

(UN)REAL

DAVID RICHARD GALLERY
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THE WAGES OF ZEN. AD REINHARDT'S LATE SERIES OF BLACK PAINTINGS

from 1960 might serve as an apogee in modern art's march towards pure abstraction. Reinhardt defined it in the negative vein of Zen Buddhism. Each canvas was "timeless, spaceless, changeless" (1960) ... "the most extreme, ultimate, climactic reaction to, and negation of ... abstract art" (1963) ... "the logical development of ... Eastern and Western pure painting" (1966). As his biographer Michael Corris observed, Reinhardt saw any attempt to inject representation into abstract art as "not only aesthetically incoherent but morally wrong." Yet, in hindsight, abstract art was not the achievement—or even the goal—of modern art in the last century. And if for many avant-garde artists pure abstraction was indeed the promised land of the modernist trajectory, even Cubism, the first abstract art movement, ended up as Picasso's Mt. Pisgah—on the verge of pure abstraction, a vantage

Michele Bubacco's oil-and-collage *Addiction* recalls Sigmar Polke's inverted or upside-down images. The device is used with equal effect in the overturned seated figure of *Periodico* and for *Waiting Room's* rigid figure propped on a chair, and with wry nuance in the dormant form in *Il Ballo* whose knees jut out beneath a table. And the broad Neo-Expressionist handling and surface of Bubacco's painting reinforce this trope with art historical resonances. *Girotondo in tre quarti* riffs the corrosive cabaret of George Grosz, while *Prove d'Orchestra* conjures up Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Garden*, and *Il Ballo* makes an odd yet fitting epilogue to *The Absinthe Drinker* by Degas. Bubacco's paintings not only restate the postmodern gloss on the artifice of painting, they celebrate the artifice as well.

Angela Fraleigh's realist style takes a more explicit art-about-art approach in which the sources remain visible,

paintings with new narratives, even if her occasional use of "real" models within the idealized figuration tends to disrupt the composition and confuse the intent.

David Humphrey's acrylic-on-canvas paintings fuse a Pop style with Neo-Expressionist caricature to yield highly effective visual capsules like *Shutterbugs*, which appears to probe Gerhard Richter's painterly rumination on the Abstract Expressionist legacy, and *Pink Couch*, recalling the potent social commentary of a Robert Colescott. Humphrey's challenge is to push this postmodern graphic syntax beyond the merely decorative or illustrational in a work such as *Posing*.

The dark jagged brushstrokes of Claire Sherman's oil-on-canvas *Dirt III* and *Dirt VII* depict urban landscape at a level just shy of a Clyfford Still abstraction. Their worm's-eye views of a collapsed, post-quake highway overpass, reduced to the skeletal remnants of its massive steel spans, convey the look and feel of Piranesi etchings of imperial Roman ruins. Their visual power gives to Sherman's landscapes, *Pool* and *Hole III*, the effect of toxic testaments to an industrial wasteland.

If Martin Mull's photo realism brings to mind the rise of British Pop Art in the mid-1950s, the imagery of paintings like *Foreplay* (2013), *Happy Hour* (2015), and *The Inheritance* (2014) are spot-on in capturing the postwar national ethos espoused at the time in magazines like *Life* and *Reader's Digest*, with their Norman-Rockwellian illustrations of an idyllic nuclear family living the *Mad Men* suburbia dream of *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It To Beaver*, and *Happy Days*. The success of Mull's paintings resides not simply with their capacity to invoke the period, but their ability to elicit our abiding nostalgia for its American dream, which has somehow survived and continues to shape the cultural landscape—if only at the level of personal myth so affectingly portrayed in Mull's *Fatherly Advice* (2014).

Like most postmodern art, the paintings in *Un(Real)* are far less about "real world" situations of daily life and far more about each artist's dialogue with the art of the past—a reflexive, art historical dialectic that became transparent after Manet. The attendant risk by now is that the art resulting from it can come across as contrived and self-conscious, falling short of the artist's full appropriation of its sources. *Un(Real)* suggests that it is a risk worth taking.

—RICHARD TOBIN

Martin Mull, *The Inheritance*, oil on linen, 36" x 60", 2014



point from which to view a host of later, figurative styles that would emerge in the Cubist wake and would survive the Minimalist tsunami. These styles range from realist to highly abstracted yet discernibly figurative.

The five painters featured in *Un(Real)*, curated by Mary Dinaburg and Howard Rutkowski, draw upon such diverse figurative currents. What they share here—apart from the very strong painting that pervades the show—is a consciousness of the art historical tradition of painting within which each artist creates his or her work.

The tipping on its side of the crouching nude in

without loss of authenticity. Her oil-on-canvas *Through the Half Drowned Stars* recalls (in reverse image) François Boucher's 1742 painting *Diana After the Bath*; in both paintings, a seated nude with one leg crossed assumes a motif whose pedigree runs back through Raphael to Michelangelo's torqued male *ignudi* on the Sistine Ceiling, and to its source in Greek sculpture. And the three diaphanously clad females in Fraleigh's *The Breezes at Dawn have Secrets* reprise Raphael's three graces from his *Psyche* fresco cycle in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. The transparency of sources allows Fraleigh to inform her