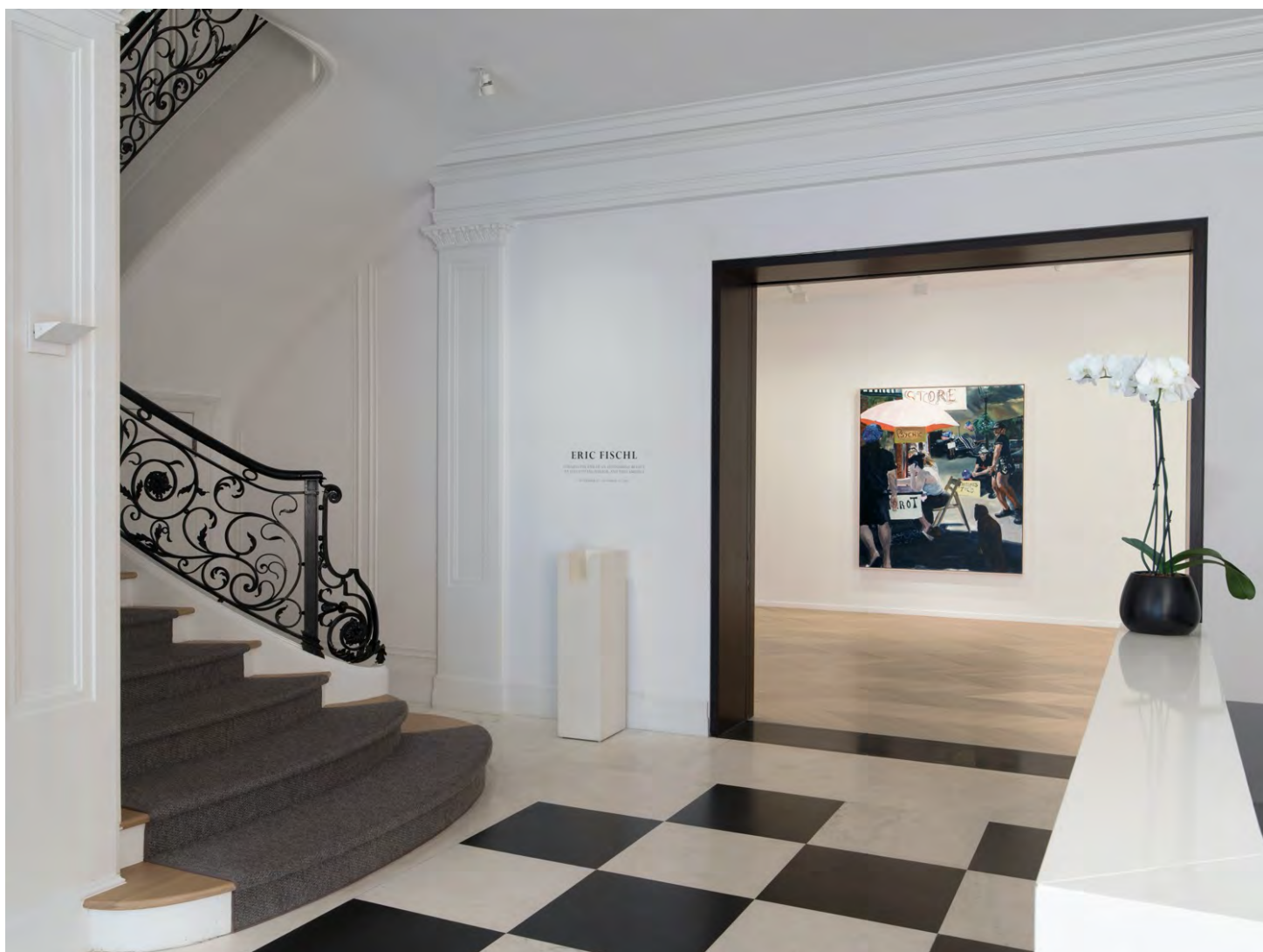


Sag Harbor Horror: Painter Eric Fischl's New Series Mines The Nightmare That is Contemporary America



BY **SARAH
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Installation view, "Eric Fischl: Towards the End of an Astonishing Beauty: An Elegy to Sag Harbor, and Thus America," September 14–October 29, 2022, at Skarstedt New York.

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The bright side of America's political polarization and neverending crises may be that it has provided ample creative fodder for painter **Eric Fischl**.

Fischl, who has been making and showing figurative paintings since the '70s, has become a self-fashioned bard of American decline.

In recent years, he has hewed to the news cycle: Shortly after Trump took office, he posted a painting to Facebook, fresh off the easel, that showed a boy curled into a fetal position wrapped in the American flag. Art critic Jerry Saltz said, at the time, that the work made him as though he "had fallen through a trapdoor into an infected field of American fissures formed by the election."

During the fall of 2020, after six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fischl showed a series called, "Meditations on Melancholia," more flag-wrapped figures, and a hula-hooping nude.

With this year's midterm elections looming in November, Fischl unveiled his latest series, *Towards the End of an Astonishing Beauty: An Elegy to Sag Harbor, and Thus America*, last week at Skarstedt Gallery. The work leans heavily on the idyllic Hamptons town of Sag Harbor, where Fischl has lived for decades, as a backdrop for a grotesque and sympathetic parade of American every-men and -women.

ARTnews met with Fischl at Skarstedt to talk through the new work.

ARTnews: These paintings might be even darker than the last ones you showed here, two years ago. At the conclusion of his review of that show in *Art in America*, Jackson Arn wrote, "I'm looking forward to late America three in 2024." Is this late America three?

Eric Fischl: I've been making dark paintings on the theme of America for a while.

AN: Yes, starting in 2016 when Trump was elected, the painting of the boy curled up, wrapped in an American flag...

EF: This new series is, in a personal way, marking the decline of America.

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AN: As it manifests in Sag Harbor.

EF: Yes. As it manifests within the strata of America I'm most familiar with, which is a basically white, educated, upper middle class. People who have placed a lot of belief in and have a need for certain values, and objects that represent those values, at a time when those objects aren't holding to those values.

AN: Did the Trump years just expose that fact?

EF: The Trump thing is hopefully the end. That, or the end is incredibly frightening. I think the first thing that set us on this path was 911. We got thrown off balance. All the things that we believed in about America were instantly revealed as not true: That we were not universally loved. That we were vulnerable on our home territory. That we didn't have a superior [intelligence service] that would stop something from happening long before it happened.

AN: And now classified documents are flapping in the breeze.

EF: Yeah. Anyway, all of that is spiraling out the myth of America. We regressed into smaller and smaller groups of like-minded people as protection, as a way of trying to hold on to something that didn't make us feel as insecure, but that brought out the anger, brought up the fear.

AN: The title of this exhibition is *Towards the End of an Astonishing Beauty: An Elegy to Sag Harbor, and Thus America*. Can we unpack that?

EF: This is the first show I've done where I'm specifically referencing the place where I live. Sag Harbor is being transformed into an uber-bourgeois, gentrified resort town. This is tragic because the character of the town, historically, has been far more compelling and far more rooted in the values that we inherited as kids and, you know, were brought up to believe in, in terms of what America could be, what a community could be, what neighbors are. Sag Harbor is being transformed by its popularity, by its beauty, by its charm. So, you are ending up with the appearance of something that no longer embodies the character of that thing. COVID was the ultimate acceleration of all of this, but it started before that.

AN: Can you elaborate on that?

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EF: What's different about Sag Harbor from the other [towns in the] Hamptons is that it is a town that you don't drive *through*. You drive *into* it. It's a town that envelops [you], a sort of embrace. The innate feeling of familiarity with a town comes from it being basically the size of a mall, and structured like a mall, which is to say, you walk down one side of the street shopping, turn around and walk down the other side. Historically, Sag Harbor made products that went out into a global market. They knew they were participating in a larger world, and that that world was diverse. So, there was an inherent tolerance for difference, otherness. It was a resort, or second home opportunity for the black community. It was a vibrant, tolerant place. And I always thought that artists gravitated towards it for the same reason. Artists were left alone. And while the town was making ships, or rope or parts, whatever it was, art was running parallel. Recently I thought, the next product out of Sag Harbor could be the art. But, unfortunately, with gentrification, everybody gets priced out.

AN: So what, precisely, are we seeing in these paintings?

EF: Every year on Halloween Sag Harbor has the ragamuffin parade. I've taken pictures of it for years. The costumes are sort of an externalization of interior thoughts and desires. You have this parade, set against the backdrop of a small town. That is one way to understand America, and community, and all of these things that have been breaking down.



Eric Fischl, *A Boy's Life*, 2022, acrylic on linen
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AN: In *A Boy's Life*, we see what seems to maybe be an adult sitting in a stroller. And then there is this drift into an almost pure abstraction on the right-hand side, where an orange—what may be a balloon...

EF: This kid [in the stroller] is dressed as some version of a devil. It could be a boy, it could be a girl, whatever it is, the child is too big for the stroller. It's being infantilized by the stroller. The mother figure, the female clown, is zipping up or unzipping her bag. Is that where she keeps the meds to keep the kid pacified? And the father is overseeing this whole administration.

AN: Do you have kids?

EF: I don't.

AN: Well I commend you on capturing the souped-up strollers that are *de rigueur* these days. I'm getting UppaBaby Vista from this one.

EF: In terms of the upper right, the painting started out as a larger view of the parade, so I knocked that part out as a placeholder. The question in painting is always, what is enough? How much do I need to do to make this feel believable? How much detail do I need to put in? Here is a kind of abstract area with an area that suggests maybe a balloon. It causes you to focus on the center of the painting. Over on the other side there's a person who seems oblivious to what's going on.

AN: There is a real feeling of self-containment to a lot of these figures. There also seems to be a lot of Cezanne-like ambiguity going on that abstract area of this painting, like Cezanne's bathers in Philadelphia, where it's tough to tell which limb belongs to whom. As for the dad-clown, I can't tell whether he is comical or menacing.

EF: At the opening, someone was saying, "Oh, that's what's his name? John Wayne Gacy?"

AN: From the few times I've been in Sag Harbor, I do recognize this setting. It does have that authenticity of place.

EF: Yes, there is the question of, what does it take to signify a particular kind of building, a particular kind of town? What does it take to create that atmosphere of strangeness, but *normal-strange*. Last night at the opening, I think it was [painter] David Humphries was talking about how he liked these

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paintings because they were comical, but not comical as a construct. They are not setting up a situation where it's like "it will be so funny with this kind of thing." My view of the world is tragic. And there's an essential comedy to the absurdity of what we keep trying to do to satisfy our needs and our feelings and our isolation...



Eric Fischl, *Sign of the Times*, 2022, acrylic on linen
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AN: Tell me about this figure in *Sign of the Times* with no face.

EF: Well it turns out there's this— I didn't know because I don't have kids—

AN: Slender Man! That's the costume. Who did you think it was a costume of? Faceless Suit Guy?

EF: [laughs] A faceless waiter? There are three different faces happening in the observers. The woman is clearly not there; she's absorbed in her iPhone. He's witnessing the scene. The faceless one is not present at all, as a person.

AN: A family of sorts.

EF: An interesting family of sorts. This figure of the—a good fairy? the good witch? a redemptive angel?— is actually finishing the lettering on the sign. So this redemptive angel is the one that's sending out message that...this is coming.

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Eric Fischl, *Untitled*, 2022, acrylic on linen
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AN: In *Untitled*, we have...two women...

EF: Two women. One is going to something and one feels like they're coming back from something. One maybe looks like Kurt Cobain.

AN: In a pink panther costume.

EF: Whatever the costume is, it's like she's exhausted coming back from something versus somebody who's off to yoga, exercise, whatever. Two ways of reading the day. Those exercise pants look painted-on. And I love the pressure the house exerts on this quiet scene.

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Eric Fischl, *Please Wait, Sir*, 2022, acrylic on linen
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AN: In *Please Wait, Sir*, I could see someone saying this plague doctor figure is a bit of a heavy-handed COVID reference. Masque of the Red Death comes to Sag Harbor.

EF: I'm not making this shit up in terms of the costumes. I've been taking photographs of a parade over three years. The most recent parade, last year, was delayed by COVID. Halloween has always had skeleton stuff. But yeah, this is the more ominous presence of death itself. I'm just observing this stuff, I'm not forcing the narrative. What I love about this painting is there's a moment taking place in which you can't figure out — there's a candy bag or something on the ground. What is going on with that? And there is something which was accidental, but I left it because I liked it, which is paint dripping from the [plague doctor's] eye. The idea of death lamenting what it has to do. The house I put here is the house I grew up in [elsewhere in Long Island].

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Eric Fischl, *The Parade Returns*, 2022, acrylic on linen
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AN: In *The Parade Returns*, it's hard to tell whose crutches are whose. Everyone looks like they are being propped up.

EF: It's the idea of a procession that seems like it's coming back from something. Watteau did this painting, *Voyage to Cythera* where it actually looks like the figures are leaving. And this felt to me like the return from some Edenic place.

AN: It has a feeling of tragicomedy. A bedraggled crew limping along Main Street.

AN: In *Halloween*, you have some parade-goers in a space with artworks. A Condo and a Lichtenstein.

EF: The Lichtenstein came from a photo I took at an art fair, and I put it in there. The figures come from different times in the ragamuffin parade. There is the Bride of Frankenstein, and I'm compelled by the costume that's such a

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mixed message—a butterfly wing and skeletal images. It's all aspects of life, death, femininity ...different images of women, some done by men.



Eric Fischl, *Halloween*, 2022, acrylic on linen.
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AN: What pops out to me in *You Don't Need a Weatherman...* is the Blue Lives Matter flag.

EF: This one is sort of the apotheosis of these other paintings. Even more significant is the truck. It feels to me like the trucks that were down in Charlottesville, the ones that rode out on the curb and ran down people. Whatever's going on, this is a very bad moment that none of these people are paying attention to, even though they're looking to the future with the psychic. They're looking to magical thinking. And then the fact that there's a storm growing... It's layered in an obvious way. But the impact to me is you

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really feel that these people are not paying attention. They are optimistic but oblivious. I'm not being judgmental.

AN: When I was growing up in Wisconsin, there is a certain way that things look and feel right before a tornado. The sky darkens in a particularly ominous way, and you can feel the barometric pressure change. I think you've captured something like that kind of weather here. And the dog—

EF: He's the only one that seems to be noticing what's going on.

AN: Animals have a more acute sense for the weather. They go hiding under tables and chairs

EF: I didn't plan this, but when you step back, this part of the umbrella looks like a bat.

AN: Now that you point that out, I won't be able to un-see it. It's like the duck/rabbit. Or the old woman/young woman. And then there is "psychic rot."

EF: It started out coincidental because the figure that's blocking the word 'Tarot' wasn't there. And then it was, and it was like, "psychic rot. Yes."



Eric Fischl, *You Don't Need a Weatherman...*, 2022, acrylic on linen.
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