Speech of Figures
By Fred Camper

Andrzej Domanski: Portraits

at Eastwick Art Gallery, through August 20

Jill Schultz

at Gwenda Jay Gallery, through August 30

Tim Lowly: Moving Pictures

at Lyons Wier Gallery, through August 30

By Fred Camper

The invention of photography, many have argued, freed painters from copying reality. The Romantic idea that a painter should instead express moods or emotions has also been thoroughly mined; today the strongest figurative painters inject a conceptual dimension into their work, often by explicitly referring to other media. Three Chicago painters currently exhibiting at Near North galleries borrow from sculpture, performance, and photography--not to make art-world references but to create a qualified vision of the human form. If their figures lack the proud autonomy of the emperors and saints of earlier painting, this is partly because the artists are also questioning the idea that humans are superior to nature.

Andrzej Domanski lived most of his life in Warsaw, where he was born in 1937 to an educated and artistic family. Inspired by an older brother who was an architect, Domanski applied to architecture school but was turned down and instead studied sculpture. He was less interested in traditional sculpture than in working with space and light, but working with space and light didn't pay the bills, so he did interior design before moving to Chicago in 1990 to pursue his painting full-time. The precision of Renaissance painting was a major influence; Domanski lists painters from van der Weyden and DŸrer to Botticelli and Raphael as inspirations.

Domanski's oil portraits seem to belong to neither the present nor the past. Four of the eight works displayed at Eastwick include backgrounds of castles, ancient cities, or pristine greenery, yet his figures' resolute poses and traditional dress exude a startling calm that lifts them out of time. Domanski showed me an article in which Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski speaks of a desire for "serene art" that would not "attack and scream," that lacks the aggressiveness of a modern street. But perhaps the most striking thing about Domanski's pictures is the odd power of his bony, elongated faces.

Their intensity goes beyond the expression of personality; their strangeness becomes a reflection on both portrait painting and the very meaning of the human presence.

The same four works dramatically contrast their faces with their backgrounds. Domanski links figure and setting, to be sure: the long thin nose of the Lady in Black parallels the ridges of the landscape behind her; her elaborate green hat resembles the background hills, and the sky echoes her gray hands and milk white face. While the greenery has a painterly depth and softness, the face is intensely solid, almost sculptural. Domanski told me that he "feels landscape in paint, and faces as sculptural forms." But his paintings also separate the human presence from the land.

Renaissance painters frequently posed a large figure in front of a window or a doorway that circumscribed a landscape or cityscape; Domanski's Lady in White Frock is clearly in that tradition, with a woman's profile beside an opening that reveals a virgin landscape. But in a Renaissance picture the view is subservient to--almost the possession of--the figure. Here the woman's head almost becomes architectural itself--her perfectly arranged hair suggests a cathedral dome. The head's stony perfection contrasts with the more sensual and supple landscape.

On one level the intense detail of Domanski's portraits celebrates his subjects. Subtle variations in their eyes can express unhappiness as well as calm, and their positions--the woman in Lady in Black displays a hand with a wedding ring--also convey attitude. But in their separation from the land, their monumental solidity, and their commanding assertiveness, they also critique the human presence. One feels their isolation, their inbred airlessness, can't possibly be sustained. The cardinal in Man in Red Skullcap has a magnificent visage, its elongated sides leading the eye to a pointed white beard that echoes his collar; the thin ridge of his nose, also pointing to his beard, dominates the compositional rectangle. By exaggerating strength and solidity to such a degree that he creates an unnatural ideal, Domanski also separates his visions from our own age. The power of his chiseled figures lies in their very impossibility: they suggest a perfection untouched by the flaws we look for in human faces.

In her 13 new oil-on-panel paintings at Gwenda Jay Gallery, Jill Schultz carefully integrates female nudes with natural settings. Born in 1963 in Miami, she grew up in suburban Atlanta, where she spent a good deal of time playing alone in the woods. Schultz poses her nudes outdoors, repeating similar figures with an obsessiveness that makes the series seem almost like a performance. One imagines the artist dragging a red sofa to different landscapes and posing nudes on it. Viewing a sleeping nude on a couch in a field, we feel almost as if we've come across the scene by mistake.

When I noticed that Schultz studied art at the University of Georgia, I immediately thought of James Herbert, a painting professor there who is also a filmmaker. He films

young people, mostly nude, in unusual settings, rephotographing his footage to slow down or zoom in on particular details. His films border on the voyeuristic, but their splendid eroticism has a polymorphous integrity: his camera is as likely to find sensual pleasure in the light bouncing off a floorboard as in a breast or a penis. As it turns out, he had twice asked Schultz to model for a film; as a student she turned him down, then two years ago, after meeting up in Italy, she agreed.

Her current series draws on the discomfort and danger she felt while posing nude in a field and in a town during siesta, yet its dominant tone is celebratory. Painting models in her studio, she invents landscapes from her memories of Georgia and Italy, aided occasionally by photographs. Often building up her colors with thin glazes, Schultz creates deep, vibrant surfaces that unify nature and human flesh. In Red Clay the bushes on either side of a sleeping figure frame the scene, leading the eye along her torso, toward the vibrant green and red field behind. The model might seem perfectly integrated with nature were it not for her prominent nipple rings. The model in Morning Haze displays on her back an elaborate tattoo whose precision contrasts with the sensual colors of the field behind her; her curved body points toward its most distant point.

The nipple rings and tattoos of Schultz's figures signify human assert-iveness; like Domanski's sculptural faces, they somehow prevent the figures from being completely absorbed, alienate them from nature, and preserve individual identity. A similar dualism can be found in all the nudes of the series. Sensual without being strongly erotic, they assert their presence while also appearing uncomfortably exposed.

Like a person obsessively revisiting a trauma, these benign pastorals, constantly returning to similar figures, represent a desire to master a "primal" nude scene that is never quite named.

If Domanski's works suggest sculpture and Schultz's performance, Tim Lowly's seven paintings at Lyons Wier (five of which include figures) clearly refer to photography--in fact they are copied from Lowly's own snapshots. By referring to other media, the three artists inject into their work a kind of self-consciousness: when media collide, the fault lines reveal their natures and differences. Lowly copies photographs not to make his paintings more realistic but to mimic the way photography captures light and motion and thus to step outside of painterly conventions.

Photography renders light very differently from the way the eye sees it or the way painters typically present it. A store sign in Walking Street is almost solid white: though the human eye could have read its lettering, the photograph's narrower latitude caused it to white out. Lowly's careful and painterly rendering of such details, or of the blur that moving objects produce in a photograph, is powerfully affecting. His careful application

of egg tempera (with oil added to make it more durable) and the gentleness and precision of his surfaces seem both personal and impersonal. Lowly's careful duplication of photography personalizes its language; his valorizing of photographic effects suggests that they are as valid a form of visual representation as any other. All are arbitrary, each a different window on a larger, illimitable reality.

Lowly was born in 1958 in Hendersonville, North Carolina; his parents moved the family to South Korea, where they worked as missionaries and where Lowly grew up. A Christian, he acknowledges that "someone who is not a believer could have done exactly these same paintings," but his faith has inspired his work. Like Domanski, he cites old master painters, especially van der Weyden and Bellini, as early influences; like Schultz, he integrates figures with their surroundings. "In a way the work is a theological expression," he acknowledges, "though not one that many Christians would feel comfortable with."

One reason Christians might not feel comfortable with Lowly's paintings is that, unlike most religious art, they lack an obvious central focus. Walking Street looks down a Korean street, its three-dimensionality seeming more a photographic trick than an allusion to Renaissance perspective. Pedestrians on either side seem haphazardly arranged; a group of children on the left fails to balance the more linear ordering of figures on the right. Yet, as in Lowly's other paintings, tiny details seem oddly charged: light glances off the rim of a bicycle wheel with an almost halolike luminosity. The careful rendering of these details gives the surface a quiet delicacy, a soft purity, that seems almost spiritual.

"People assume that for a religious image you have to have a picture of Jesus or of some iconographically important event," Lowly remarks. "I'm not sure that's true. God is just as present in the transient, in the mistakes." Yet even his apparently random arrangement of details can become pregnant with possible meanings. In the circular Stone Lake a woman walks away from us while a man walks to the left. The blur of his figure at once adumbrates and accentuates his presence, making time visible and charging his figure with apparent purposefulness. The blurred young boy in Adam charges off to the left, some parts of his body more blurred than others according to their varying movement, while behind him a staircase leads upward at a right angle to his direction. In a more traditional religious allegory, the staircase might signify the true path, contrasted with the boy's errant direction. Yet the boy's movement seems as charged with odd beauty--the beauty of a form becoming transparent, almost angelic--as the more static landscape behind. Lowly sees his figures as perhaps no more precious than a tree or the pebbles on a beach. I found it quite moving to see a self-acknowledged religious painter offering us the most qualified and integrated view of the human presence among these shows.