

Dark side of the suburbs

Charlotte Metcalf on the paintings of Martin Mull

The last time Martin Mull left America for Britain was for a Bob Monkhouse show. Back then he was known as a musician and comedian who went on to play the part of the high school principal in *Sabrina*, the *Teenage Witch* and Roseanne's gay boss. This month, after a 23-year absence, Mull arrives in London to attend the first European exhibition of his paintings.

Mull loathes being compared to other celebrities who paint. 'It's a death knell,' he says from his LA home. Despite being known as an actor, his art is taken seriously in his native America and hangs in 15 museums, including the Whitney and Metropolitan in New York. 'Performing's an avocation but painting's a passion that takes up 99 per cent of my time now,' says Mull — so much so that he's virtually homebound, spending every day from 5 a.m. in his studio. 'Coming to London will be a huge adventure,' he laughs.

Mull's paintings plunge us into 1950s suburban America, that golden era of postwar economic growth and social stability in which men went out to work and women with perfect hairdos dusted their cosy homes in pretty aprons. It was also the time of the Cold War and McCarthyism. 'America was portraying itself the way it wanted its enemies to see us — a thriving, happy society,' Mull explains.

Indeed, his exhibition is called *The Pursuit of Happiness*, part of the credo 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', from the 1776 Declaration of Independence. At first glance you might think Mull is idealising Fifties suburbia, drawing from photographs in *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Look closer and you notice incongruous images that nudge us towards the clamour of darker, more subversive emotions beneath the ordered surface. Mull's preoccupation is the gap between the glossy varnish of people's lifestyles and what lies beneath. His are happy people with a twist.



'The Luck of the Draw' (2007) by Martin Mull; oil on linen, 27 x 42in. Below: the artist at work

Mull also draws from old family photographs that he buys in huge batches from eBay. 'My parents never had a camera so there's no visual record of my boyhood,' he explains. Born in 1943, Mull grew up in Ohio, where his father worked in aeroplane acoustics and his mother was a housewife. When he was 15, the Mulls moved to New Canaan, Connecticut: 'I was used to living hand-to-mouth in farming country and found the leafy affluence of Connecticut a shock.' Later Mull left for art school in Rhode Island and, 'I got back into my scruffy jeans with relief,' he says. Ever since, painting has been Mull's own route to happiness.

In 'Weekend in Pleasantville', Mull takes a typical scene from his Connecticut years and jolts us out of our complacency. In the foreground stands a naked woman, her flesh exquisitely luminous, while behind her, oblivious to all but his task, her husband builds a pergola. The woman's sexual needs are not even noticed, let alone sated. Around this scene is a painted border of vintage wallpaper roses, alluding to the cosiness that

contains the emotional action. Around 'Woman Descending the Stair', there is a similar border, reminding us that the darkest of passions lurk within suburbia's confines. The painting is a troubling depiction of an 'iron maiden', as Mull calls her, whose face suggests she is descending from a scene of unspeakable horror. Mull also uses borders to distance us from the presence.

Despite the unsettling effect of some of his paintings, Mull is by no means lambasting the American Dream. 'I just paint as I observe,' he says. 'To quote Sam Goldwyn, "Messages should only be sent by Western Union."'

The paintings are beautiful and unsettling but remain distinctly rooted in the American past, so I ask Ben Brown, whose gallery is hosting the exhibition, why we Brits should buy his work. Brown answers that he simply doesn't care whether Brits like Mull's paintings or not. 'The paintings have universal appeal and if the British don't like them, the Europeans will snap them up.'

When I ask Mull the same question he replies, 'That's the big question mark but I hope people will grasp similarities between the cultures — the myth of postwar economic growth that both countries shared. I'm trying to burst the bubble of that myth and pierce the corporate veil.'

At a time when the majority of our middle class is mortgaged up to the hilt and the collapse of the American sub-prime mortgage market threatens to trigger a global recession, British art-lovers may well find plenty to respond to. I predict Mull's paintings will positively sing to them. That would make Mull very happy indeed.

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