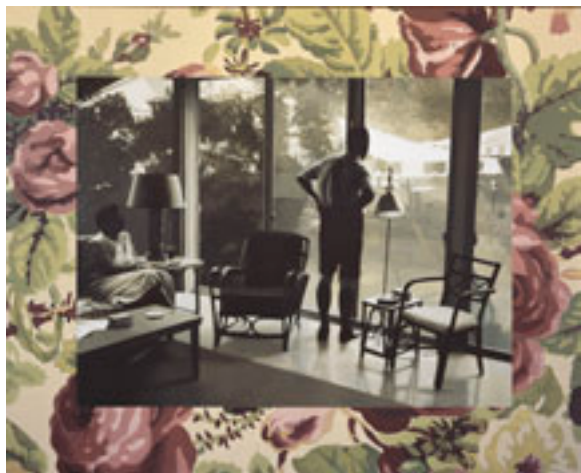


## Martin Mull's Adventures in a Temperate Climate



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The anonymous man and woman who inhabit Martin Mull's painting, *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living*, are cast in shadow, their features obscured. He wears a cotton shirt, Bermuda shorts, and knee-high socks; she wears a sleeveless shift. The clothes, the discernibly aging physiques, and the glass-walled den the figures occupy, all serve to categorize the couple as relatively prosperous members of the 1950s-American middle class. The joyless narrative—he stares out at backyard party canopies devoid of guests; she stares at him staring—further identifies the figures as emblems of the American culture that prevailed in World War II, put fins on Cadillacs, and democratized golf, a culture described by some as America's "greatest generation," and by others as a chauvinistic and cruel myth. Judging by the aching dystopic sunset years presented in *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living*, Mull clearly resides in the latter camp.

For twenty-odd years, Mull has mined the troves of popular images left behind by Americans of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, using them as the raw material out of which he develops his art. As a boy in the Midwest, he consumed images like food—in cereal boxes, in *Boy's Life* magazines, and in issues of *Look*, *Life*, and other photo-spread journals—his coming of age coinciding neatly with that moment in history when photographs first defined a coherent, Modern American culture, and codified that culture as prosperous, optimistic, benign, Protestant, and exclusively Anglo-Saxon white. Surely when figures in Mull's paintings swim away from clapboard houses, or drive away from burning ones, they are fleeing the constructs that transformed a generation of Americans into the blindly narcissistic, nationalistic culture that once stood firmly on clay feet. Mull, who is deeply familiar with the ways of Modern American culture by accident of his heartland birth, has made a career of demystifying what he summarily refers to as "whiteness."

In recent works, Mull has fine-tuned his Postmodern practice of appropriating images and recontextualizing them in paintings. The pastiche figures that in magazines, books, and the few family photographs the artist incorporates from time

to time, originally mowed lawns, started campfires, jumped on trampolines, sold lemonade, modeled new clothes, drove convertibles, bought televisions, and otherwise engaged in innocent, quotidian activities. In Mull's paintings, the figures are convincingly integrated into naturalistic space and cast in roles more common to traditional narrative realism. One would hardly notice that the scene in *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living*, painted in 2005, is pieced together from multiple photographic sources but for the den's wall, which is improbably constructed entirely of sliding glass doors. In this work, as in most others Mull has painted since 2002, the architectural and decorative features of the setting are as important as the figural elements. For Mull, the critique of Modern culture is brought home by references to the Modern aesthetics that mid-century "forward thinking" Americans had embraced. The Modern home depicted in *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living* advances the scene's narrative of innocence lost.

Occasionally, Mull cleverly codes his allusions to Modern aesthetics, as he does in *Former Athlete and His Wife* (2005). In this painting, the signature primary colors of early twentieth-century abstract master Piet Mondrian—red, yellow, and blue—appear as a striped design that decorates the canvas's border. The colors serve to remind viewers that, before Modern aesthetics took hold, wide horizontal formats such as shapes this canvas were rare in easel painting. In other works, such as *The Aerialist* (2004), the Modernist aesthetic is embedded within the compositional structure with such subtlety that it is all but invisible to the unschooled eye. The point at which the young aerialist's pole crosses the high wire corresponds compositionally with the point at which the vertical and horizontal lines in a classic Mondrian abstraction would intersect, creating the asymmetrically balanced composition



that is a standard Modernist design. Further, if one were to remove all figurative elements from *The Aerialist*, there would remain a perfectly proportioned simulation of a painting from Joseph Albers's mid twentieth-century series, *Homage to the Square*.

At times, Mull reaches further back in the history of "white" painting to borrow pictorial devices and substructural designs. The iconographic program developed in Mull's *Dream House* (2003) has a complexity worthy of Old Masters; the teenage girl, wearing a plaid dress and seated gracefully in the center of the composition is as much a Biblical presence as an emblem of rural America. With a book in her lap and the farmhouse towering behind her, she brings to mind Renaissance depictions of Saint Barbara, the clapboard house standing in for the castle in which Saint Barbara's father imprisoned his wayward daughter. Rendered in a grisaille that sets her apart from her full-color surroundings, and crowned by a golden halo conveniently formed by the Frisbee in flight, the figure is at once a mystical, Whitmanesque vision and a stereotypical girl-next-door. To fully grasp Mull's theme of feminine entrapment in conservative domestic life, one must read the girl both ways.



The pastiche girl in *Dream House* has a monumental presence that belies the paper-thin character of the figure's photographic source. Reconfigured as players in complex narratives, Mull transforms his pastiche figures into fully dimensional personalities as solemn, multivalent, and reflective as any in realist paintings of the past. Mull accomplishes the transformation partly by integrating the figures logically within three-dimensional space, and partly by modifying the rendering of the figures in ways that enliven them with human emotion and purpose. Note the remarkably "present" female figure in

Mull's *Fully Dressed Woman Descending a Staircase* (2004). This bulldog of a woman would wield a spiked club—or perhaps the spiked chandelier above her—to defend the rituals and aesthetics that define the values of her middle-class world.

The female figure in the center panel of Mull's triptych, *Contemplation of Assets II*, is completely engaging. She is June Cleaver, Christian martyr, and film noir leading lady rolled into one. And look again at the couple in *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living*. The slightly stooped figure of the man, cast in shadow, embodies all the information we need to know about his cultural history and psychological state of mind. His wife, seated demurely at the very edge of the scene, looks on, the folds of her summer shift collapsing into her sunken chest.

The understated simplicity, atmosphere of calm and order, and contemplative mood presented in *The Joys of Indoor/Outdoor Living* date back at least as far as Jean-Siméon Chardin's eighteenth-century domestic interiors, and in the painting's poignant evocation of introspective suburban detachment, it takes up where Edward Hopper's early twentieth-century portraits of American loneliness leave off. Together, in their Modern den, the couple represents the failings of an entire generation.

Mull's artistic practice of deconstructing the constructs of Modern American culture has positioned the artist among those exponents of Postmodern art who appropriate images from popular culture and render them in paint. The group includes, to greater or lesser extent, artists such as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Mark Tansey, David Salle, and Neo Rauch. Yet Mull's paintings suggest that for him, deconstructive practice is as personal as it is political. The cool intellectualism and critical

edge that characterize the majority of Postmodernists' efforts to detoxify images *per se*—or otherwise politicize cultural discourse—are in Mull's works given a softer, more expressive touch. When Mull revisits the temperate climate of the heartland, he never ignores the plight of the real human beings trapped in the constructs of their culture, and he doesn't forget where he's from.



Adventures in a Temperate Climate  
A Retrospective of Paintings by Martin Mull  
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