it and everybody was gone. I was too old for prime-time network but soaps discriminated a little less. I wore my Fürstenberg to a party on a Benetti at the New York Yacht Club, where I buttonholed ABC's Brandon Stoddard and ultimately wangled that into a recurring bit part on *All My Children*.

I played Pippa, the girlfriend of Eric Kane, who is the father of the lead character, Erica Kane, played by the terrifying Susan Lucci. Erica Kane is a goddess and dark beauty with a daddy complex because her black-eyed, brooding, and dashing father, Eric, left her and her mother when she was a child in order to find vast success in Hollywood as a director. Eric's desertion gives Erica her motivation and her hero's journey, which is to overcome her fear of abandonment by dominating all the bitches in Pine Valley, as *les monstres sacrés* are wont to do. For most of the series, Erica mentions Daddy here and there in sparkling-eyed monologues, but in the late eighties, Stephen Schenkel decided to spice up the incest factor by reintroducing Eric in a primary role, even though he had been reputedly killed in a car accident about five years earlier. One day, Erica is sharpening her nails on Jackson Montgomery, who is

the brother of her eighth husband, Travis Montgomery, and Jackson lets it slip that he heard a whisper that Eric had faked his own death. Erica promptly has an early midlife crisis and wanders off in search of her father, only to find him installed in a Midwestern clown college and embroiled in a sadomasochistic affair with Pippa, whose specialty is in creepy clowning as opposed to the more classic Tramp type that Eric is studying. Erica persuades Eric to leave Pippa and come back with her to Pine Valley, but Pippa has her own abandonment issues, as her father had died in a Bulgarian train wreck when she was eight years old, which created a sort of Pippa-Erica *mise en abyme* of Electra neurosis. Pippa has a psychotic break and begins to stalk Eric and Erica through Pine Valley while wearing her creepy makeup. The whole thing was humiliating for me personally, of course, except that when you are an actor you can't think of that. Pippa begins a vengeful affair with Travis, Erica's cuckolded eighth husband, prompting a heroic cat fight between her and Erica, wherein Erica throws Pippa off an eleventh-floor hotel balcony, but not before Pippa makes an impassioned speech about her true and undying love for Eric, whom she accidentally calls by her father's name just before she plummets to her death.

I got depressed again after Pippa was killed off because even if it was trash, AMC was a fabulous gig and gave me health insurance. The soap people were a lovely crew and they had welcomed me with open arms. I was so realistic about my prospects that as long as they kept me employed, I had been perfectly happy to defer to Lucci, who has a reputation as a wonderful person and is so and you would never hear me say a word otherwise. I suppose it could be said also that it was difficult for me to accept that I was no longer the bright star of *Messalina*. And that when I looked in the mirror I no longer saw the sexy beast whom Edgar always said was a jewel and a lollipop who had such deep reserves and etcetera. And then I did I suppose begin drinking again a little because without the commotion of the set I had some time to think about him dying and my father also dying.

Thank God, then Harold Connolly, that bastard who had left me stranded at the Mayfair twelve years earlier, inherited four million dollars after his father carked it. Harold had grown tired of caravanning around Egypt with Quentin and She. He had, moreover, heard that my last

season on AMC had been very impressive, as he explained on the phone, having called me in early '91. "I understand that you were able to play a clown bitch very convincingly, which could have been no small trick, and that tells me that you haven't lost your touch, my dear," he said. "Of course I haven't," I replied, stuffing my face into a pillow because I was crying. "Darling," he said. "Come to London. I can make good this time, I swear. I'm putting on *Hamlet* again, for real, actually I'm producing it and Stevie Merchant is directing. I'm sorry that I can't offer you Hamlet or Ophelia, but I do want you to play Gertrude. I think you would be perfect."

I lay in bed wearing a huge muumuu and covered in the three repellant Persian cats that I had just saved from the SPCA and musing on which of pills or razors would make for the most stylish exit.

"All right," I said.

I no longer wanted to play Hamlet, in any case. Gertrude was now the only part for me. She's a real, grown woman, with that unhealable wound that you get when you are older. I understood her in a way that had been beyond me before I took care of Edgar, when I held him and bathed him and tried to feed him while the memories of my father's death crawled back into my mind like a snake. Because, do you really think that Gertrude cannot see The Ghost? Of course she can. And she *can't*, at the same time. Gertrude marries her husband's murderous brother and feasts on the funeral baked meats at her wedding because time split and merged for her in the same way that it did for me.

It was Munger Carr as Hamlet, Betheny Weaver as Ophelia, Yidris Hamacheck as Claudius, Timothy Redding as Horatio, and Karl Teacher as Polonius. We premiered on March 30, 1993. Packed crowd. I walked out onto the stage in a halo of light. I remembered everything, my dad, Edgar, and what Edgar had tried to teach me about the Method so many years before. I did not notice the audience, or the other actors. Instead, I saw the brown dress, and the flower print, and the way my father's eye had cried blood in his last days. I saw the Fortuny lamp, and Edgar's shaking hand. I felt that old sadness that had thrashed within me when I was a young girl at my father's deathbed, at Edgar's deathbed. I romanced my son and new husband with that

ugly insanity that you feel when a loved one is dying and no one will hear you or help you. While Hamlet raged in my boudoir, The Ghost entered stage right and buried me with his stone look. I could not breathe and was blind. I clung on to Hamlet and acted as if I did not feel, that I did not grieve. I would not see The Ghost, even though he was screaming right at me.

"Alas, how is 't with you, that you do bend your eye on vacancy?" I asked the Prince, my heart shattering as I pretended that my dead beloved did not exist.

It was really quite a performance, if I might say so myself.

*[wipes her eyes, then makes a dramatic, dismissive gesture with her hand]*

I won an Olivier. And later, when we brought the act to New York, I won a Tony.

**Yxta Maya Murray** is a novelist, art critic, playwright, and law professor. She is the author of nine books; her most recent are the forthcoming story collection *The World Doesn't Work That Way, but It Could* (University of Nevada Press, 2020) and the novel *Art Is Everything* (TriQuarterly Press, 2021). She has won a Whiting Award and an Art Writers Grant and has been named a fellow at the Huntington Library for her work on radionuclide contamination in Simi Valley, California.

## WAYNE MORRIS

*Afternoon, 1990*  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 57.5 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST