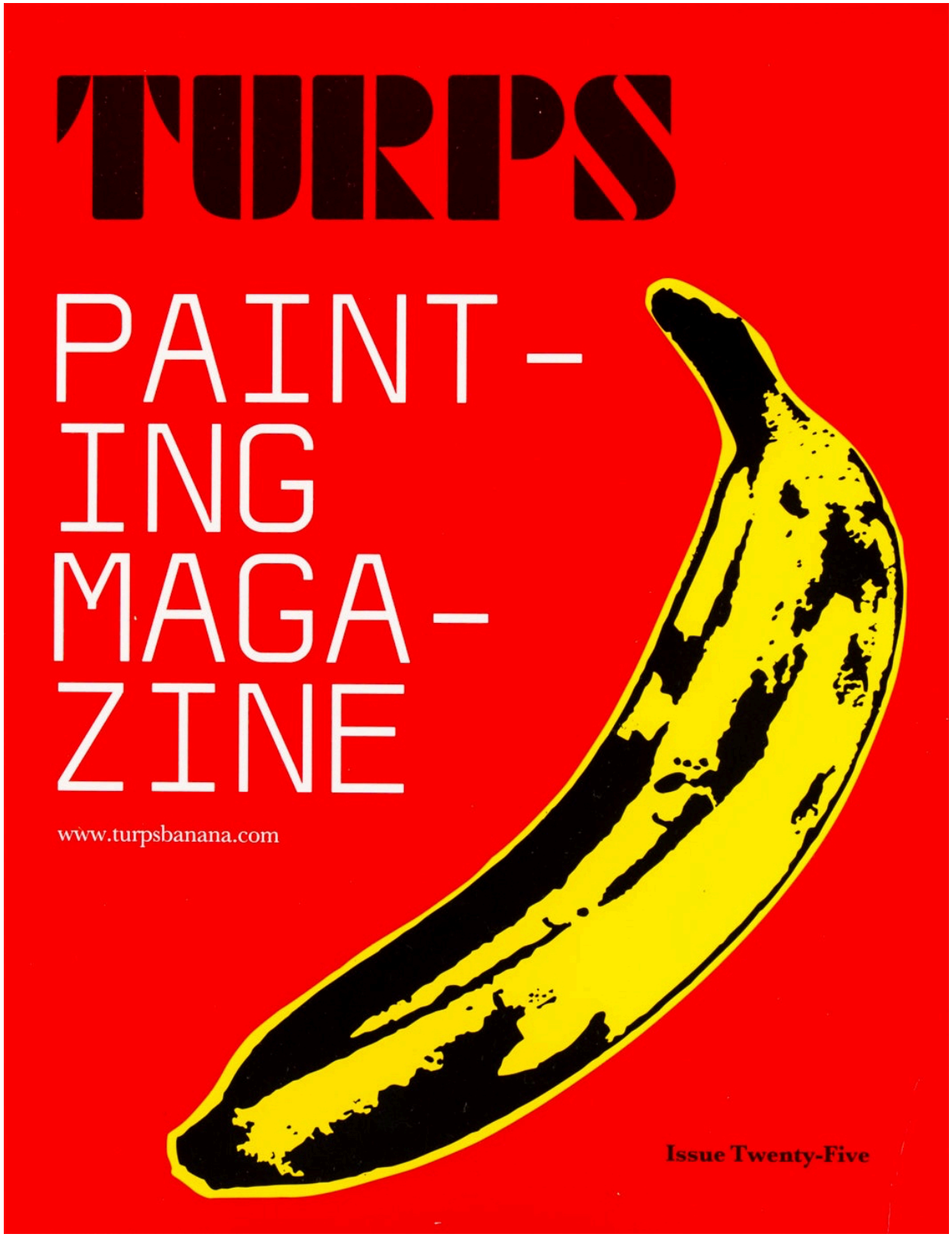
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Issue Twenty-Five

MATT LIPPIATT IN CONVERSATION WITH ERIC FISCHL

We are people who can be significant to our community. We can be something that brings a vitality to our community in a profound way – not in a lesser form – in a profound way. I think that should be the ambition of most artists.

Late America 2
2020
Acrylic and oil on linen
198.1 x 279.4 cm

Opposite:
My Old Neighborhood: The Old Man Stays Behind
2021
Acrylic on linen
190.5 x 165.1 cm

Matt Lippiatt: After thirty years of painting oil on linen, is *My Old Neighborhood* (2021) your first exhibition of paintings made with acrylic?
Eric Fischl: It's the first where all the paintings are acrylic only. I had a show in 2020 that began the transition, part acrylic, part oil. During the pandemic lockdown I found myself shifting to acrylic.
ML: Why?
EF: The feeling that life was short! There's always been something in my smaller works on paper that I was trying to scale up into larger paintings, but the authority of the large scale made it harder to 'let go'. My desire was to create a painting language where I wasn't focussed on every detail of every aspect of the scene: this green colour here is grass, you don't need to see every blade, I don't want you to spend a lot of time here. I'm setting up a hierarchy. This person or this gesture or this chair is the most important thing in the scene, and here's why.

When I went to acrylics, I was able to move at a tempo comparable to my works on paper: I'm pouring; I'm letting the paint pool and dry. It was immediate, direct, and in a very short space of time, I could decide what works, what doesn't work, and paint it out or build up over it.

It was a response to the moment. With the pandemic, everything felt vulnerable, in great danger, closing down. With that it became simpler: do it, get it done now.
ML: I got that from the work in *Meditations on Melancholia* (2020). In those paintings there was an explosion of techniques that previously you'd only used in works on paper.
EF: Yeah, that's where it began. Part of that body of work was also accepting that my images are collages, and it's not important to me to make you think they're not collages. It's about the meaningfulness of the image, even if it's obviously stuck together.
ML: I'd like to return to what you said about de-emphasising parts of the image by not describing every form in detail. The representational imagery in the *My Old Neighborhood* paintings co-exists with non-descriptive areas of very liquid paint, running, splashed, and dispersing in pools. For example, in *Cul De Sac* (2021) and *No Sunday School* (2021), whole areas of the painting are streaming with thin rivulets of paint.

Looking back to the late 1980s, you made several paintings that had similar large areas of streaming paint – for example, *The Birth of Love, 2nd Version* (1987) – but in the 1990s you switch to buttery, smoothly-blended fields of colour – as in *Dancer* (1990). Do you remember how that change came about?
EF: *The Birth of Love, 2nd Version* comes from a period when I made several

paintings with collaged canvases, which related to my earliest work in the 70s – the pieces on glassine (a transparent paper). Those collaged canvases resulted in something that I was ultimately uncomfortable with, which was the clumsiness of the finished object. Since then, my goal has been to resolve a fully articulated and credible experience that captures the complexity of our lives within the eloquence of a rectangle, without anything feeling forced or constrained. If I could put a fully credible life experience within a rectangle – within the artifice of a rectangle – to me that was a higher achievement than the messier free-form-ness of the canvas collages. I consider this the ultimate goal for painters, because there is nothing in our lives that is ever as precise, fixed, orderly, or resolved as what painting can capture, and that is why art works.

ML: I'd like to come back to those areas of running paint. I realise it's almost perverse to focus on these non-descriptive passages, because the psychological narrative implications of your figuration are so compelling, but I'm asking because the non-figurative aspects of your work are rarely discussed, and I think they play a very active role.

EF: I'm happy to discuss it.

ML: So, the running paint in the multi-panel paintings of the 1980s gives way in the 90s to much smoother blending of opaque paint. That running paint doesn't reappear until *Four Women* (2010), and appears even more so now in the *My Old Neighborhood* paintings.

EF: Right. If you look at *The Miami Scene* (2013) [from the *Art Fair* paintings] you can see running paint in the water, but there are also breakdowns of descriptive language throughout the whole painting. The two figures on the right, holding hands and walking into the picture, have hardly any detail in their faces. Their gestures are absolutely explicit, but their bodies are loosely described, in contrast with the woman standing in the water.

The whole painting is playing with the weight of description. It's not a pre-conceived strategy, but something that I intuit as I move through it. I'm building the moment as I go. Some things can be knocked in and stay that way, others I just can't get right until I get them right. I don't know ahead of time where those moments are going to be because they're based on what turns out to be the urgency of a person, or a relationship, or whatever takes on the specificity of the psychological emotional moment.

ML: In regard to building and finding images, you were using the glassines from the late 70s, and then, more recently, Photoshop, creating photocollages to paint from. But you've also described how some paintings have had extensive changes painted in and out on the canvas; for example, *Daddy's Girl* (1984). Does that still happen?

EF: It definitely happens, and it's happening more and more again. With *Late America* (2016), I established the male figure on the ground and then asked *"Why?"* and *"Where?"* *"Are we looking at an inconsolable male? Are we looking at a sick person? Who cares to find out?"* I had crowd scenes going on. I had him on a chaise lounge so it looked more like he was sleeping. I had people in the pool looking at him. I had people who were beginning to express some kind of concern. The narrative went through many different stages.

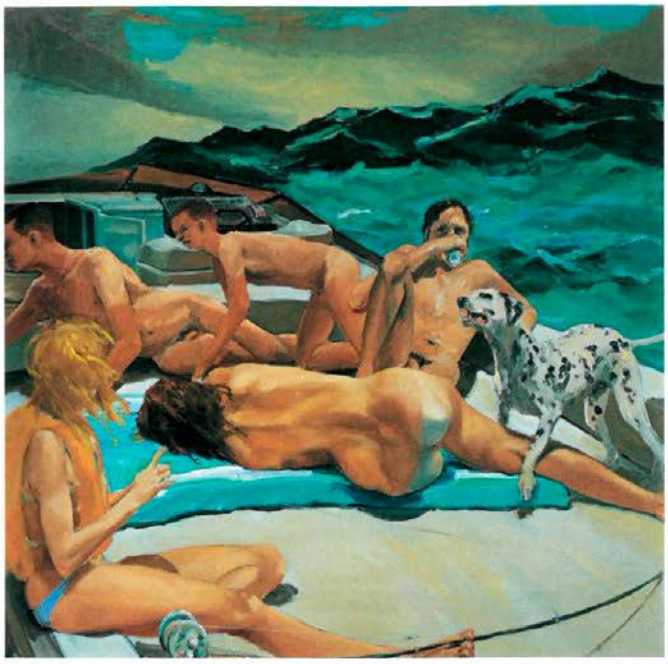
ML: In Photoshop?

EF: In Photoshop, and then in the painting as well. There are several things underneath what you finally see. When pentimenti sets in you're going to be wondering *"what the fuck is going on?!"*

Anyway, it was only when I put the boy there that it became clear what the painting was. Then I just had to clean up the background.

The paintings all vary and each painting I start, I'm not sure where it's going to end up and I'm okay with that. Some paintings, like *Late America 2* (2020),

Opposite:
My Old Neighborhood: Jump Roping
2021
Acrylic on linen
188 x 165.1 cm



The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog
1982
Oil on canvas
213 x 213 cm

Private collection
© Eric Fischl

the background pretty much stayed the way it was.

ML: The *My Old Neighborhood* paintings have more complex architectural backgrounds than the open space in *Late America 2*.

EF: With the *My Old Neighborhood* series, I decided that I would stage all the scenes in front of houses. I wanted architecture in there, and I wanted it to be the public-facing side, as opposed to the more private backyard, or the more intimate interior spaces.

The paintings started with schmears and pools of paint to build up a kind of activity – create a sense of light or indicate a space – and then the architecture went in to lock it in place. In several of them there's the presence of a car, which again was meant to lock in the idea that this is the public street side.

ML: When you're taking photographs to paint from, I guess you're looking for a certain light, using a fast shutter speed (the woman in *Cul De Sac* (2021) is captured running), and so on. Do your photographs have an identifiable style?

EF: I think they have an identifiable non-style. I take snapshots. I realised a long time ago that if I found myself staring at something, transfixed by it, and most importantly, not questioning why, then this was a moment filled with meaning for me. I've trained myself to photograph that moment without questioning it. Later, when I'm rummaging through my photos looking for something compelling enough to begin a painting, the same thing would happen: I'd find myself once again transfixed by a figure or group of figures and know that is as good as any place to start.

It's never the case that the background is the part that's compelling. The figure is easy to remove from the original context to put into other contexts, and the figure's the thing that's holding the mystery for me.

ML: But with the final paintings, I keep returning to the backgrounds. For me, the paint handling in the open areas of, say, *Red Balloon* (2021), is doing as much work as the figures. The figures exist in this melting, weeping world, which would be totally different if it was rendered with the sweeping blended horizontal brushstrokes you were using in the 1990s and into the 2000s, like your portrait of *Lorne Michaels* (2002).

EF: I'm giving you the wrong impression. In a finished work, the background – the handling of the background – is every bit as important as the figures, and they are both essential to creating a dynamic and compelling moment. Take for example, *Red Balloon*, which you've mentioned. I was trying to explain to myself the depth of the boy's interiority. He is clearly elsewhere. The entirety of painting this work was spent trying to disrupt, distract, or reveal the impact of his isolation. Every choice I made about what to put in, what to take out, was done with this in mind. The most difficult decision, which created many false starts, was trying to figure out where the balloon the girl holds went: higher, closer to her hand,

more air, less air...? For some reason, the significance of the moment hung on the precise placement of that balloon.

ML: The balloon looks like it was painted in one shot, wet-on-dry over the green background. When you were repositioning the balloon, were you repainting the background as well?

EF: Each time I gessoed it out I had to imitate the looseness of the ground around it as best I could without it becoming stiff and overworked.

ML: I think I'm focussing on the formal qualities of your paint handling, rather than narrative content, because the figurative images you arrive at strike me as so persuasive on their own terms, I simply accept them. I almost take them for granted as having arrived fully formed.

EF: That is exactly where I want the audience to be. When I started to paint figuratively, one of the artists I looked to was Manet. The thing that is so compelling about Manet is that he figured out how to balance descriptive painting with the influence of photography. If you look closely at his paintings, you see how abbreviated they are in terms of description.

What I'm going for is the effect of the moment itself: the people; the emotional psychological content. I'm trying to stop the moment where it's open enough to allow you to come in. The moment that's most full in terms of potential meaning, without me controlling the meaning. I leave the painting at the point where I think you'll enter it. Things are open-ended in a way

My Old Neighborhood: Red Balloon
2021
Acrylic on linen
172.7 x 243.8 cm

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that I hope allows the audience to make their own associations. It becomes their scene, their memory.

ML: I'm interested in how the backgrounds play into that. In *The Old Man Stays Behind* (2021), the angle of the roof and the placement of the windows feel very odd, like nothing is quite finding its place, but it's not architecturally impossible, so I ask myself, *"Did he paint it inaccurately or is the building really that shape? Never mind, I'll come back and figure it out later."* I move on to another part of the picture, but that unresolved doubt lingers, troubling the whole scene.

EF: I struggled with that painting. There were several things going on in the background to contextualise the people in the foreground. When I arrived at this house on this piece of land, I began to struggle with the lack of perspective, but there was something about the animation of the house – because it wasn't perfectly perspectival – that felt like it was impinging on the scene in a way that gave the moment that we're seeing in the foreground some content. I couldn't explain it. It's not that I couldn't have made a house in isometric perspective and left it at that. There was something about it feeling like the fifth character in the scene that I went with.

That is the beauty and magic of painting. The artist can make anything in the picture acquire disproportionate significance. Inanimate objects can feel like witnesses to the scene. They can feel like a conscious presence. I love this about painting!

ML: It also has a taut relationship with the vehicle in the foreground. On the subject of vehicles, perhaps we could talk about the *ROAD RAGE* group exhibition (2021), and more generally, about what you and April [Gornik] are doing with The Church art venue.

EF: *ROAD RAGE* was an exhibition, initially inspired by Matisse's *The Windshield* (1917), bringing together various artworks related to the car. It

Art Fair:
Booth #15 Oof
2014
Oil on linen
173 x 208 x 4 cm

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was our first exhibition announcing The Church in a full way. I'd bought this old Methodist church in Sag Harbour in 2017, and renovated it to run as an arts centre and artist residency. The aim is to develop a full-blown program of creativity that will bring compelling content into Sag Harbour's daily life.

ML: Would it be fair to say that your involvement in a community focussed project like The Church is in contrast to the perception people might have had of you in the 1980s, when you were often viewed in the context of a booming art market and a heady culture of individualism and celebrity?

EF: That was the view from outside. We weren't thinking along those lines. We were on the ride, for sure, but we had come out of a time when fame and fortune weren't connected to each other. Our ambitions were for fame. Fame meant that you were making work that deserved to be part of a historical dialogue. You wanted it to be referred to when talking about this or that issue. In other words, you wanted your work to be important.

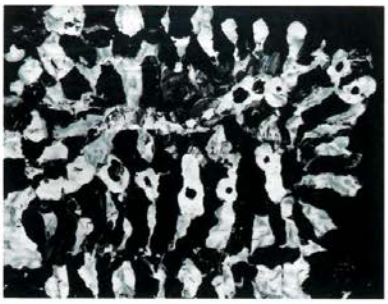
When things took off, we were going to fancy restaurants for the first time in our lives, having wine we never could afford, taking advantage of all that stuff because it was just silly. What we weren't seeing was the ultimate effect it was going to have on the next wave of artists. Without realizing it or taking responsibility for it, we opened the door to what became the art world of the 90s. We were trying to make art that subverted or disrupted all those values. It was political: about changing social structures. It aimed to rewrite the agreed-upon modernist narrative. We were high-minded, I think, but we also made it easy for other people to overlook that part of it and speculate on our art – not live with it, not take it seriously enough – just use it as a currency exchange, all the shit that began to come into the art world at the end of the 80s and into the 90s.

ML: One of the outcomes of that turn is the contemporary space of art fairs, where artworks are presented explicitly as commodities, which is markedly different to the kind of environment you're creating with The Church. Also, the world's population has grown so much, and communication technology connects so many more people, that the model you mentioned – of an artistic canon with a tidy story about a manageable number of 'important' artists – no longer fits.

EF: I think the thing that younger artists have to deal with – and I don't underestimate the struggle – is the feeling that they have to work on a global scale; they have to somehow answer to that. It's an impossible problem to deal with because it's so vast, so fast moving, so immediately repetitive, that to find vitality and freshness – and perspective, my god! – within that thing... I can't even imagine it.

Also, the modernist narrative has at its core this absurd idea that all artists are geniuses. The very idea of a *personal* style was understood to reflect the genius of the individual and individuality was meant to represent *uniqueness*. The art world became obsessed with speculating on the lasting genius of younger artists based on the superficial aspects of their *style* because style signifies *uniqueness*, and you must be a genius to articulate your uniqueness. Or so the reasoning goes.

Moreover, the modernist narrative had this idea of the genius: that your whole thing is to be that – to manifest that genius – which is of course patently absurd because most of us just aren't geniuses, and that's all there is to it. But we *are* people who can be significant to our community. We can be something that brings a vitality to our community in a profound way – not in a lesser form – in a profound way. I think that should be the ambition of most artists.



Matt Lippiatt
Untitled
2021
Acrylic on paper
50 x 65 cm

Courtesy of the artist