

Eric Fischl's "Rift Raft" Exhibition Dumps on Art Fairs



Eric Fischl,

"False Gods" (2015), oil on linen 56 in. x 76 in. (142.2 x 193 cm)

At Skarstedt, 20 East 79th St. through June 25th

By JAN CASTRO, MAY 2016

Eric Fischl's humorous and painterly exposé of high end art fairs opened at Skarstedt uptown the day before Frieze New York. To achieve his overly obvious views, Fischl staged scenes in which high end dealers lounge on nude female sculpture and in which the cell phone in the picture testifies that many are too busy talking to someone who is not there to be fully present themselves. What are not obvious are Fischl's facility with paint, his skill at painting other artists' signature styles, and his storytelling talents. In these complex meta-works – paintings within paintings, the artists stages complex scenes that call for the viewer's active participation.



"Watch" (2015), oil/linen, 60x80 in. (152.4 x 203.2 cm)

As Fischl is aware, Velasquez's *Las Meninas* and Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, two historically important paintings, both include mirror images of important personages outside the frame and suggest, in turn, that we viewers are now looking into the frame from that same position. Now, Fischl suggests, the famous gaze that brings viewers eye to eye with a Rembrandt face and eyes is missing and, in fact, that art fairs are a jumble of disparate dealers and viewers with less than noble intentions. Fischl pictures plenty of life-sized nudes with prominent breasts and nipples, abstract art that is simplistic, older men trying to engage the attention of younger women, and cynical to blasé dealers. At the press preview, the artist noted, "To some extent, the television or the mobile phone carry on the traditional use of the mirror in paintings with one major exception. The TV or cell phone expand the experiential space of the room by connecting to things outside of the room that have nothing to do with the space of the room you are occupying. These 'tools' act to sever and disjoin your connection to space your body occupies."*



"The Disconnect" (2015), oil on linen 56

in. x 75 in. *142.2 x 190.5 cm)

Rift Raft, the exhibition title, is a pun on riff raff and also the largest painting in the exhibition *Rift/Raft* (98" x 220"). This diptych shows two different worlds side by side. On the left, "important" art men lounge on and near a bevy of nude female sculpture – realistic bodies turned into objects – to reverse the Medusa myth that her gaze could turn men to stone. The rift part of the title suggests that these men are callous about art and women and do not see the outside world on the right where men of color are in the water next to the red hull of a vessel. The painting reprises Fischl's 1983 diptych of nude bathers on the right and more boat people on the left. The men lost at sea image dates back to Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19). Fischl suggests that the riff raff in the painting are not the desperate men at sea but men who objectify women's bodies and who prey on refugees. *Rift/Raft* emphasizes the disconnect between people with resources and people who need help.

Fischl is poking fun at himself in this and in other works such as *Portrait of the Artist as a Battered Head*, which shows viewers in front of a large painting that seems to be Close's signature style except that Close would never paint a battered head. Fischl noted, "I had to find an abbreviated language to reproduce the 'effect' of a Close painting" and the whole painting related to his "lifelong struggle trying to figure out girls."



"Her" (2016), oil/linen 80 x 68 in. (203.2 x 172.7 cm)

Fischl's most enigmatic comment was, "In some cases, I choose a work because I can't stand it and then, during the course of reproducing it, I realize the work's intelligence and sophistication which in turn I must acknowledge and change my opinion." Fischl curated *Disturbing Innocence* for the Flag Art Foundation in 2014, and almost all of the art was about sexual or bodily 'naughty' behavior, poses, or suggestions. Some artists from the Flag show whose work Fischl 'imitates' for his Skarstedt show are Roy Lichtenstein, Sarah Lucas, and Lisa Yuksavage. I loved Fischl's take on Yuksavage. Part of the fun of Fischl's Rift Raft show is identifying the artists Fischl imitates and the juxtapositions of imitated art in each composition. The art in *Rift Raft* is sometimes work Fischl does not enjoy, and, except for the Yuksavage take – a one-breasted woman, most of the nude and abstract art is more ordinary than Fischl's own work and the inventive, salacious works in *Disturbing Innocence*. **WM**

*All Fischl quotes from press preview at Skarstedt, 20 East 79th St., New York on May 3, 2016. Show closes June 25.



Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com) is a contributing editor for Sculpture Magazine (17 cover stories) and blogs at sculpture.org (<http://blog.sculpture.org/2015/07/08/uncovering-yoko-ono/#more-5940>). She has curated exhibitions for IAA (International Arts & Artists), Jane V. Zimmerli Museum, JAMA (Japan Association of Art Museums), and ICPNA (Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano – Lima). Her books include *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne*, and *The Last Frontier*. Her work has appeared in *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, and *American Book Review*.