

# Art in America

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## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### DENNIS KARDON MITCHELL ALGUS

Veteran artist Dennis Kardon (his first solo exhibition was in 1981) is more intellectual, in his willingness to play with painting's syntax, than such peers as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. And if their work has tended to broad irony, his veers toward the humorously strange.

Kardon's past output includes a series of hand-painted figurative reliefs, titled "Jewish Noses," that were modeled from life, and a series of closely observed oil-on-canvas renditions of the bare backs of various friends and acquaintances. Both series reveal a preoccupation with giving the viewer an experience of discomfiting intimacy. Kardon expanded on this psychological theme after 2000, with figures and objects pushed claustrophobically close to the picture plane. His repertoire grew to include confessional elements, such as a work from 2000 that depicts a rakish if weathered version of the artist in bed with two naked women, one smoking a joint. The paintings soon became more fantastical. One, dated 2005, features a half-naked adolescent girl scrambling over mushrooms; another, of 2002, depicts a woman with a ventriloquist's dummy in her lap staring at a turkey dinner.

His most recent show (all paintings 2006 or 2007) revealed the development of a genre that might be called onanistic allegory. *Between the*



DENNIS KARDON: *OUT OF CONTROL*, 2007, OIL ON LINEN, 46 BY 68 INCHES; AT MITCHELL ALGUS.

*Past and Nothingness* shows two hands emerging from what appear to be holes in an ice sheet, one with a burning candle balanced on its palm. *When I Am Gone* (both paintings are 30 by 36 inches) features a female cropped to a torso, wearing an open blue bathrobe trimmed with white fur. Her left hand steadies a large yellow jar while the other pulls from it an elongated sweet potato.

A deceptively skillful painter, Kardon renders his imagery fussily, in order, I suspect, to counter a natural facility. But he lovingly builds up smooth paint on the jar and a delicate patchwork of light orange and peach tones in the flesh areas. He is willing to contrast open brushworked areas to flat, closed fields of color, or to stippled, deliberately amateurish descriptive passages. Where some painters affect to be naive, Kardon is faux-gauche. His artistic persona, as it reveals itself in the work, allows viewers to feel smarter than the paintings, which seem so clumsily personal and earnestly painted. But in *Out of Control* (46 by 68 inches), Kardon seems to reveal that this is all sly dissembling. Here his apparent stand-in is an orange pussycat, wearing a cross between a shower cap and a chef's toque, and cooking up something in a black pan on a hot plate—it is putty green and completely opaque.

—Joe Fyfe