

MARTIN MULL: OCCIDENTALIST

During the late nineteen sixties, when I was a gallerist in Austin, Texas and life in the arts was less structured than it is today, I received amazing things in the mail on a daily basis. Among these (some of which were very strange indeed) my all-time was a position paper on the necessity and viability of edible art issued by Smart Ducky, a guerilla art coalition in Boston. The occasion for this manifesto was a Smart Ducky exhibition that paid homage to artists from Brancusi to Pollock by recreating their work out of snack food—cocktail wieners, Triskets, M&M's etc. All of these tasty and tasteful works, it seemed, were to be admired by the viewers and then consumed at the opening. The idea, as far as I could tease it out, was to bring advanced art practice in this country into line with the norms of Anglo American consumer culture through the medium of an art-savvy, post-hippie Tupperware party with snacks.

Smart Ducky's edible art movement, not surprisingly, did not last. It was all too quickly consumed by the appetites of its advocates but, in its aftermath, I struck up a spirited correspondence with the ringleader of Smart Ducky, a guy named Martin Mull, recently escaped from the Rhode Island School of Design. Following his short detour into edible art, I soon discovered, Mull returned to his first love, the production of strange and inedible paintings but his subject matter

never wavered, nor has it wavered during the subsequent thirty-five years. Martin Mull grew up in North Ridgeville, Ohio, left it for art school in Rhode Island and never returned. He now resides in Los Angeles but the country of his youth survives as his one great subject. He was then, as he is now, simultaneously beguiled and horrified by the sweet eccentricity and radical emptiness of "white culture" in American.

In the mid-eighties, Mull wrote, produced and starred in an extremely funny television special called "The History of White People in America," which sought to plumb the mysteries of bowling, snack food, golf and other forms of *folie blanche*. Today, Mull addresses the same mysteries with more assurance and sobriety, so I think of him now as the first post-modern "identity artist." It was, after all, the flowering of cosmopolitan America in the post-war years that effectively *invented* the idea of a distinctive white culture in the United States. It was the escalating imbrication of that white culture with black, Asian and Hispanic cultures that gradually pre-empted its claim to "normality" and rendered the exotic world of cookies, real estate, bowling and wall paper visible and available to us in all its marginal eccentricity. Suddenly, in these post-war years, there was a place inside America but outside of white America from which it might be regarded.

Before this, painters of the “American scene” were, in George Orwell’s phrase, inside the whale. They could only see the outside from the inside. Their emotional palette was limited to this interior view: to the regional chauvinism of Thomas Hart Benton, the urban tristesse of Edward Hopper, the nostalgic coziness of Normal Rockwell (although, in truth, Rockwell’s plangent nostalgia for the present is redolent with intimations of its demise). Mull’s paintings, on the other hand, are pictures from outside—cool, remote and sad. Bereft of love but not without affection, they portray white culture rather than the American scene, white cultural iconography rather than its living members. Actually, more precisely, they portray white iconography *as* a living thing and white culture as an American scene. The grisaille sfumato of Mull’s pictures insists on the external *reality* of this iconic domain—as the paintings of Ed Ruscha in which fragments of language float in palpable, pictorial haze, insist upon their social reality. In this sense, Mull’s paintings distinguish themselves from the work of American iconographers like Andy Warhol and David Salle who are beguiled by the shelf-life of the image itself as a singular strange attractor.

Mull’s paintings are always more about art-in-life than life-in-art—less concerned with the gaudy power of the image than with the ominous power of the image over our daily lives. They urgently, even

tragically, evoke a blended atmosphere in which imperative cultural icons and singular human beings co-exist and breathe the same air. In this domain, the easy metamorphosis of living creatures into cultural icons into fugitive images and back again leaves them inextricably entangled in memory and imagination, all equally real and inescapable, like those eighteenth century Arcadian *pastorales*, much favored in the halls of Versailles, in which symbolic shepherds and shepherdesses cavort in naturalistic rural settings adorned with iconic putto, and surrounded by gilt frames of rococo ornament.

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Martin Mull: Admissible Evidence

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In Mull’s paintings, of course, the tract-house banality of flowered wallpaper substitutes for the rococo frame and evokes its memory. Naturalistic settings, symbolic figures and mythic icons coexist as they do in French pastorals but they are more collaged together than fully integrated, so we are always fully aware of their artificial assembly. Mull’s symbolic “white subjects” disport themselves in the landscape much like the symbolic shepherds and shepherdesses of King Louis’ court, but they have clearly been placed there, and the ebullient infant aviators of French Arcadia are replaced by weightless, high-contrast Clip-Art icons that evoke *The Kids*, *The Wife*, and *The Pets*. These float like flat talk bubbles in the pictorial atmosphere—icons of protestant conscience and social control. What distinguishes Mull’s paintings most profoundly from their French precedents,

however, is the fact that Mull’s lily-white Arcadia is truly lost to us and probably for the better. The promiscuous invitation of Francois Boucher’s open picture-plane and his appetizing pink and blue palette are replaced in Mull’s paintings by the impenetrable, black-and-white blur of aging snapshots. The realm of these images is irrevocably distanced into the entropic domain of fading memory.

Not one of these analogues and comparisons, however, accounts for the strange evocative allure of the paintings themselves. Part of this allure is attributable to the calm assurance of the painter’s hand, of course, to the intrinsic seriousness his mark bestows upon its subjects. The larger part of their attraction, I think, derives from the fact that the paintings, even as they declare their remoteness from the culture they portray, refuse to deny their complicity in its rituals. Mull may have distanced himself from the plain repression of white America, but he is still an American, and this I think accounts for the haunting double entendre that pervades his paintings. They cannot help but evoke for us the happy days we lived and the sweetness of the air we tasted before we tried to run and found we were in chains.