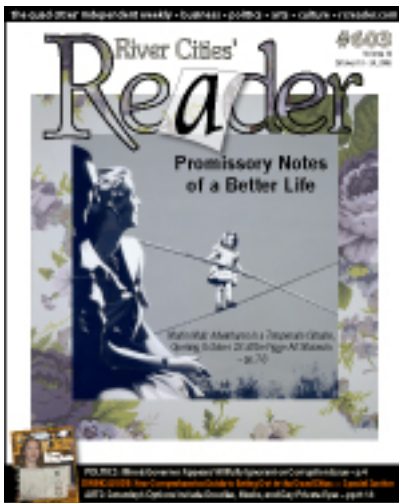


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In the 1985 HBO mockumentary *The History of White People in America*, co-writer and host Martin Mull offered the world mayonnaise-loving WASPs - suburbanites who had lost any sense of their roots, to the point that one child's understanding of his own heritage was limited to the streets on which he and his parents had lived.

White people, the show seemed to be saying, are beyond ethnicity and culture.

Mull doesn't see a meaningful connection between that work and his paintings, which will be shown at the Figge Art Museum in a retrospective that opens October 28. The only link, he said in an interview last month, is that they reflect his upbringing in Ohio. "It comes from the same vein," he said, "the same mother lode."

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Yet they share more than just a Midwestern upbringing. *The History of White People in America* is the light-comic flip side to Mull's ambiguous but loaded paintings. Both represent a tug of war over the American dream, a recognition of both its allure and its pitfalls.

The Figge exhibit, which will include roughly 40 works from the past 22 years (with an emphasis on the past decade), is called *Adventures in a Temperate Climate* and originated with the Las Vegas Art Museum. It finds Mull fixated on the 1950s that were portrayed in magazines and on television shows of the day - defined by sunny conformity.



"Even before I started doing the somewhat photo-real kind of assemblage collage-ish kind of stuff - working from '50s photographs and so forth that I'm doing right now ... - I was working with children's books, illustrations that I had gleaned from my own childhood," Mull said. "I've always had a certain fascination. It's basically 'paint what you know,' and this is what I grew up with."

But Mull isn't employing this iconography for mere humor, and he's not casting it as ironic fantasy. There's a sadness and longing tied into many of his images, in the way they're lovingly re-created in paint. For people who grew up in the 1950s, he said, many of the paintings will bring with them a lot of baggage.

"It was taunted as reality," the 63-year-old Mull said. "It was dangled as a carrot. In terms of people's hopes and dreams, to say that that is less of a reality than the daily grind they find

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themselves in is maybe not correct. Your hopes and dreams tend to figure very prominently in what makes up your life. And that's what those things were: They were promissory notes of the quote-unquote 'better life' that were unredeemable."

Yet Mull doesn't want to circumscribe people's experience of his work and is hesitant to even assign meaning to the paintings; he claims that he makes "pictures," not art.

That self-deprecation - whether earnest or an act - extends to his fame. He will grudgingly talk about his career as a comedian and actor but derides it as merely a job.

Painting Money

Unlike many celebrity artists, Mull got his training in fine arts, graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design.

And although the bulk of his money came from performing - with a series of comedy albums in the 1970s and a television and movie career that span from *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* to *Roseanne*

to

Sabrina, the Teenage Witch

- he claims that painting has remained his true love.

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