

ARTFORUM

Eric Fischl

Robert Pincus-Witten

September 2016



My earliest reviews of Eric Fischl’s “narrative paintings”—as they date some thirty-five years back—bore the titles “Snatch and Snatching” (1981), and “Analytical Pubism” (1985), their snarkiness meant to take note of the then-tenderfoot painter’s louche imagery. In the early 1980s, Fischl was negotiating the shoals between Conceptual art and figurative painting, a divide that also marked the curriculum of CalArts, where Fischl graduated as a member of the school’s initial class in 1972. For a while, it seemed that the Conceptualist adherents of John Baldessari, a justifiably beloved figure at CalArts, had won the day. Now, however, the split is not so clear: Conceptualism and representational painting are, often enough, thoroughly entangled.

In their long evolution, Fischl’s paintings have moved from blunt ungainliness to breathtaking virtuosity, and this expertise was amply demonstrated in the present exhibition. Fischl fuses the expressionist symbolism of Max Beckmann with Edgar Degas’s grasp of the new compositional possibilities inherent to the then-emerging art of photography. In American terms, Fischl’s mastery of painting is comparable to John Singer Sargent’s, quite as Sargent himself was part of a larger European drift favoring painterly virtuosity: Ignacio Zuloaga in Spain, Anders Zorn in Sweden, Giovanni Boldini in Italy—all major painters, though all distant from the Cézanne-anchored trajectory of modernism. Indeed, the dark-suited, bearded men or smartly caparisoned women in Fischl’s new paintings deeply resemble the grandees who sat for those once immensely prominent society portraitists.

Thus, Fischl may not be found wanting when judged in the train of such turn-of-the-twentieth-century virtuosi—nor by the occasionally consequential efforts made by certain of today’s artists determined to discover, yet again, the beauties of the square, the enticements of the monochrome, or the ironies of the readymade. A telling aperçu found in Fischl’s recent autobiography (perhaps more a biography, as *Bad Boy: My Life On and Off the Canvas* is



SKARSTEDT

rather skillfully coauthored by Michael Stone): “Painters don’t chose to be painters. They just choose to be better painters.”

In *Rift/Raft*, 2016, Fischl’s challenging reprise of Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-19, the painter updates its portrayal of a hugely criminal French maritime disgrace with allusions to the West’s current failure to face up to the migrant crisis. Woe-filled unfortunates attempting to flee disaster occupy the right-hand side of Fischl’s enormous, episodic “compare-and-contrast” canvas—which measures some eight by eighteen feet. On the canvas’s left-hand side, we find allegorical nudes situated among the imagery of the art-fair booth, an environment underscoring a time-tested conflation of money, celebrity, and male-gaze eroticism. At the same time, Fischl, on a tear, also references the “real allegory” of Gustave Courbet’s huge *The Painter’s Studio*, 1854-55, shown in the pavilion the great realist erected near the world’s fair of 1855.

Indeed, the works in this exhibition—which, in addition to the epic *Rift/Raft*, included eight smaller pieces from 2015 and 2016, variously—are masterly quote beyond their challenging art-historical references. As is often the case with Fischl’s art, the works derive from photographic source material, in this case taken by Fischl at art fairs. The resulting compositions are filled with discontinuities and interruptions—a collage-like space of booth, corridor, wall, work of art, dealer, collector, visitor, reflection—images of privilege and wealth (discordantly countering those of homeless misery) punctuated by depictions of trophy works by Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, Chuck Close, even Fischl himself.

Admittedly, *Rift/Raft*—an operatic work of furious ambition—may not be for everyone. I grasp the twinge of unease at its ostentatious scale. But I am hard pressed to name another work of recent vintage to equal the preeminence of this flaming, condemnatory effort of outrage.

