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A Brief Review of Eric Fischl at PAFA



by Miles Mathis

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The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts currently has an exhibition of Eric Fischl, which will run through the end of September [2012]. It includes 145 “works of art,” including 50 working photographs and 14 paintings representing the period 1979 to the present. Just so you know, Fischl is now 64 and has been with Mary Boone Gallery in New York City since 1984. She is still publishing this old picture of him.



Do you know anyone who smokes cigars who *isn't* an asshole? There may be a couple worldwide, but even Mother Teresa with a cigar in her mouth would *look* like an asshole. I don't know about you, but I would never let anyone take a picture of me looking like this, much less let it be published it for decades. But that's just the way these people are, I guess. Confused about art and everything else, they

also seem to think it looks cool to have a big brown dick-shaped roll of leaves sticking out of their half-open mouths. It would be hard to make sense out of that, except that it *does* seem to sort of fit in with Fischl's art.

I don't want to waste too much time with Fischl, since he isn't worth it, but we will take a quick look at the painting progression posted at PAFA. We start with one of the photos he worked from:



Just a snapshot in San Tropez, as you see. The photos I sometimes use for reference are miles better than this, but even so I wouldn't call most of them works of art. A few of [my photos of Tess](#) are very strong, and stand on their own, but the majority of my reference photos are just that—reference photos. If they were already works of art, I wouldn't bother making a painting from them. But that logic is beyond the modern artist, who thinks everything he touches is immediately imbued with his genius. Fischl bothered to make a dye transfer enlargement of this crap photo, and sell it to the Hall collection, whatever that is.

As mundane as this photo is, Fischl manages to drain what little life there is out of it, making several drawings and paintings that weren't really worth the effort, the paper, or the canvas. Don't believe me? Take a look:



That's pencil on a manila folder. Fischl makes hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, but he can't afford paper? And it's not like that's all he had at the beach. It wasn't some kind of art emergency. He had his camera! He obviously drew that from the photo, not from life, so why draw it on a manila folder? Just to be cool, we guess.

But even if you wish to believe that was drawn from life, it is terrible regardless. PAFA has life drawing classes still, we hope, and anyone who produced that in life drawing should be embarrassed. I was drawing better than that when I was 10. If I had drawn anything that awful even then I would have thrown in the trash immediately, but here Fischl is at 64 allowing it in a major retrospective. PAFA is leading with it, publishing it as a taster for the exhibition. If that is the best drawing in the exhibition, I don't want to see the worst.

Here's the next step, a 35 inch oil on paper called "Study for a Brief History of North Africa."



Very brief, I would say. Like ten minutes in 1985, which is about how long that took to paint. But someone might want to tell Fischl that San Tropez isn't in North Africa. Also that four figures slapped on a piece of paper isn't a "history," brief or not. Also that three white figures and a black boy holding a squiggle don't represent any historical period in Africa that I have studied, especially when one of the white figures is a girl in a bathing suit and another one is a white (though tan) nude in San Tropez.

Finally we reach the culmination of all this brilliance in concept and technique, a 120 inch canvas with the same winning title:



We now have two blacks guys (I think), one on the other's shoulders. And another nude white girl. So this must be a somewhat less brief history of North Africa.

But—dispensing for a moment with the crushing historical import of all this, for North Africa, Greater Africa, and the geopolitical landscape as a whole—can someone explain to me what parallel universe these proto-humans are supposed to be from, before they reached or were transported to North Africa? They aren't sized like any Earthlings I have ever met. If we divide the canvas into a foreground, middle ground, and background, we seem to have a monstrously large reclining nude in the middle ground, possibly nine feet tall or more based on comparative sizes. In front of her we have two figures. The first is another nude woman who should be larger because she is closer; but instead she is smaller. We will say she is about four feet tall. The man in a sheet is also in the foreground, which makes him about eight feet tall. Behind him, we have a tiny woman who appears to be standing on the reclining nude's arm. Since this puts her in the same space, we peg her at about three feet tall. And to the rear of all these figures, we find the two black guys. They are difficult to size, since the lower ones feet never hit the ground. We should see at least one of his feet in that little patch of blue below the girl's butt crack, but all we see is sea. Finally it occurs to me that perhaps the girl is deadlifting both black guys with one arm, which would make each one about 2.5 feet tall. Not only a multicultural beach, but a multi-planetary beach. I never knew the history of North Africa was so diverse, and I think we have all learned so much here.

I would also like to draw your attention to the original reclining nude's back. She is the one Fischl had such wonderful photographic reference for, remember, so you might think he could get her right. Nope. He has bulked up her back like Arnold Schwarzenegger and shrunk her head like George Bush, Sr. Why? Has she become more expressive? More historical? More North African? You decide.

Fischl's show at PAFA is called “Dive Deep.” Ironically, we hope.

Of course I know Fischl's and Boone's response to this, since they made sure to post it before any criticism came out, about thirty years ago. He has famously said that he grew up “against a backdrop of alcoholism and a country club culture obsessed with image over content.” That puts into your head the idea that anyone who expects a fully fleshed out image from art is both an alcoholic and a shallow country clubber, play golf and drinking vodka tonics all day. And it puts into your head the idea that Fischl is avoiding painting well as a statement against his shallow upbringing, concentrating instead on content. Is that what we see in his work? No. Although the figures are painted very poorly, they aren't thereby expressive. And his work has no content, as we just saw. It has a *title* with some fake stab at fake content, and the blurbs also try to fake some content, but the work itself is a big nothing. It isn't even painted poorly so much as it is painted *carelessly*. Van Gogh and Gauguin and Cezanne and Munch painted figures that were far from correct, but the figures were never painted carelessly. They are sometimes very expressive precisely because they were painted with care.

But the feeling we get from Fischl is that he can't be bothered to spend any time on a painting. He knows it just doesn't matter. Mary Boone could sell swastikas to Jews, so quality is not an issue. She has the most vulgar and ignorant clientele on the planet—composed, I assume, of alcoholic rich people obsessed with image over content—so Fischl doesn't have to bother actually creating real works of art. Giant empty images painted carelessly will do.

Notice how everything is inverted in contemporary art. You are sold an upside down world. Fischl pretends to be against precisely the thing he is selling to you. Contemporary art—especially his—is

content free, being all image (not an artistic image, but a image as a cultural pose). He rails against that while providing more of the same. Even his dig at alcoholism is undercut by his cigar photo. To me, cigar smoking and alcoholism are of a piece—terribly unhealthy pastimes practiced by people out of touch with the physical body. But for some reason Fischl doesn't make the connection. And he doesn't appear to realize how much like a smug yachtsman he looks with that cigar in his mouth.

Is it possible that any of the students at PAFA will be impressed with Mr. Fischl's art? You never know. PAFA isn't what it used to be. It is the oldest art school in America, having been founded in 1810, and it once had a stellar reputation, peaking in the 1880s when Thomas Eakins taught there. They still make a big deal out of Eakins at PAFA, but do you think Eakins would be impressed by Fischl? I *know* the answer to that: a big NO. Eakins is clawing ferociously up at the earth, trying to grab Fischl by the ankles, and we hope he is successful. We hope the ghost of Eakins finds a way to punish Fischl in some way that only he knows. But regardless, the students at PAFA are currently in the jaws of the living, being propagandized daily by the new world and its constant promotion. Since at least 1992, when PAFA incorporated its MFA program, the school has been in steep decline. That is when it gave up on Eakins and the old art for good and began promoting itself as another alternative to the Yale or Columbia school of arts. Why else would it invite Fischl—who knows and cares nothing about technique—to exhibit? To connect its students to the all-powerful market, of course. Anyone can see that Fischl can't paint or think himself out of a Fome-Cor box, but he is a rich and famous guy. Do current art students want to paint and think well, or do they want to be rich and famous? You decide.