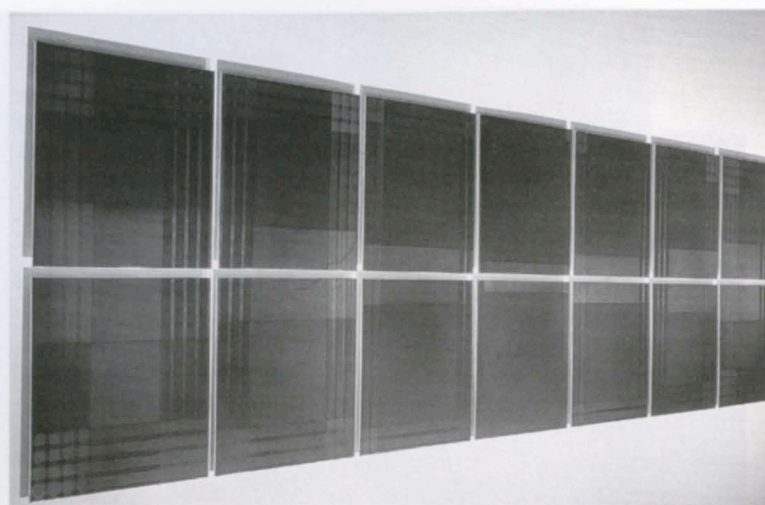




Martin Mull, *Ariadne's Thread*, 2000, oil on linen, 72 x 60".



James Stroud, *Janus I*, 2001, oil on aluminum, 41 x 146". Installation view.

Hartman, Mary Hartman and Fernwood 2Night to his mid-'80s cable special *The History of White People in America* (divided into episodes called "White Religion," "White Politics," "White Crime," and "White Stress"), Mull the actor has focused on white American cultural myths and stereotypes. And Mull the painter brings to bear the same earnest irreverence, seriousness of intent, and dark humor.

Mull usually works on a large scale, in oil on canvas. Seven of his most recent paintings (all works 2000) were on view here, along with a selection of smaller watercolors, his preferred medium when he is on location. At the core of his works are sunny images of white folk that look as if they've been lifted from postwar family magazines like *Look* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, publications that staged what came to define the ideal American family: moms proffering cakes, dads in business suits, smiling boys and girls, and animals that accessorize the "white" existence—labradors, robins, Canadian geese, and cows from the dairyland of Mull's native Ohio.

Mull's recontextualization of these stock images is not entirely original: Postwar America has been subjected to a fairly extensive excavation. The funny yet terrifying irony of conformist textbook and magazine images and instructional films like *Duck and Cover* has generated a cottage industry for everyone from academics to indie-comic artists ever since the late '60s (and Nixon) blew the lid off the myth of '50s white America. Nickelodeon provides full evenings of morality plays like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*—

hours of entertainment for generations of younger Americans. But Mull's paintings breathe fresh life into the trope. Painted in nostalgic colors (yellowed whites, chalky blues and greens), his landscapes and genre scenes are full of distortions and fragments. *Ariadne's Thread* features a prepubescent girl in hula position (sans hoop) sandwiched between two landscapes: the one in which she stands and the inverted suburban house and lawn that serve as "sky." The smiling mother of *Fool's Paradise III* shares canvas space with four supersize animals—two birds, a fox, and a squirrel painted with choppy paint-by-numbers strokes in hues reminiscent of those on flannel sleeping-bag linings.

Mining the veins of banal white culture and turning its landscapes (literally) upside down, Mull transforms the milquetoast creatures of postwar America into exotics, relics of a culture that existed only in magazines, in movies, and on television. In some ways, however, his work is a truly accurate document of that era, since it lays bare the distortions implicit in normalizing one culture—the white American family—at the expense of all others.

—Martha Schwendener

BOSTON

JAMES STROUD

BARBARA KRAKOW
GALLERY

To make the paintings in his latest exhibition, "Linear Strategies," James Stroud secured square aluminum panels to a

metal rack like those used by commercial printers and applied blue, red, and yellow oil-based printing inks in grids and stripes with a roller. Despite the limitations of this procedure and the exacting rigor of his techniques, borrowed from printmaking (he is also a master printer), the geometric abstractions that result are surprisingly luminous and seductive.

Six of the seven grand installations on view were long rectangular arrangements of the painted aluminum squares (all works 2001). Mounted on hidden wood supports, the twenty-by-twenty-inch panels seemed to hover about an inch from the white wall. The hard edges of the aluminum and the precisely painted stripes, rectangles, and squares are systematically linear, but the layered surfaces appear to glow. The two largest works, *Janus I* and *Janus II* (named after the two-headed Roman god), each comprise two horizontal, symmetrical rows of seven panels. Centered on each panel is a large square of ultramarine, similar in tone and effect to Yves Klein's IKB monochromes. Surrounded by magenta, green, and orange stripes (the result of laying a blue glaze over highly pigmented bands of red and yellow), these blue squares dominated the installations and gave rise to architectonic patterns that unified and activated the arrangements: In *Janus I*, the blue squares steadily decrease in size as you move from the inner to the outer panels; in *Janus II*, the order is reversed so that the squares are largest on the outermost panels. (The artist referred to the side-by-side installation of the two pieces as "looking into the future and the past.") In other works,

such as *Potemkin* and *End Games*, the blue squares become red-and-blue grids; some, like *Orpheus*, are distinctly plaidlike and less dynamic.

The seventh work on view, *Untitled*, perhaps suggests a new direction. Five panels hung in an overlapping vertical arrangement: The bottom panel leaned two inches out from the wall; slipped behind it was the bottom edge of the next panel, which itself leaned out from the wall to allow the panel above to slip behind it; and so on. Stroud and an assistant used an orbital sander to create metallic swirls on the surfaces. He then sprayed the back of each plate with orange paint so that an incandescent glow was reflected onto the wall behind. The artist nicknamed the piece "Judd-lite," for its obvious references to the late Minimalist master's vertical arrangements of anodized aluminum and Plexiglas. While all Stroud's work exists somewhere between painting, print, and sculpture, *Untitled* seems to represent a move away from his highly technical printmaking strategies and toward the methods and means of painting and sculpture.

—Francine Koslow Miller

PHILADELPHIA / NEW YORK

LISA YUSKAVAGE

INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ART /
MARIANNE BOESKY
GALLERY

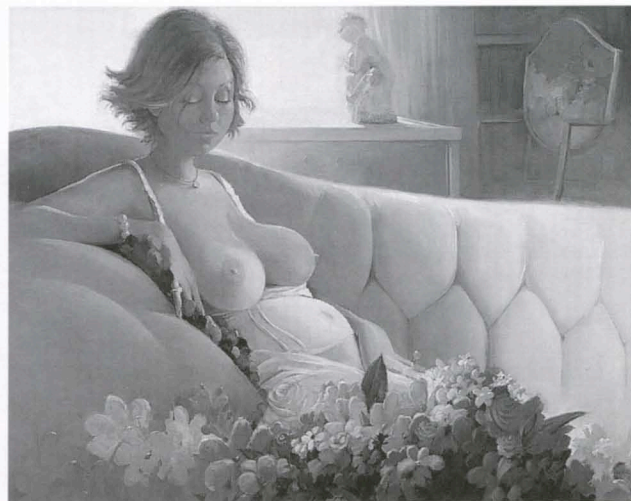
Masturbation is without a doubt a great subject for painting. The real question is why more artists haven't taken it on as wholeheartedly as Lisa Yuskavage has. I'm referring not just to her depictions of women actually playing with themselves, such as *Interior: Big Blonde with Beaded Jacket*, 1997, or *True Blonde*, 1999, two examples from the ICA's five-year survey; surprisingly enough, such directness is not the forte of this notoriously in-your-face artist. More to the point are the paintings of women indulging in a less specific but all the more voluptuous self-touching: for instance, the way the twilit figure fingers her hair in *Honeymoon*, 1998. Honeymoon? There's no sign of any groom. But Yuskavage's brides without bachelors hardly pine; instead, they are totally self-absorbed. When two or three of them share a canvas, they seem only robotically, incommunicatively coordinated. Even when their butts turn

into candied hams, or their torsos into marble columns, they seem too lost in reverie to notice the bizarre reality of their actual appearance.

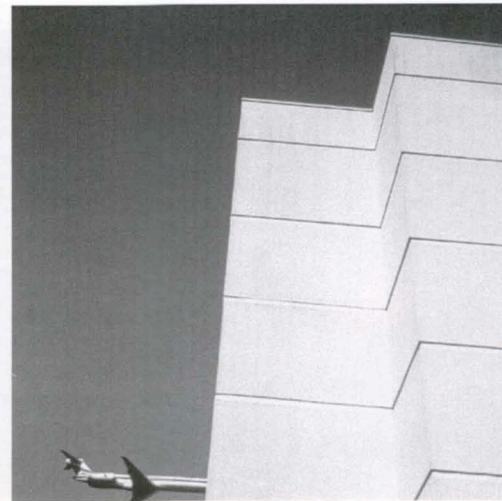
Yuskavage told ICA director Claudia Gould, "I have always thought of the image as a personification of the painting itself," and her imagery seems to embody the conceit, common enough today, that painting amounts to little more than onanistic indulgence. Yet her work's intimations of weird and uncomfortable psychological truths would indicate that the opposite must be true. The contradiction is not unexpected: Yuskavage's paintings, in allegorizing their own operations, have always been pictorial equivalents of the unreliable narrator. Her nearly monochromatic canvases of the early '90s, of adolescent girls who seemed not to know what to do with their breasts, self-evidently concerned their own awkwardness at being looked at. But what's a painting for, if not to be looked at? Lacan had a pretty good answer—he hypothesized that a painter presents a picture as a kind of decoy: "You want something to see? Well, take a look at *this*!" Yuskavage may never strike anyone as a shrinking violet, but the odd mixture of empathy and prurience aroused by her early work clearly pointed to the confusing dialectic of shame and fascination. Of course, those paintings that personified themselves as so abashed by the gaze were in fact profoundly confrontational.

Since then Yuskavage has seemingly hypnotized her subjects into unawareness of being looked at. That's part of her own trick of appearing to work in the name of primal impulse while in fact mounting a self-consciously virtuoso performance: redoing rococo painting for the age of Koons and McCarthy. Her most recent canvases, shown in New York, plumb a more subdued humor than much of what was seen in Philadelphia, perhaps because she is making ever more complicated magic out of the play of color, light, and volume. For instance, *Northview*, 2000, an image of a blonde gazing enraptured at her own breast, is a variation on *Day*, 1999–2000. The difference is telling: In *Day* there is a cartoonish exaggeration that makes the painting funny and strangely sweet, while in *Northview* an almost academic correctness conspires with a Playboy-style idealization to give the painting an obscure blandness that is far more disquieting.

—BS



Lisa Yuskavage, *Northview*, 2000, oil on linen, 50½ x 63½".



Gretchen Hupfel, *Spatial Disorientation (pilot error, induced)*, 2000, black-and-white photograph, 12 x 12".

ATLANTA

GRETCHEN HUPFEL

ATLANTA CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

In Gretchen Hupfel's recent black-and-white photographs, horrifying things are happening to airplanes: One plows into the side of a building; another crash-lands on a factory roof; still another is about to collide with an enormous needle-like structure. The photographs' laconic titles evoke an expert's shorthand evaluations of the black-box tapes from these accidents: *Spatial Disorientation (pilot error, induced)*; *Touchdown (premature)*; *Wind Shear (unforeseeable)* (all works 2000). But the events in the photographs turn out to be fictional. With broad (if somewhat dark) humor, Hupfel photographs perfectly functioning, normally flying airplanes from angles that make disaster seem imminent. The joke is so obvious it's almost undetectable: We know so well that photographs can lie that we immediately assume we're not seeing what we're seeing, that such an image is simply an optical illusion. Which it is. But then we notice the titles, which suggest that perhaps it isn't; after all, such accidents do happen. Hupfel plays on our anxieties about technology—our will not to believe that people and machines can malfunction; our knowledge that they always can—and makes them the objects of cathartic humor.

In *Spatial Disorientation*, the plane and the modernist monolith that it seems to be crashing into are the only objects in the frame. Shot from a low angle against the

sky, they constitute an imposing, high-contrast tonal abstraction. Except for the implied disaster (and the sleek plane itself), the photograph looks as though it could have been published soon after World War II to celebrate modern industrial and architectural design—a relic from a time when it was possible simply to enjoy the machinery and marvel of flight alongside the other wonders of modern life. In *Lift (insufficient)*, which shows an airplane apparently having trouble clearing a light tower, the shape of the plane mirrors the triangle of the tower. The jokey illusion in both photographs serves to strengthen the images as modernist abstractions. Here the modernist celebration of technology joins hands with contemporary techno-anxiety.

Two photographs single out an air traffic control tower and a set of runway lights respectively, implying, in the spirit of the Precisionists, that these built structures are worthy of close scrutiny in their own right. In each image, the object occupies the lower portion of the frame, dwarfed by a vast expanse of gray sky. The control center of *Tower* seems vaguely anthropomorphic or robotlike; in *Runway*, two rows of light poles converge on a vanishing point in the distance. These images partake of a technological sublime: Alone against the unforgiving sky, the tower and lights represent the putative heroism and attendant risk of the attempt to conquer the natural world.

Most of the prints in this show are tiny—the smallest is two and a quarter inches square—but surrounded by wide mats. The effect is to make the images

seem like precious, carefully preserved documents, perhaps excerpts from an album—products of a vanished sensibility to be examined closely and appreciated. Evoking the not-so-distant past when we still saw aviation as a technological miracle and technology as something to be celebrated in art, they simultaneously remind us, often with an endearingly macabre sense of humor, that we no longer think that way.

—Philip Auslander

CHICAGO

ROBERT BLANCHON

BETTY RYMER GALLERY, SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Robert Blanchon, who died in 1999 at thirty-three from AIDS-related illnesses, was the ultimate accelerated man. Whether sending out press releases and personalized invitations for what turned out to be a fictitious panel discussion on Conceptual art in 1989 (he got me on that one, and the embarrassment/exhilaration of being so artfully and aptly tricked was unforgettable), or having fourteen street and shopping-mall caricaturists do on-the-spot portraits of him and showing the results at the Drawing Center in New York in 1991, Blanchon was driven by a restless, high-keyed humor and a kind of incredulity over how many ways there are to foster artistic engagement and how few of them are pursued in the contemporary art world. (He would have approved of a sentence as long and hybridized as that