

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Martin Mull at David Beitzel

by Michael Amy, March, 2000

Martin Mull's exhibition consisted of 13 watercolors and six oil paintings on canvas, all executed in 1999 with the exception of one picture from '98. In these works, the artist explores the paradigmatic white american middle class family, presenting a man, his wife, son and daughter, their house and belongings and the family dog. The imagery brings to mind magazines and children's books of the 40's and 50's. Mull's style is characterized by a fragmentary treatment of form, a tendency to reduce shapes to essentials and a testing of traditional notions of finish.



In *Pillar to Post* (watercolor on paper, 23 by 20 inches), the torsos of a man and woman occupy the top center of the composition. Only their clothes are shown; they lack heads and hands. A block of landscape, receding illusionistically, is painted below the man. His arms appear to rest on the landscape as if it were a table. Mull is good at exploiting levels of reality in ways occasionally akin to Magritte, whose *periode vache* is evoked by the looseness of the brushwork and the muddying of the colors. The horizontal slab of landscape overlaps a second landscape slap placed on its side on the left. The sky, houses and ground of the latter serve as a foil for the man's torso.

In his oils, Mull uses a bright varied palette, with large voids of tarnished canvas, making them airier than the drawings. The paintings have the appearance of palimpsests, with rubbed-out passages, and residues of paint and turpentine streaming down the canvas. *Chase* (Oil on linen, 20 by 24 inches) shows the body of a running boy (without head, hands or feet), a house in a landscape, the head and torso of a girl turned upside down, a dog and a pair of legs and feet, all loosely painted and floating in an indefinable space. The picture has to do with children's play, though Mull's fragmented bodies and unorthodox compositional strategies suggest the possibility of calamity. Mull's keen on determining how much abstraction he can let seep into his compositions, as he tells his stories about family life.

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