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ARTFORUM

Eric Fischl

[Skarstedt Gallery | New York E 79](#)

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Eric Fischl, *King's Highway: Killing Time*, 2024, acrylic on linen, 54 × 68".

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The nine large canvases in “Hotel Stories” presented Eric Fischl at the top of his game. His painted world is one in which ambiguity and narrative complexity play consistent roles. You are never sure if something of import is about to happen, or if you are witnessing the aftermath of a particular event. Take, for instance, *Breakfast Begins the Day or Ends the Evening*, 2023. Is the woman in this picture removing or putting on her high heels? She is fully dressed, but why is the man in her bed still lounging around, unclothed?

These suspended moments encourage us to entertain a number of different narrative possibilities. In *Untitled*, 2023, we wonder who in this tableau has startled the naked woman and one of her two dogs in her bed, making them both apprehensive? In *Standoff*, 2024, what has provoked a middle-aged man to leave the bathroom, lathers of shampoo still in his hair, to talk to a younger guy in the adjoining room? Whatever the cause of the interruption, a lissome woman in the shower presses her hand against the glass door in what we read as a sign of warning. Fischl has used a similar division of architectural space to indicate different psychological states in the paintings for his 2002–2003 series, “The Krefeld Project.” Like the works in “Hotel Stories,” all of the “Krefeld” canvases feature glimpses of various scenes unfolding in different close-knit settings. One of the pleasures of this exhibition was the way it deftly echoed earlier bodies of work.

Fischl has said that “there is an inherent mystery in intimacy,” and that what he is trying to do is to find ways to capture it. He also depicts situations in which there is a pronounced absence of comfort or affection. In *Hotel Service*, 2023, a man wearing a large Stetson hat and a woman in a chic blue ensemble watch a bellhop wheel a breakfast cart out of their room. The banana on the trolley is an unmistakable reminder of the fruit bowl in *Bad Boy*, 1981, Fischl’s iconic painting (and the title of his 2012 memoir) of an adolescent stealing something from his mother’s purse as he watches her luxuriate in a post-masturbatory reverie. In *Hotel Service*, it’s as if the bad boy grew up to be a cowboy with scuffed boots and fussily creased pants whose youthful wife is hipper and better dressed than he is. They both wait for the bellhop to leave in order to continue a conversation that holds little promise

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of intimacy. The couples in Fischlworld embody an altered version of Henry David Thoreau’s lament that “the mass of men—and women, too—lead lives of quiet desperation.”

Other paintings in the exhibition presented stories that connect to real historical events. The date in the title of *October 7: Heading Out, 2023*—the day Hamas staged a terrorist attack on Israeli citizens last year—explains the anguished hands of the woman whose unbelieving gaze is locked onto the TV. And it is easy to overlook the fake space needle of the STRAT Hotel, Casino, and Tower in Las Vegas outside the window in *King’s Highway: Killing Time, 2024*, until you notice an AR-15 leaning almost imperceptibly against a gray chair. The pictured guitar player, a monster from the lyrics of the Joe Henry song that provide the painting’s title, is biding his time before he begins his murderous version of sightseeing. He is likely based on sixty-four-year-old Stephen Paddock, who opened fire on a crowd attending the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in 2017.

Last Days at Tender Cove, 2024, however, strikes a different note: A respite from the artist’s trademark unease and desperation, this canvas depicts a moment of intimacy between an older couple, nude and in bed. The man’s thinning hair and the woman’s settling weight evidence the advance of time, but the tenderness of his head on her breast and the way she clasps his forearm are timeless gestures. The painting is simply what it is: an image of unmitigated care and trust. Its poignancy is a reconciliation and, if such a thing exists in Fischl’s universe, a secular benediction. Among his hotel stories, this picture is the only one that tells us about love.