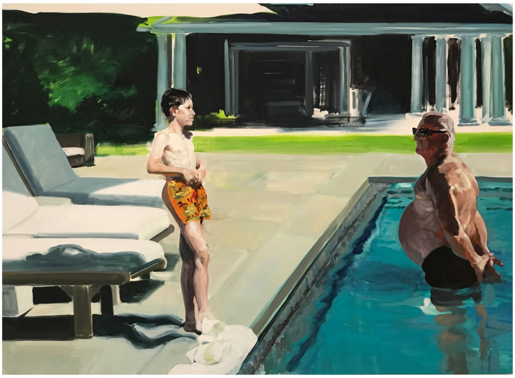
Art Reviews

Eric Fischl Paints the Precariousness of Growing Old

In his new show at Skarstedt, the artist creates confrontations between young, fresh bodies and tired, aging flesh.

Dennis Kardon June 14, 2017

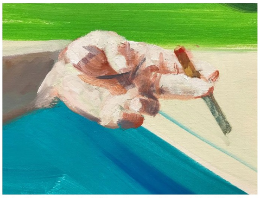
Share



Eric Fischl, "Face Off" (2017), oil on linen, 78 x 107 in (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

Recovering his groove with *Late America*, his current show at Skarstedt gallery, Eric Fischl manages to transmit information through his brush so economically that the result is a finely calibrated ambiguity. Nuances in the expressions or body language of his subjects inspire subconscious assumptions, creating uncomfortable narratives in the imaginations of his viewers.

In "Face Off," painted this year, an unbridgeable chasm of concrete and cerulean separates a young boy with a tentative posture and uncertain expression (the shadows of his legs look like arms trying to pull him under a poolside chaise) from a patriarchal figure with hoary head, reflective shades, thrusting chin, and great protrusion of belly. The resulting power dynamic can send one careening through memories of childhood confrontations or musing on our country's ideological schism. Apparently inspired by recent political events (three paintings were completed after the November election), the "Late" of the exhibition's title contains an implicit critique of the current decadent phase of the American Empire. It can also refer to the artist's contemplation, at 68, of his own looming mortality. All five large paintings on view, set around a pool in a manicured estate on a bright summer day, create confrontations between young, fresh bodies and tired, aging flesh.



Eric Fischl, detail of "Feeding the Turtle" (2016), oil on linen, 66 x 78 in

There is an urgency to these paintings, giving the impression that they were done at great speed. They're full of confident individual brushstrokes uniting to form water, foliage, and bodies. Fischl is frugal in his depictions, which are just complex enough to establish the feeling he wants to convey without showing off. There's no deliberative rendering, no hesitancy in the marks, and no built-up palimpsests of

POPULAR

The Mythmaking Apparatus of the US National Parks

Activists Take to Guggenheim Museum to Denounce Israeli Airstrikes

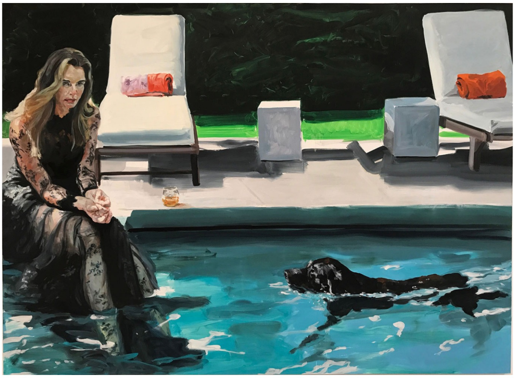
Pistachio Billionaires Accused of Artwashing California's Water Crisis

Christie's Pulls Paintings by Lebanese Artist After "Complaints"

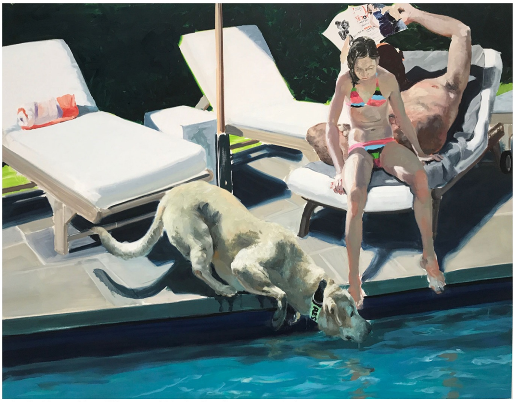
Stunning Codex Documenting Aztec Culture Now Fully Digitized

reconsidered past decisions. At most there are clusters of brushstrokes that concentrate the pattern on a swimsuit or a hand holding a cigarette. The canvas's white ground constantly leaks through. And despite the electric-green lawn, blazing off-whites of furniture and concrete, and flashing turquoise of pool water that illuminate each painting with a searing light, there is also a contrasting darkness that lurks in the background or reaches out from the shadows.

Sometimes Fischl employs black in the foreground. In "Daddy's Gone Girl" (2016), a young woman in elegant mourning attire sits at pool's edge with a round tumbler of scotch at her side. Her black-lace-clad legs are half-submerged, while from the right, an ebony lab dogpaddles to her emotional rescue. With an impressive tactile suggestion, Fischl conjures stiff, soaked tulle on flesh, conveying a loss so intense that the subject seems oblivious to the present moment, unmindful of a wet, scratchy sensation or that an expensive dress is getting trashed.



Eric Fischl, "Daddy's Gone, Girl" (2016), oil on linen, 78 x 107 in



Eric Fischl, "Daddy's Girl Age 11" (2017), oil on linen, 84 x 108 in

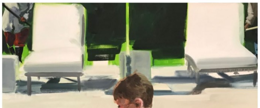
"Daddy's Gone, Girl" is one of two paintings in the show referring to an early, well-known Fischl work from 1984, "Daddy's Girl," which depicts a lounging, naked man in a deck chair at a seaside villa; he holds a wriggling infant whose little leg dangles inches from his exposed penis. In the other painting, "Daddy's Girl, Age 11" (2017), which is perhaps a memory of the grieving daughter from "Daddy's Gone, Girl," the father of the title now reclines poolside, cross-legged and naked in a lounge chair, with his body obscured by his bikinied tween daughter sitting distractedly on the chair's edge. The shadow of the *Elle* magazine he's reading obliterates his facial features — perhaps a foreshadowing of his demise — while a yellow hound with a "rescue" collar slurps chlorinated water at the girl's feet.

As questions of diversity and privilege have become more mainstream cultural issues, the adults in Fischl's paintings have often started to look like horrors, oblivious to the casual damage they inflict with every decision. Older men come in for particularly harsh treatment, as Fischl reserves his empathy for children and animals, who are innocent and unaware of the adult choices that have placed them in these environments.

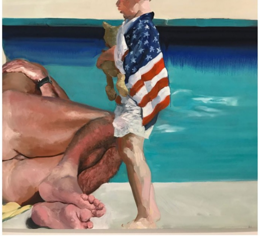
One of Fischl's dilemmas has always been creating people who seem believable, while still being a metaphorical representation of humanity that can absorb viewers' fantasies and fears. When they're too dependent on photography, his characters can't transcend the particular; when they become too generalized, or his ideas too transparent, viewers lose the connection with his paintings.

Installation view, *Eric Fischl: Late America* at Skarstedt, 2017 (image courtesy Skarstedt)

Fischl started his career by trying to completely invent the people in his paintings. The results, though clumsy, had an intensity that derived from the feelings he was trying to express through the force of his imagination. As he entered the circle of important and successful '80s artists, the milieux of his paintings began to move from middle-class suburbia to environments probably more familiar to his newer and wealthier collectors. Sometimes, he successfully navigated the requirements of his imagination by working from photographs of actors hired to portray the mise-en-scènes of his paintings. But he has nevertheless gone down a number of wrong paths with celebrity portraiture, tone-deaf political commentary, and art world critiques, prompting Sanford Schwartz, in a review of Fischl's 2013 memoir, *Bad Boy*, to write in the *New York Review of Books*, "Since some point in the 1980s, his art has felt hollow."



But something different is happening here. It's as though, with the finality of his life coming into view, Fischl has realized how much



Eric Fischl, detail of "Late America" (2016), oil on linen, 80 x 98 in

is at stake and suddenly started paying attention to his feelings. I've heard people say that he's returned to his roots with these works. I disagree: never before has Fischl so seamlessly transmuted emotion into paint. While not sharing the stylistic look of his early work, though, these paintings do seem to reach back to his younger motivations: they are less judgmental, less aggrandizing, and more exploratory of the authenticity of embarrassment and the painful uncertainty of human life.

Eric Fischl: Late America *continues at Skarstedt (550 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 24.*

Related

Eric Fischl's Privileged Bubble
November 14, 2020

The Art That Inspired Joan Didion Goes to Auction
August 15, 2022

Matt Bollinger, Painter of the Forgotten
April 26, 2023

Tagged: Eric Fischl Reviews Skarstedt

Dennis Kardon

Dennis Kardon is a painter and writer living and working in New York. A show of his recent paintings, Reflections on the Surface, can be seen at Valentine Gallery. Work and writing can be seen at denniskardon.com. More by Dennis Kardon

Most Popular

1. The Mythmaking Apparatus of the US National Parks
2. Activists Take to Guggenheim Museum to Denounce Israeli Airstrikes
3. Pistachio Billionaires Accused of Artwashing California's Water Crisis
4. Christie's Pulls Paintings by Lebanese Artist After "Complaints"
5. Stunning Codex Documenting Aztec Culture Now Fully Digitized

The Latest

As a History Professor, This Is How I Use AI in Class

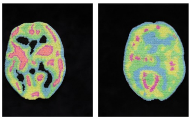
Instead of assigning my routine *Gladiator* review, I asked students to query ChatGPT about the film's historical inaccuracies.

Sarah E. Bond

The Democratic Power of the Risograph

The risograph's handmade aesthetic has become associated with posters, broadsheets, zines, and pamphlets, and has been embraced by small publishers.

Nancy Zastudil



Sponsored

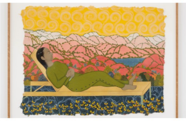
Eiteljorg 2023 Contemporary Art Fellowship Exhibition Opens in Indianapolis

Works by Ruth Cuthand, Natalie Ball, Sean Chandler, Mercedes Dorame, and Raven Halfmoon are now on view in *Unsettle/Converge* at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.

The Fairytale Charm of Soviet Country *Dachas*

Fyodor Savintsev's photographs of the small wooden cottages capture the aesthetics and ethos of "a slower, more traditional pace of life."

Sarah Rose Sharp



Rupy C. Tut's Landscapes of Belonging

Her paintings, springing from traditional Indian miniature painting made large, radiate both rootedness and displacement.

Bridget Quinn

INDIGENOUS
RESISTANCE
SINCE
1492

Sponsored

Watch Indigenous Cinema With the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

For Native American Heritage Month, the Native Cinema Showcase includes over 35 free online screenings representing 22 Indigenous Nations in six different countries.

IDFAcademy 2023

Filmmakers, Arts Organizations, and Cultural Workers Boycott the IDFA

Cultural groups and artists are withdrawing from the film festival over allegations of institutional censorship of the Palestinian liberation movement.

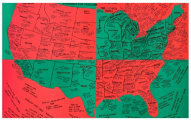
Maya Pontone

NO ART
ON A DEAD PLANET
CHRISTIE'S

Climate Activists Crash Christie's Auction in New York

"No art on a dead planet," they chanted, demanding an end to fossil fuels.

Rhea Nayyar



Sponsored

Worcester Art Museum Presents *Faith Ringgold: Freedom to Say What I Please*

Ringgold's first solo exhibition in New England in nearly 15 years is centered around her story quilt "Picasso's Studio", a cornerstone of the museum's collection.

The Mythmaking Apparatus of the US National Parks

In quiet yet scrupulous detail, *Designing Experience* asks how the US National Park Service shapes the narratives it tells about this country and the lands it claims.

Alexis Clements

A Chelsea Gallery's Secret Beekeeping Operation

Works by artists such as Diana Al-Hadid share Kasmin Gallery's rooftop sculpture garden with five hives that yield about 100 jars of honey a year.

Elaine Velie

HYPERALLERGIC

Hyperallergic is a forum for serious, playful, and radical thinking about art in the world today. Founded in 2009, Hyperallergic is headquartered in Brooklyn, New York.

© 2023 Hyperallergic. Proudly powered by Newspack by Automattic

Privacy Policy