

MARTIN MULL

by Steve Martin

Martin Mull should not exist but clearly he does. It would seem that no one who has been nominated for two Grammys, has hosted the Tonight Show, received a Writer's Guild award for best teleplay, been the center square on Hollywood Squares, and kicked a field goal for the Cleveland Browns could possibly be an extraordinary painter and illuminator of psychological darkness. It is just not done, and the person who did it would certainly vanish in a puff of smoke.

Martin would fit nicely in the lineage of American narrative painting, except that the lineage of American narrative painting is square and dull, especially in the 20th century (George Bellows and a few others excepted). However, the lineage of American *sinister, brooding, mystifying* narrative painting is not square and dull, and includes Edward Hopper, Eric Fischl, Mark Tansey and John Currin. Martin Mull slides easily into this group.

It is hard to digress after only two paragraphs, but watch me. I paused a bit on the word *narrative* because of its mountain range of definitions when applied to art.

When applied to literature, we know exactly what it means, but in art what is meant is more like a snapshot: a falling safe about to land on a man's head (if it hasn't been painted already, it should be). Yves Klein's photograph of himself midair, with a one-story house to his left and a concrete street directly below him comes to mind. It is pure narrative: we assume the leap, we see him in the air, we assume the splat. In Munch's "The Sick Child," we assume the healthy child, we see her sick, we assume her death. Beginning, middle, end.

In the art world, there is a slippery use of the term "narrative" that would make a semanticist squirm. A painting of a vacant room can be called narrative. In Hopper's painting "Sun in an Empty Room" we are moved by what we are not seeing. Hopper was the master of making us care about the small event. The empty room implies a previous history, and presumes a future history. In Fischl's work, the narrative was specifically unclear: something is happening, but we're not sure what. This type of narrative became more dreamlike, but this was not the dreaminess of the surrealists where trains were coming out of fireplaces; this



was the dreaminess of Freud and Jung, where mothers and sons enacted subterranean dramas. Martin Mull's work adds to this developing, unraveling definition, by juxtaposing or superimposing relevant imagery over normal – or abnormal - narrative information.

In life, Martin Mull is an ironist and satirist. I watched - over the past thirty-five years that I have known him - irony and satire leave his painting and I saw his successful reach for depth and meaning (I am happy to report that humor has not left his daily life). Whatever humor is hidden in his paintings, it is contradicted by an equal amount of heartbreak. Through the years, it has been a joy to see Martin find and focus on his subject. He has never spoken of his past, he only paints the result of it. I suspect that for him to verbalize his inspiration would be to dilute the paintings.

Martin's technical mastery has always coexisted perfectly with the intent of his work. After his early precision-driven paintings, as his work became more complex, he intentionally blunted his draftsmanship, probably indicating that his messages were becoming less tangible and more mysterious to him. In the paint-

ings of the last five years, the renderings have once again become more precise, suggesting that Martin's grasp on his symbols is more exact.

In addition to Martin's ability to tell the psychological story, he has achieved something rare for picture makers. He has, in many instances, created the unforgettable image. Like the spooky demon sitting on top of a fitfully sleeping woman in Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare," or Hopper's once-seen-never-forgotten "Nighthawks," a powerful visual can set the viewer off on a lengthy journey that can be enjoyed and dissected weeks after the picture has left one's sight, or been spirited off by some greedy collector (maybe me). Martin has left a trail of haunting paintings throughout his artistic career, from his early photo-realist work of a toy dog sitting in a toy bathtub, to his recent composition of a TV dad swimming away from a mid-western house besieged by rising seas.

His eye is focused dead center on the American psyche, and his hand is grounded in the tradition of American realism, which, in spite of dramatic excursions away from it, maintains a powerful grasp on American art.

From Martin Mull: The Contemplation of Assets,
Spike Gallery
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Image: Real Estate, 2003 36x72 inches,
Oil on Linen