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Ebony, David. Art in America (September 2004)

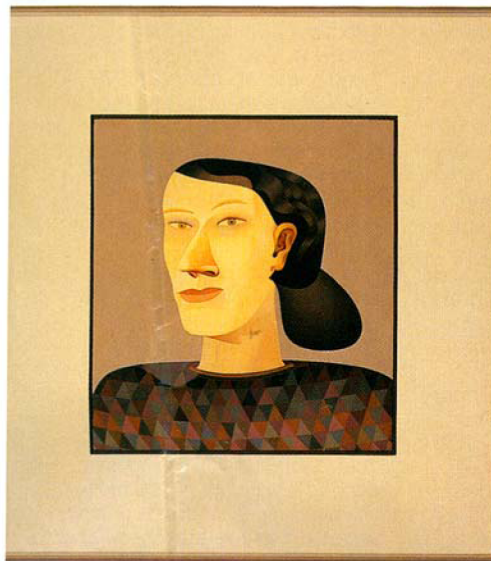
**Jim Nutt
at Nolan/Eckman**

For the past decade or so, Jim Nutt has concentrated on painting schematic heads of imaginary women, which he refers to as "portraits." While perusing this wonderful exhibition of three recent, medium-size acrylic paintings and a dozen related pencil drawings, I kept thinking of Sargent's famous quote, "A portrait is a likeness in which there is something wrong about the mouth." In the works on view, Nutt seems to have reached a new level of refinement that at times recalls Ingres's technique. But the 66-year-old Chicago Imagist pioneer, known for his inventive approach to the figure, has lost none of his penchant for outrageous distortion, nor his sense of humor. In an interview for the show's catalogue, the artist says that the images do not refer to specific women. Instead of suggesting an individual, he is more concerned with creating a personality or a character.

Centered on the canvas, each image bears a number of formal attributes associated with conventional portraiture. Seemingly lit from the side, the head is set against a grayish-tan monochrome ground. Each figure is isolated within the wide borders of a painted frame, which the artist designs, but does not execute. In *Sip* (2003), the head is turned slightly to the left and the lips are tightly closed; it's as if the model were holding a rather tense pose. The figure in each of the paintings and most of the drawings wears a blouse with a hard-edge geometric design. *Sip*'s is a lively Op-art pattern of tiny cubes with orange, green, purple and black stripes. In an untitled work, the network of triangular shapes of the blouse, in modulated tones of mauve, beige

and gray, is similarly mesmerizing. Meticulously painted, sometimes using a brush with only a single hair, these areas of the canvases could stand alone as exciting abstract compositions.

The most fantastic elements of the paintings, and also of the delicately wrought drawings, are the strange facial features and hair. Each nose, lip and chin has a sculptural solidity. The mismatched almond eyes, one blue and one brown in each painting, seem to be inlaid like the eyes of a Byzantine mosaic icon. In *Drawing for Suit* (2001), an outsize ear resembles an elaborate flower; its crisp, serpentine lines are pressed between two areas of gracefully modulated crosshatch, indicating the sitter's helmetlike coiffure. The wildest distortions are reserved for the noses, which at times are



Jim Nutt: Untitled, 2002-03, acrylic on linen, 25 by 24 inches; at Nolan/Eckman.

rendered as elaborate excrescences. The grotesque nose in the painting *Coin* (2002), light brown on the side and dark brown on the pointy tip, is ultimately more riveting than repelling. Although they are far from naturalistic, Nutt's images, like the best portraiture, convey a surprising array of moods, feelings and psychological insight.

—David Ebony