



Martin Mull, *Birthday Boy XI*, 2000, oil on linen, 72 x 60"

Fool's Paradise

Martin Mull at David Beitzel

by Jeanne C. Wilkinson

If it's a truism that artists need jobs to support their art careers, Martin Mull has put his skills as an actor and comedian to excellent use. Mull's paintings continue to evolve, and in this latest exhibition, *Fool's Paradise*, his paintings have grown in complexity and technical skill but still maintain the spontaneity and freshness of his earlier work.

There is a feeling of memory in Mull's painting, a recollection of childhood—of its pleasures and pains—that is poignant yet not sentimental. A narrative is implied by the Dick-and-Jane imagery, but the story is elusive, enigmatic—like taking a walk on a summer day and looking into lawns and windows, glimpsing people's lives but never knowing the whole story.

As in all Mull's work, his paint handling fits this kind of half-real, half-imaginary universe. Some of the imagery is crisp and clean while some has drippy or undefined edges that bleed and blur, a visual metaphor for things well remembered versus things made a bit fuzzy and obscure by the passage of time.

The more one looks at these paintings, the more they seem lit from within—the colors are filled with a soft, glowing, impressionistic light from a non-specific source. This is not the light of harsh everyday reality but more a dream-tinged, subtly joyful luminosity transformed by time. The pictures seem filled with an enveloping mist that does not hide but rather illuminates and

connects the imagery despite scale or directional discrepancies. This ambient light seems to shelter and preserve the forms and figures. The characters in these painterly chronicles, whether they express anxiety, sadness, pleasure, or some mixture of emotions, all seem comfortable within this universe—for better or worse, they are at home.

The paintings are surreal, but in a sort of normal, '50s American kind of way. There's a bit of sexual obsession—a mother's dress doing a meltdown, a girl's body sliced like a birthday cake (*Birthday Boy XI*)—but rather than graphic sexuality, a kind of gentle existential angst permeates all the imagery. In *Bible Stories*, a running boy, hemmed in by soft



Martin Mull, *Bible Stories*, 2000, oil on linen, 72 x 60"

grayness, tightly clasps two books while looking over his shoulder toward two adults performing some sort of barbecue ritual. In *Apocrypha*, one of the larger pieces at 64-1/2 x 106 inches, a boy's crying head, hands covering his face, hovers over a landscape of pastured cows and a mother-and-daughter team happily hemming a dress. In the sky an angry father turns away and a cake floats over a transparent, box-like hole.

The normal rules of gravity don't apply in Mull's imagery. This is not an analytic Cubistic breaking up of space, but more like the rearrangements that occur when a child has a whim to hang upside down just to get a different perspective on things. In *Ariadne's Thread*, a '40s or '50s style white house surrounded by lawn and trees reflects another tidy white house and lawn floating upside down where the sky usually belongs. A Betsy McCall style girl in the upper world is connected to a tree in the lower world, and part of a man's torso, dressed for work in white shirt and tie, floats in the empty space between the two worlds with an open, entreating hand gesturing toward the girl. The father, fragmented, floating, beckoning; the girl, smiling, full skirt twirling; the two worlds reflecting each other, the same but not the same. As in all Mull's works, the meaning is veiled and evocative, meditative rather than confrontational.

Mull's drawing style had always been awkward and childlike, it seemed purposely. The figures and objects in his compositions seemed to be half-formed, somewhat crude apparitions floating in an atmospheric sea of paint. Now, however, his drawing seems



Martin Mull, *Ariadne's Thread*, 2000, oil on linen, 72 x 60"

to be shaping up, the figures clarified, the dream illustrated more clearly than before. The balance between abstract paint handling, which Mull does so well, and careful drawing is more evenly matched. It's refreshing to see an artist engaged in formal painterly issues who gives evidence of a growing understanding of the language and potentialities of paint. In a way, it's the old Poussinist/Rubensist argument—form versus painterly color and stroke—and it will be interesting

to see how these two tendencies play out in his future work.

Most importantly, these paintings take into account the intelligence of the viewer, as do all Mull's work. Things are not spelled out—it is expected that the imagery will be looked at, thought about, with meanings, like memory itself, evolving and altering over time. Mull's world, for all its references to the past, is less nostalgia than a revelation of the underlying child who becomes father of the man.