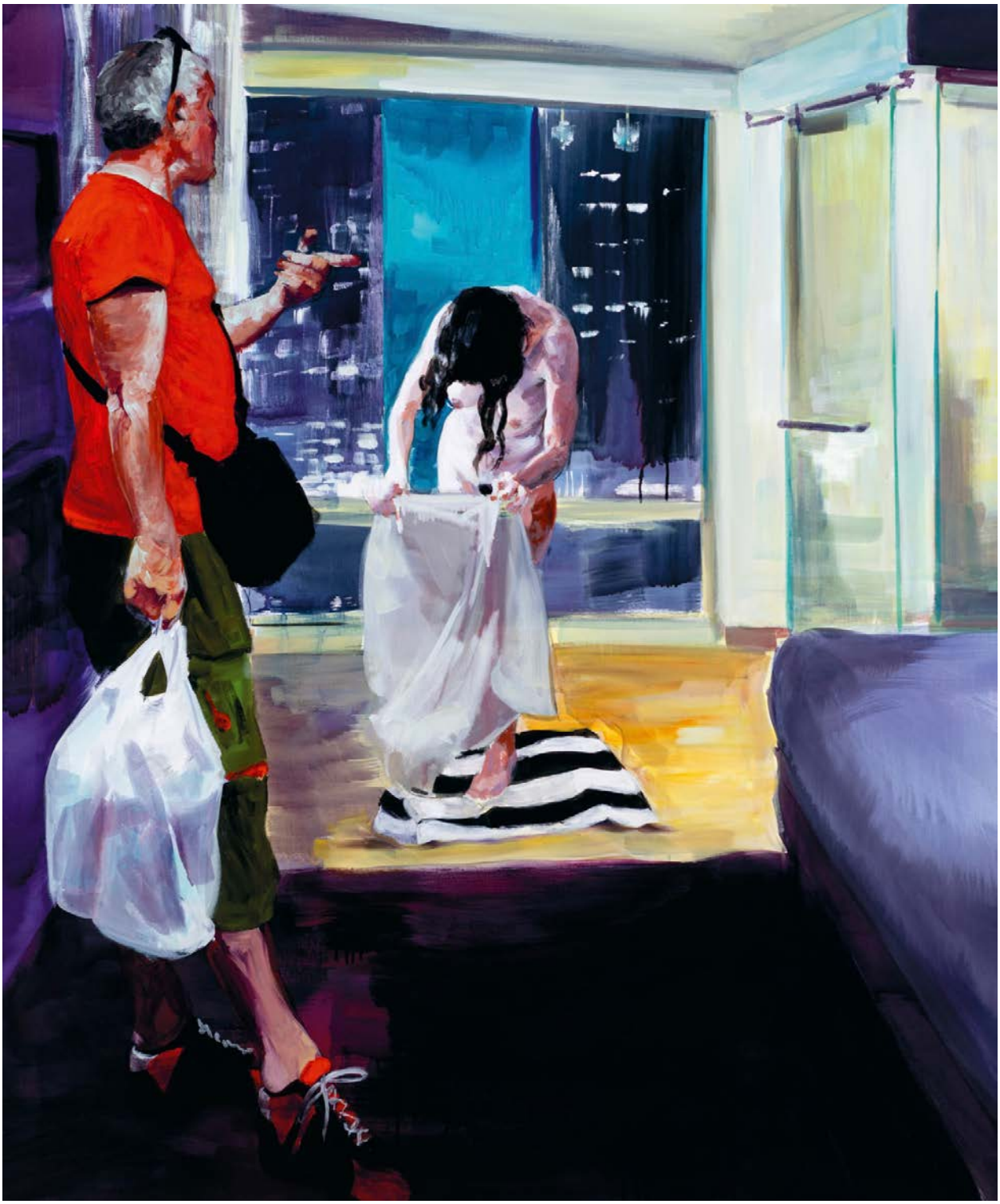

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Eric Fischl

The anger is still there, but buried beneath layers of living.
Andrew Winer meets the painter, a latter-day Manet
who once busied himself with the bedroom and the beach.
Now, at 76, he has the keycard to the in-between

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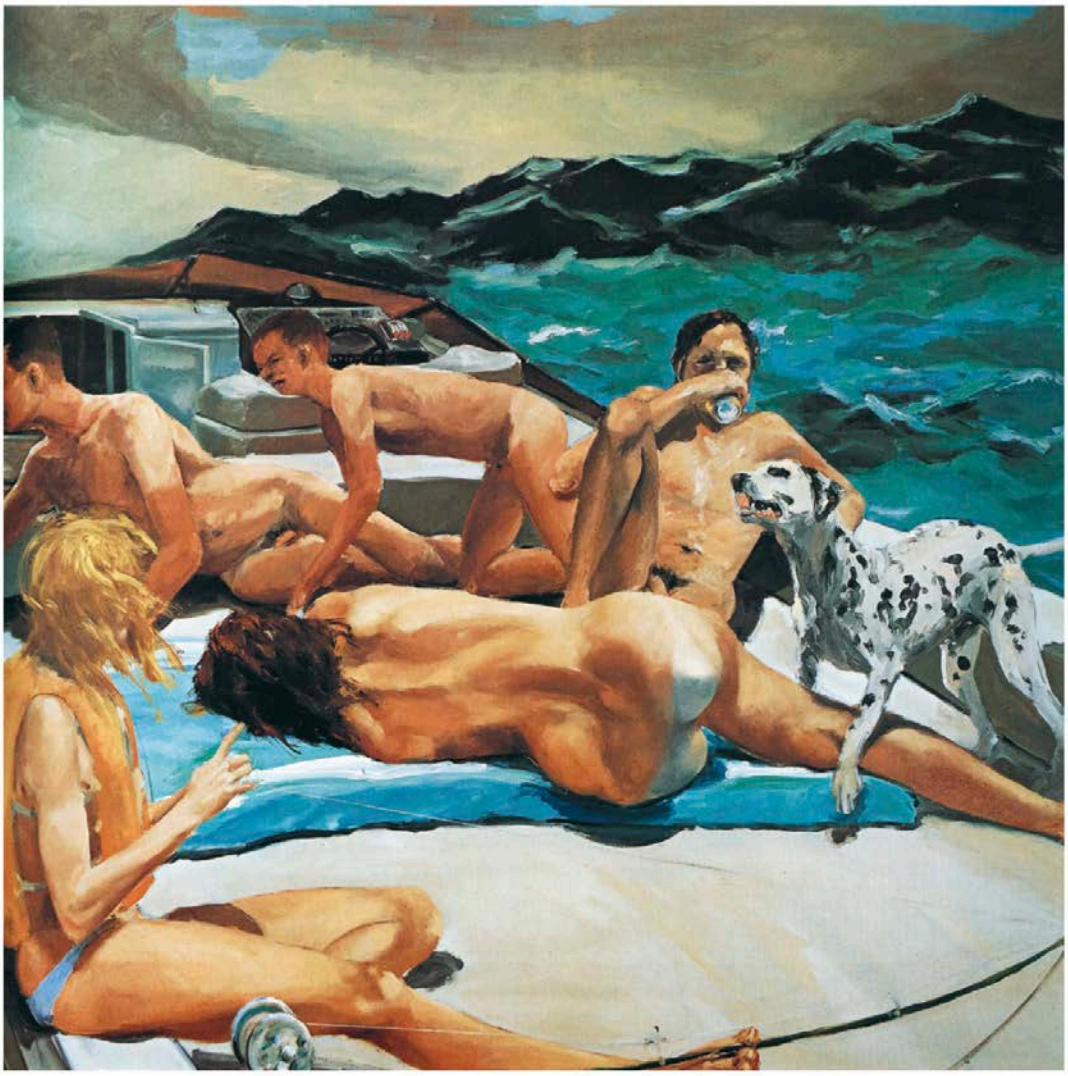


THE OLD MAN'S BOAT AND THE OLD MAN'S DOG, 1982
Oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm

Eric Fischl

Just once, I'd like to see every painting Eric Fischl has ever made together in one place. For though several early works instilled themselves so forcefully in the collective consciousness of the art-going public that they have become part of history and lore, my hunch is that the individuality of any single canvas would somewhat recede, while the figures portrayed in them, the larger human scene, would leap out and then walk home with me. Let's face it: that Fischl can still be associated primarily with a couple of those early paintings is an accident of the art world's short attention span, because his method and style insist that you look at the work in its entirety to understand what the artist is actually doing—as if all the individual pieces are indeed one piece. There are artists, some of them great, who essentially repeat themselves across a career, effecting incremental variations in form, but the meaning of whose work is principally grasped at the beginning. And there are artists who make a habit of radically changing things up, who operate best when forced into the formal and intellectual geometry—the particular internal logic—of a singular piece. Eric Fischl makes them all look restless. Artists like him work as if they're in on a secret: the secret of the long way.

Not incidentally, Fischl is also one of those artists whose work says, *Look at how we are*. And as with the praisers and prayer-sayers of the world who invoke God's name endlessly, there is one word that is uppermost in this kind of artist's thoughts: *us*. This puts Fischl on the same footing as a Balzac, a Chekhov, and more than a few modern and contemporary novelists and film directors. On the day I visit his wonderfully sylvan studio in Sag Harbor, I tell him that his early work's portrayal of the psychosexual cracks in nuclear-family decorum—its troubling of an unreconstructed belief in upward mobility that perpetually lies like a veil over America's suburban disappointment—has a literary equivalent in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. Fischl nods. "Novelists discovered that subject before painters did," he says. "Updike, Cheever, Carver…"

"And then *Yates*," I reiterate.

"And then film."

I suggest to him that his more recent work, subtly focused on adult disquiet, brings to mind the cinema of Michael Haneke and Todd Haynes. He seems to get my drift—that both directors deal with boundaries, and with tragic women: "I grew up with the feminist critique being very present. That's always in the back of my mind. How do I internalize that critique and move forward? Early on, I was one of the people who pushed to break down what boundaries mean. Where is legitimate intimacy? I mean, I certainly came from a family life where there was outside and inside. But the lines inside were absolutely blurred. And the question was formed early on: how do you negotiate spaces that have no clear boundaries, even though you're longing to have them?" All of this gives Fischl more in common with several non-painters who are roughly

"Early on, I was one of the people who pushed to break down what boundaries mean. Where is legitimate intimacy?"

his age than it does with David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Ross Bleckner, and the other painters of his generation with whom he is usually associated. I am thinking of artists such as Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman, and even Jenny Holzer. Workers toiling in the narrative vineyards whose fruits increase the measure of knowable human facts.

Why Fischl now? Much has been written about those early paintings he made in the 1980s. It was the work of a hurt innocence, and it was driven by anger, formed in Fischl's childhood, at grown adults who had been incapable of observing the limits of a decent middle-class way of life, a life that their own striving and disappointments had turned into a chimera. Those paintings were put into a world that was still capable of being shocked, and the artist became a justifiably renowned figure for them, even beyond the purlieus of an otherwise hermetic art world.

There have been important, if inevitably quieter, discussions of the paintings he's done since. Because of his portraits, it's also widely known that celebrities such as Steve Martin and Mike Nichols have numbered among his friends. But none of that has much to do with the significance of Fischl's oeuvre, which to my mind has amassed no small amount of gravitas in the last two decades. Any painter who traffics in narrative must attempt to strike an honest bargain between art and actual life, saying their best and most important things to just about anyone. That's weird. It's also democratic. And freeing. For it's dangerously easy for artists to fall into seeking *position* with everything they say in their work. Of course all artists do this to *some* degree. I mention it because the extent to which they engage with the current culture in their work is often a measure of the tension between this self-consciousness and the freedom that presides over its making.

How much self-consciousness exists in Eric Fischl's work? Is he a cosmopolitan like his heroes Édouard Manet and Max Beckmann? Or something of a provincial like Edward Hopper, the painter to whom he is most frequently compared? Phrased differently: is he, when painting his figures, trying to empty himself of all the people in his head so that he can

Opening spread: SNAPSHOT OF A MARRIAGE, 2023, acrylic on linen, 157 × 183 cm

Fischl is an artist who clearly doesn't want *us* to forget the shaken, the scared, the lonely, and the liberated—the kinds of people he likes to depict

achieve a kind of exquisite solitude? Or is he trying to get along with the population that lives there? Is Fischl running toward us or away from us?

It's true that whatever insights his paintings offer into how people behave and feel are *public* insights. Stories are written, or painted, for others. They are not made exclusively for the artist, and they may not be for the artist to understand at all. And indeed, Fischl must leave his stories on the canvas for the rest of us. Still, one would think that in so doing he could release himself from the characters that haunt them. Too much psychologizing? It can't be helped in this case. Look at the way Fischl paints faces: except in the portraits, they aren't all that significant, surprisingly. In their hasty non-specificity, they tend to recall many other faces, as though what the artist is wrestling with is a crowded life that keeps failing to sort itself out. Indeed, he does sometimes *crowd* his paintings with people, but in formal ways—pictorial collages, reality- and perspective-defying experiments in scale—that seem too sophisticated to have much demotic appeal. During our talk in the studio, Fischl comes off as friendly and forthcoming, colloquial but calmly articulate—yet I sense how guarded, how *studied* he actually is…

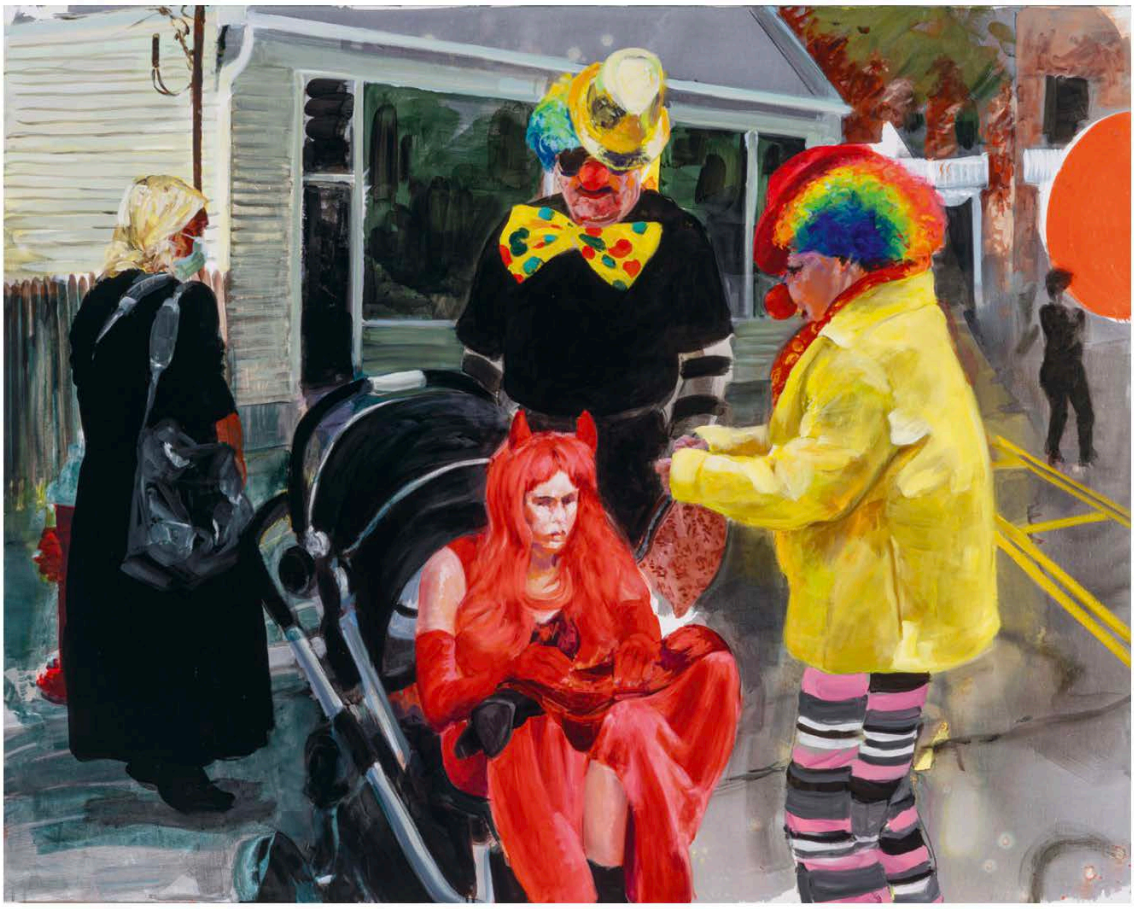
I happen to like that specific mix of qualities in a person. It wins my trust rather than my mistrust. And as with the man, so with the artist. Since his earliest works, Fischl has taken a set of thoughts, fears, and anxieties that have apparently dominated his life and permitted them to sink so deeply that they only surface in the dream world of his canvases. The anger is still there, I sense, but buried beneath layers of living.

I certainly treasure what an artist conceals as much as what they reveal to us. Figurative painters can be helpfully divided into two camps: those who are looking out a window and those who are looking in. Cézanne, Van Gogh, Manet, and Hartley belong to the former; they don't conceal nearly as much as Vermeer, Hopper, and, yes, Matisse and Picasso, who all belong to the latter. If those looking out are longing for infinity, those looking in seek to settle into life, having come from infinity. They need structure, even comfort, a place or form in which to hide—and after all, a bit of infinity can be found there, too, in illimitable human limitation. Fischl looks in.

Most artists order their work around one or two structural ideas. This is as it should be, as it leaves a lot of room. For Eric Fischl, it has largely been *the room* that leaves a lot of room. The new paintings he is developing when I visit him are all set in hotel rooms, permitting him to practice his eyes on many different human scenarios, all of them having to do with loneliness and freedom, it seems to me. And with a certain eroticism. But Fischl corrects me on this last theory when I offer it. "My interest is in the sexual, not the erotic," he insists. I ask him to explain the difference, and he assures me that one is pleasure-based, the other psychological and emotional. "The erotic is about beauty. It's about pleasure. Heightened states of physical awareness. The sexual is about identity. About all of the stuff that comes along with that. *What* is taking place here? Is it isolation, connectedness, disconnectedness? Is it quiet? Is it relief? Is it pain?" His hotel rooms tell us, then, how alone we ultimately are—even in, especially in, the company of others. More than almost any other contemporary painter I can think of, Fischl stands at the wailing wall of human aloneness when he begins to paint. Yet *he* isn't wailing. A certain cruelty is necessary to observe people without error. If he's a voyeur, he's one only in the way all humans are—we like to observe others while remaining unobserved ourselves. If he removes himself from these paintings, it's because hiding is how you find anything out.

One of the things Fischl has found out is that a hotel room is set up not for you but for any human. "It's a place that is simultaneously intimate and public," he tells me as we look at the first painting he attempted in this series, *Snapshot of a Marriage* (2023). "Intimate while an individual is there, and then the next night there are different people altogether." He appears to be suggesting that the hotel room functions as a space where you can find a certain recognizability—and then lose it. Where you can discover that not even shameful, guilty feelings are right. It is an invitation to your actual self, a place not only of self-realization, but also of contradiction and disorder. Small wonder then that these paintings search for meaning in the fissures of partings, in meetings or their aftermath, clandestine or otherwise.

Another discovery: how innocent we are in such instants! Regardless of whether Fischl is trying to cut them loose from his own imagination or not, this is an artist who clearly doesn't want *us* to forget the shaken, the scared, the lonely, and the liberated—the kinds of people he likes to depict, who, in checking into a hotel room, have removed themselves from a life teeming with who knows what names and things. During



A BOY'S LIFE, 2022
Acrylic on linen, 137 × 173 cm

such uncounted moments that, in Fischl's hands, seem to be the very fund of meaning, the stuff of regular life appears either to preoccupy them or not concern them at all. In some of the paintings, the ones with more than one figure in them, a bit of that life has followed them into the room, creating an almost holy tension between nearness and infringement. Either way, the hotel rooms clearly function like little islands in a churning sea, instants of quiet and calibration about which one would like to say something in such a way that it is said once and for all—even though one knows that the next painting might force one to say something different. These paintings protect their protagonists from our conclusions, but not from our empathy. They don't invite us to *be* the people in them. But they invite us to get past that human instinct—almost a physical repulsion—that can cause us to dislike any human who is not us. And they make clear that, in observing others, we don't need to know who anyone is to understand or identify with them. In a hotel room, everyone is nameless.

Eric Fischl has a gift—and it's a gift to us—for making us see the people he paints as though we have seen them 50 times *and* for the first time. There's a name for that. It's called *love*. It often comes down to some part of a person's body. He draws my attention to a pair of clasped hands in one painting, a pointing finger in another, and I get the impression that he likes to reach into some secret collective soul where all the lonely dwell, and, finding there a shoe or a knee or an elbow or a

BREAKFAST BEGINS THE DAY OR ENDS THE EVENING, 2023
Acrylic on linen, 173 x 244 cm

shoulder, uses it to pull people forth onto his canvases. Some figures emerge whole, some half—these he can work with. Others appear only in pieces, it seems, and he paints over them. He paints over whole individuals, too, when they don't work ("I can always tell when I paint people in and they don't belong"), returning them to that place out of which they were born, often naked, like so many grown foundlings. I would like to see an exhibition of all *those* figures—they are the loneliest of all, and constitute a shadow realm of erased people that, like distant memories, haunt the surfaces of all Fischl's canvases. (Sometimes literally: Fischl tells me of a painting of a "giant chicken man"—a man in a chicken costume—that he once whited out, covering it with an almost Sargent-like portrait of a family, which subsequently sold to a collector. When the original figure decided to seep through, slowly and faintly appearing like some specter haunting the depicted family, the collector called Fischl's dealer in confusion, saying he felt like he was starting to see a large chicken in the painting he'd bought…) I wonder if they haunt Fischl himself, wonder if all these people are silent within him, or if it's not the people he paints but the rooms containing them that haunt him. Standing there looking at these new paintings, I am reminded that all rooms seem to possess memories of those who've entered them. But we possess memories as well—of those rooms that we have visited in private, in duress, irritation, or ecstasy. They become the rooms in that ever-expanding home we carry somewhere in us all our lives. The only home we will die in.

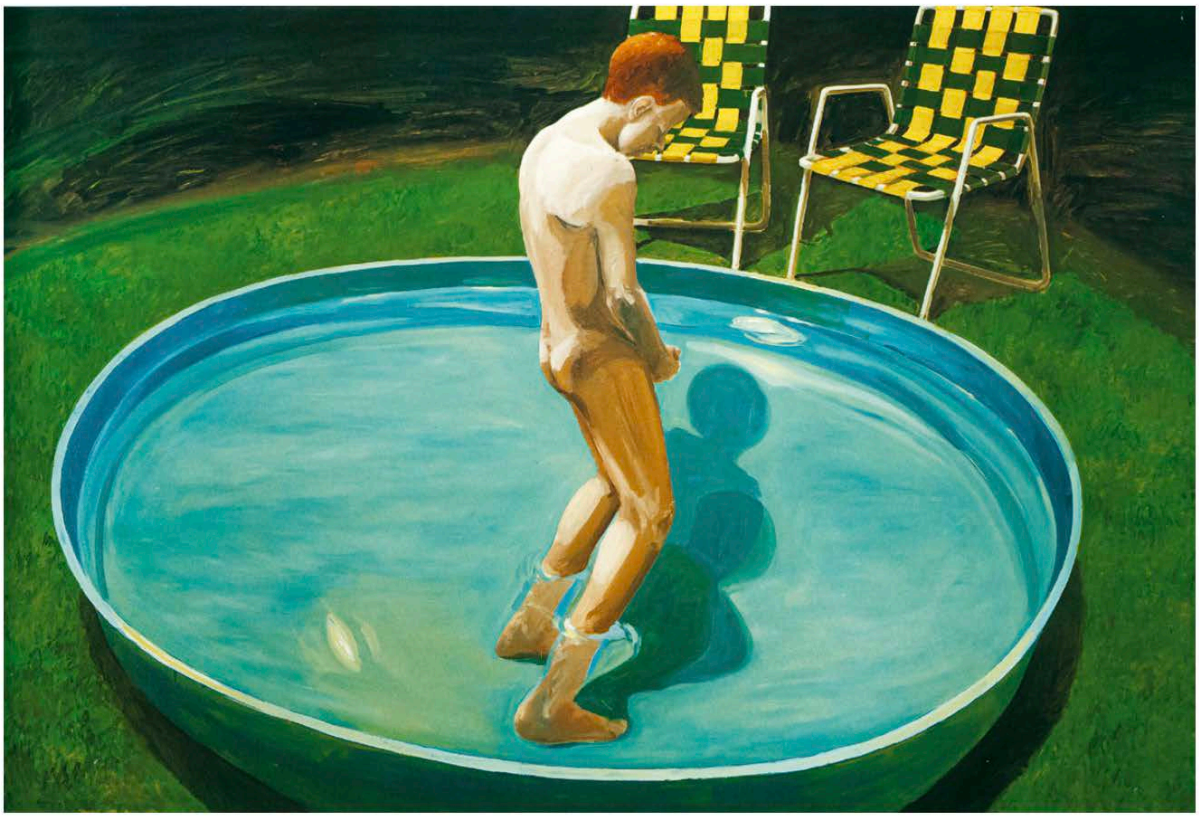
Fischl leads me over to a painting called *Breakfast Begins the Day or Ends the Evening* (2023), in which he has depicted a woman standing in her hotel suite in a business suit, struggling to remove or put on a high-heel shoe while a mostly naked man sits prostrate in a bed in the other room. "Each time I paint, I don't know what I'm looking for," Fischl confesses. "But I know where I'm looking to find it. That's irony—absolutely the most profound condition of life." I turn to him, asking what he means. "Irony," he says, "is what shows up in the face of spiritual pursuit. When the thing that drives you can't be found. Or is present but you can't name it."

We both turn back to the painting. Within the strictures of realism, Fischl's actual painting method is akin to that of the expressionists. Lots of candid, quick decisions that capture people in a plausible present tense, and then a certain apparent indifference to the painterly results—as if all his wristy gestures and daubs were applied by another's hand. Still, in his description of it, when things are going well in the studio, he tosses something onto the canvas—a naked couple, a toweled man, a suitcase, a dog—and then gets pulled in by that thing. This may explain the captured spontaneity of his brushwork, the lack of embellishment, the seemingly necessary suppression of virtuosity. Fischl avoids the merely aesthetic, as though driven by a conviction that every person, if only they could be captured by his brush in an unguarded moment, is interesting, irreplaceable.

"The erotic is about beauty and pleasure. Heightened states of physical awareness. The sexual is about identity. About all of the stuff that comes along with that"

Then there's the problem of handling everything else in the painting. "I was always jealous of you novelists," he tells me, pointing at the room in which the woman stands. "Because you can write, 'Joan walked through the door into the suite.' But for a painter it's: how much detail do you need to make something real enough that people don't pay attention to it? What language do you need to bring people into a moment where they're not distracted by everything in the fucking moment?" He dips his chin toward the man in the bed. "What is a pillow? Does a pillow say, 'This person just got off of it?' Or, 'This person is just going to it?' After 50 years of painting, I thought those questions would be over by now. But it turns out that every painting asks the same question. And it's like, 'Why do I have to go through this again? Can I never finally decide what a fucking pillow is?' And the answer is no, because I'm painting a different character in that room."

We examine one last painting: a couple lying in bed in a hotel room with windows out onto a large body of water—a lake, it looks like. The woman is naked, the man still has his pants on. The scene is pervaded by a wonderful light. Not a religious light but a sacred one, in my opinion, because it's sensitive to the surfaces of the situation, to ongoing life itself. I say as much to Fischl, who shakes his head. He's not quite satisfied with the painting yet. "Artists all have a list of what's wrong with their work," he complains. "Is this line too strong, too weak? I can't tell. And if somebody comes in and says that line is too weak, you say, '*Crap*—I gotta deal with that.' If nobody notices, you know it's your phantoms yelling at you." He proceeds to tell me about the time Jean-Christophe Ammann—who was the curator of the Kunsthalle in Basel when



SLEEPWALKER, 1979
Oil on canvas, 175 × 267 cm

he praised the earliest work Fischl had produced while living in Canada in the late 1970s—came to do a studio visit after he'd moved to New York. "Jean-Christophe walks in," Fischl says, "looks at my new paintings, and nails every fucking thing I was afraid of."

"As if he had your list printed out," I joke.

"Told me I'd regressed. That I was doing antiquated work. Everything I'd hoped for was destroyed."

Fischl explains that, after Ammann left, he sat down in front of the painting he had out and tried to think how he could become more contemporary.

He considered overlaying another image in a different language. "No, David was doing that," Fischl says, referring to his old friend David Salle. He could throw on other materials. No, Julian (Schnabel, another old friend) was doing that. "Every idea I had was somebody else's idea, because I didn't *have* any ideas.

And then what I did was quiet down and look at this painting, which would turn out to be *Sleepwalker* (1979)"—one of the paintings for which he became famous—"and I'm thinking, 'I definitely could paint that elbow better.' So I got up and painted the elbow better. And then started to paint more and just finished the painting. And it worked. What Jean-Christophe had done was take everything away from me except me."

I ask if he can elaborate on that.

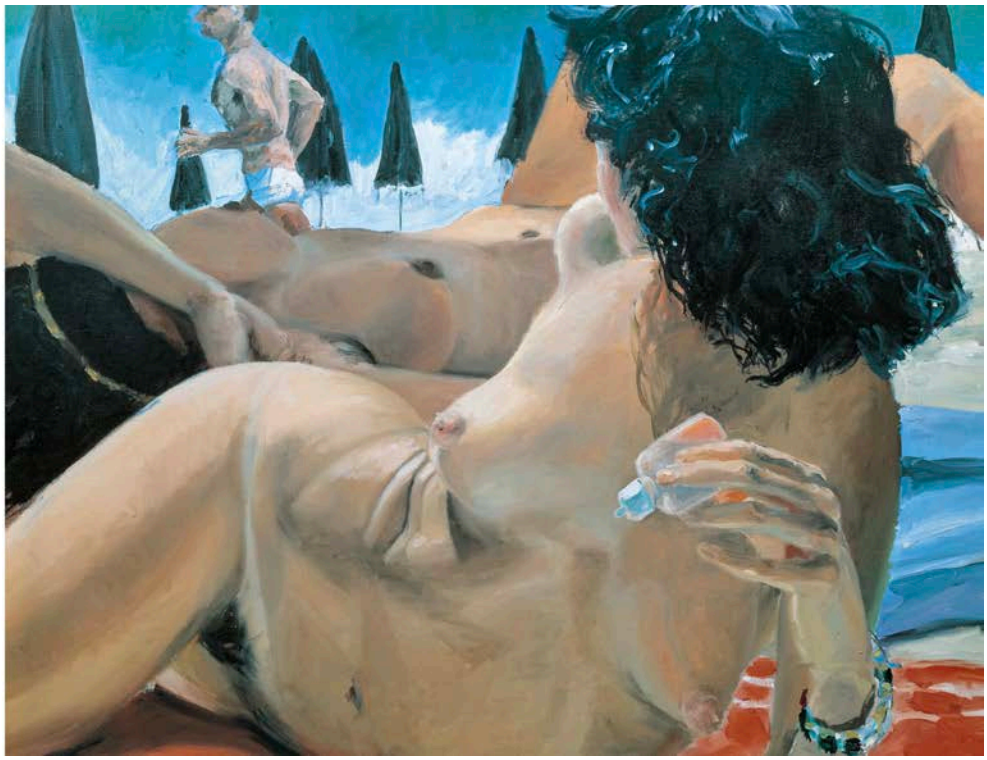
"We all go to that point where you paint something that's taken everything you've got," he says, "and you're looking at it and you have no idea whether it's art or not. It is what you can do the best, but you have no idea how it's going to land in any context you want to put it in. And it's terrifying. Because you're there not to be yourself but to be an artist. It's what Chuck Close said: if it looks like art, it's probably somebody else's art. It turns out you have to be yourself."

I say, "Perfect."

He looks at me and smiles. "If you put everything I've said into this piece you're writing, it will be a fucking book."

"Would you be jealous?"

"I would!"



THE DAY THE SHAH RAN IN, 1982
Oil on canvas, 91 × 122 cm