



ERIC FISCHL

1970-2000

Arthur C. Danto

Robert Enright

Steve Martin

The Monacelli Press

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65" x 58"

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Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man, 1984 (detail)

oil on canvas
85" x 70"

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Bad Boy, 1981 (detail)

oil on canvas
66" x 96"

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Birth of Love, 2nd Version, 1987 (detail)

oil on linen, four panels
119" x 142 ½"

Page 8:

Holy Man, 1990 (detail)

oil on linen
98" x 74"

Page 9:

**Imitating the Dog (Mother and Daughter II),
1984 (detail)**

oil on canvas
96" x 84"

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**I paint to tell myself
about myself.**

— Eric Fischl

FORMATION, SUCCESS, AND MASTERY

Eric Fischl Decade by Decade

Arthur C. Danto

I. The 1970s

Eric Fischl's one-person exhibition at the Edward Thorp Gallery in 1980 aroused considerable critical interest in the artist, not simply because of the arresting images that became the focus of most of the writing devoted to him, but because of the fact that what he showed were paintings. Fischl was part of an international cohort of artists—American, German, Italian—who burst into art-world consciousness in the early 1980s, after a period in which painting was largely absent from the scene. From the outside, it seemed as though painting had made a spectacular comeback after a blank and barren interval—and since painting had been widely accepted as the vehicle of art history, it was as if art itself had once again found the path from which it had strayed. From the perspective of the early 1980s, the preceding decade was accordingly perceived as having been a caesura in the history of art. There had been, it must be said, relatively little new painting in the 1970s. But at least part of this was because the very idea of painting had come under severe theoretical and even political pressure from what was accepted as the most advanced

thinking about art at that time. The less radical attitude was that making art was no longer narrowly identified with making paintings. The more radical attitude was that painting was dead or ought to be dead. And then, in the early 1980s, there was so remarkable a renaissance of painting, so tremendous an explosion of painterly energy, that it seemed as if the medium had burst the bonds of a tethered giant and reaffirmed its inherent artistic dominance. It was an intoxicating moment, evidenced by the crowds who thronged the important openings, filling the streets of Soho with excitement. A whole new scene had emerged.

The 1970s, then, was the crucible from which Fischl emerged as a painter, and it is important that he be understood against the background of that extraordinary decade, the art history of which is still little understood. In part this was because the art school emerged as the defining institution of the art world. The geography of the American art world before and after this time consisted of a center—New York—surrounded by provinces. But in the 1970s, it was a dispersed constellation of art schools across the entire country. These

were, however, very different from the traditional *académie des beaux-arts*. They were not training facilities but a kind of institute of advanced philosophical thinking about art, where teachers and students were treated as collaborators and equals. Or perhaps the students were advantaged through the fact that, unlike the teachers, they had no past from which to cast themselves free. They were in any case considered artists already, in that they participated in the discourse that was a chief artistic contribution of the era; virtually every piece of art was an application of that discourse, through which it had to be understood. The schools were running seminars in the meaning of art. There was, so to speak, no artistic *a priori*: art could be anything. But because a radical political consciousness was carried over from the 1960s, the *mentalité* of the art-school artist—student or teacher—was far less tolerant than the openness of artistic practice would lead one to believe. So it was a period of intense experimentation, in which artists could try anything, so long as it was not politically disapproved.

Fischl recalls an extraordinary drawing class at the California Institute of the Arts. Drawing had always been the foundational discipline in traditional art training. Whether or not someone could draw had been the test of artistic authenticity when possession of that skill meant, to the skeptical or the dubious, that he or she was not incompetent, whatever the evidence of the art itself. When Giotto drew, freehand, a perfect circle, it was implied that he could draw anything. But “drawing was frowned upon at Cal Arts,” Fischl said. So what was put in its place?

It was about 1970, the peak of crazed liberal ideas about education and self development. Do your own thing. No rules. No history. We had this drawing class that Allan Hacklin had put together. I arrived late. It started around nine or ten in the morning, but I couldn’t get there until eleven. I walked into the studio and everybody was naked. Right! *Everybody* was naked. Half the people were covered with paint. They rolled around on the ground, on pieces of paper that they had torn off a roll. The two mod-

els were sitting in the corner absolutely still, bored to tears. Everybody else was throwing stuff around and had climbed up onto the roof and jumped into buckets of paint. It was an absolute zoo.¹

It is always problematic to envisage the future, but the students we see behind easels in engravings of Jacques-Louis David’s classes, or those who were endeavoring to master anatomy with Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, would have been blankly uncomprehending were they given a glimpse of the scene Fischl describes and told that these students were learning what drawing really was.

Well, there was, after all, paper, on which marks were made. There were, after all, models. But it would have struck participants in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century art instruction that these naked, paint-smeared young people had reverted to some primitive human condition, as if civilization had somehow been erased. But that was the point of the exercise. The students were engaged in regressive conduct in an effort to draw in the most primordial manner—far more primordial than what the legendary Corinthian girl achieved when she allegedly invented drawing by tracing the shadow of her lover’s profile on the wall. Drawing may be basic—but how basic can we get? Hacklin’s class was intended to reconnect the students with something ordinarily repressed—using the body as a surface to be transformed by marks, like war paint, into something magical, and then transferred to another surface, so the body becomes a drawing instrument. But I cite this extraordinary memory only to illustrate the kind of thing that belongs to the discourse of art circa 1970. It is a discourse that draws on the ideas of its time—Norman O. Brown’s polymorphic sexuality, the Living Theatre’s *Paradise Now*, primal scream therapy, the theories of R. D. Laing, Woodstock as utopia. There is a distant connection between these ideas and those of the Cultural Revolution in China—a program of radical erasures, of leveling out differences due to culture. That is precisely what must be dismantled if we are to begin anew in the making of an art we have not as yet begun to visualize. “Tear it all down and begin again” was something one

often heard in the 1960s and 1970s. It can't be worse than what we have. It was a scary and an exhilarating time.

What was true of "drawing" was no less true of painting. Easel painting is a form of art peculiar to the West, unparalleled in the art forms of any artistic tradition other than those that had become cultural colonies of the West. But the West itself was demonized in the wake of the Vietnam War, and painting—which had once been regarded as proof of the West's superiority—was collaterally demonized. Painting and sculpture were so identified with the political establishment that it seemed imperative to dissociate oneself from them as a way of expressing an opposition to a despised government. Beyond that, there was a vexed question in speculative feminism as to whether painting was not somehow so connected with a kind of masculinist psychology that its appropriateness to feminine artistic consciousness was uncertain. There was a massive critique of a number of what were felt to be disabling concepts—the genius, the Great Artist, the masterpiece, the museum of fine arts, the idea of artistic quality. Since art criticism was deeply inflected with cultural criticism, painting faced objections to its existence unparalleled since the iconoclastic controversies of earlier ages. There had always been a morality of painting, first in terms of a morality of subject matter, later in terms of a morality of aesthetic purity, which reigned in the modernist period for which Clement Greenberg was a main spokesman. But never had the morality of painting as painting been at issue as it came to be in the 1970s. It was widely presupposed that in any case painting was internally exhausted, having used up all its possibilities.

The atmosphere in the advanced art school of Fischl's student years was like that of a theological seminary in which students accept that God is dead but want still to lead a religious form of life. Seminaries in the 1970s actually saw themselves as producing prophets rather than pastors and conceived the ministry in terms of social activism. The young American painters who made such a splash in the early 1980s were so thoroughly the products of their art schools' formative atmosphere, so different from anything that had pre-

vailed in earlier times, that they were obliged to reinvent—and rejustify—the idea of painting if they were to persist in its practice.

For one thing, if they were to become painters, they would have to paint in an unprecedentedly pluralistic art world, where painting was far from *primus inter pares*. In his interview with Donald Kuspit in 1987, Fischl explained:

The artists of my generation feel that you can borrow freely from any time and place to construct your own image. So-called pluralism means that you can locate yourself in different periods of time. My work seems to come out of the nineteenth century, but it also uses twentieth-century primitivism. Other artists go back to the fifties or surrealism or the thirties. All these different styles and philosophies based on different stylistic advances are available for use. It's like the universe has curled back on itself and become full of possibilities that were half realized but still have a long way to go. In that sense I think I am a postmodernist.²

Consider the work of David Salle, like Fischl a graduate of Cal Arts, perhaps the farthest out of the art schools of the time. Salle's paintings internalized the disjunctiveness that was accepted as the reality of artistic production in the 1970s. He juxtaposed unrelated images in different styles within a single canvas, often attaching to it extraneous objects such as chairs or feminine garments. And he used a certain bland, notational drawing style that almost expressed contempt for the idea of draftsmanly virtuosity. It was easy to believe that Salle had found a way of representing a world of fractured meanings. Fischl has more than once said that he regards Salle as the contemporary painter he most admires. And he sees his work and Salle's as answering to parallel impulses, whatever the outward differences. By contrast with Salle's disjunctiveness and the diversity of styles he appropriated, Fischl's paintings typically showed a single narrative moment executed in a single distinctive representational style. His pictures for some years were to be depictions of suburban life, toward

which they seem to express a certain moral anger. Nevertheless, he feels that someone who does not appreciate Salle's work can hardly understand his own. It would have been, for example, entirely comprehensible that one might use pictorial strategies from the nineteenth century to convey the reality he had selected as his. One could paint like a nineteenth-century artist and still be of one's own time.

Whatever the case, Eric Fischl graduated from Cal Arts fluent in the prevailing theoretical discourse of that institution, but almost entirely self-taught as a painter (as he was as a sculptor when he took up that medium almost two decades later). He came out an abstractionist, which in terms of the art culture of the moment was something of a hedge. Ironically, he was hired to teach painting at another remarkable art school, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. (It is significant that the school turned to Fischl's teacher, Allan Hacklin—a lyrical abstractionist—to recommend someone for the position, since its own agenda was in many ways like that of Cal Arts.) Practically, NSCAD had to cater to a population of students eager to study painting. But painting was not where its heart lay. It was a mecca of advanced conceptual art. There were memorable visits by Vito Acconci and Carl Andre. Joseph Beuys was the commencement speaker in 1978. And for the enlightened, painting, as at Cal Arts, was of marginal interest. When I visited NSCAD in the early 1990s, I was struck by its unexpected look of the traditional art school. There were paintings on easels, drawings pinned to the wall. The sculpture studio had partially shaped stone blocks, with chisels and mallets at hand. I wondered how this was consistent with an institution that had invited Beuys to address it, or that still celebrated a legendary moment when Vito Acconci bit someone on the ankle, who then had the tooth marks tattooed. If that was what the school believed in, why all this evidence of old-fashioned painting and sculpture? My guide, who had graduated from NSCAD, told me that in those days they were all conceptual artists. There was no reason to teach or study painting unless you needed to realize some concept. If you actually needed painting for your work, you would learn how to do it on your own.

It would be the same if the work required you to master glassblowing or electronics. You would not expect an art school to teach everything an artist might be required to know. "At Cal Arts," Fischl said, "we were taught to believe that we were all professionals. We could do anything we wanted to." He had never learned to paint the figure—but when he needed to, he thought, "What the hell, I can do that."³

Why did he need to? It was while teaching at NSCAD that Fischl made the transition from abstraction into something like a kind of realism. He told me that it once occurred to him to change the shape of a canvas by cutting off the corners. This immediately suggested the form of a house or a boat. "I reduced the image to that of a house, an object," he told Robert Pincus-Witten in 1981.

The house I saw as a shield, as a protection. From here I could go inside the house and abstract the table and chair. But such objects were insufficiently ambiguous. So from here I began to deal with the figure.⁴

It would be the figure that would vest the household furnishing—the chair, the bed, the table, the lamp, but also the yard and the porch—with the ambiguities that marked his New York debut at the Thorp Gallery. So he needed to master the figure.

Fischl resigned his position at NSCAD in 1978, the year his companion (and now his wife), April Gornik, graduated from the school. His works from the late 1970s are mainly paintings on glassine, which have the appearance of monotypes, a medium that was to prove particularly congenial to him later in his career. At first, his figures bear some resemblance to late Degas drawings, especially *1st Woman in Water* (1977), which looks as though the figure has been scrubbed onto the surface. The difference between it and anything one can imagine Degas having done lies in the fact that Fischl has overlaid one sheet of glassine with another, which acts like a cataract, dimming the contours of the tub and graying the shadows. *Saturday Night* (1980) has four superimposed glassine panels and three characters:

a woman, probably the mother, sits on the edge of a bathtub in her slip, smoking and preoccupied; a man, probably the father, his penis hanging down, shaves himself, gazing into the mirror; a child is in the bathtub, apparently touching his genitals. Each of the three figures dominates, but does not completely occupy, one of the glassine planes, and one supposes that this serves, or could serve, as a metaphor for the typical family we imagine represented here. There certainly does not appear to be anything by way of communication between the family members, and the implication is that they live in different if overlapping but not necessarily interpenetrating spaces. Each is occupied with her or his interior life, the child most especially. How otherwise to explain that mother and father seem unaware of or indifferent to what the child is up to? Either they do not see or they no longer care whether the child touches himself. It is, one might say, a (very) modern family.

The glassine works are, Fischl says, “narrative and psychological.” Both psychology and storytelling were anathema to orthodox modernism, which in its insistence on each medium purging itself of everything extrinsic to its essence would have assigned them to literature. It was important to Fischl to maintain his modernist credentials, however, and he makes a point of observing that the glassine paintings “revealed their structure and material.” These are certainly modernist attributes, so it must have seemed to him that his overlapping planes could serve both functions. One translated form, so to speak, into content by supposing each plane to define a particular psychological space within the total composition. The graying or blurring effect of overlapping sheets of glassine perhaps implied different meanings for the individuals who “owned” the space.

We can discern both tendencies—that of modernism and that of psychological narrative—in what Fischl says about *Rowboat*, an important if transitional painting of 1978. Fischl describes it as a boy’s boat, a kind of toy: “I decided that I’d paint the boy’s boat to suggest a story in which the boy’s father was a fisherman and the boy imitated the father with the toy boat.”⁵ That, more or less, was what play has classically been expected to be: the child imitating the adult, the toy imitating the

appurtenances of adult life. But neither the psychology nor the narrative are visually implied by the painting, which, as Fischl told Kuspit, “turned out to be beautiful . . . It had an extraordinary light in it. It was very moving.”⁶ He almost reflexively draws attention to the painting’s modernism—“The painting turned out to be red, yellow, and blue—absolutely reductive”—as if the reductive use of primary hues connected the painting with Mondrian. But the reduction has little to do with the beauty or the light in the painting. I always resisted Fischl’s “modernism” because I felt it did not always have much to do with the intense, often shattering content of his paintings, which raised moral questions and indeed leveled moral judgments. They seemed to reveal the smallnesses of human beings, which we all know about and all share, just because we are human ourselves. What contribution does the fact that the large oil paintings he was to do in the 1980s were made of adjoined or overlapping panels make to the depicted narrative? They echoed the overlapping glassine panels but did not contribute to what the latter did. I always thought the paintings were divided against themselves somehow, irrelevantly modernist in most cases. I said as much in the review I wrote of his show of 1986 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the paintings he concurrently exhibited at Mary Boone. There is something overwhelmingly evocative about an empty boat, even perhaps an empty toy boat, whether or not the story is the one Fischl hoped the painting would suggest. And that evocativeness would be lost or dissipated in any pictorial space save the conventional one.

“I knew that if I went directly into representational painting, I would have to give up even the little bit of modernism I had cleverly used in the glassines,” Fischl said.⁷ He confessed to Gerald Marzorati, “I was definitely afraid when I began to paint realistically . . . There’s all this weight.”⁸ The weight, in my view, is not the weight of the great pictorial tradition of the West, to which he was bound, but was, rather, the weight of modernist discourse he had to shrug off when he attempted to join the tradition of narrative realism. I tend to think that using different panels in constructing a painting was an effort to reaffirm the felt pertinence of modernism—it