

ARTS & LETTERS

The Michelangelo of Suburbia

“Erich Fischl: Fallen” by James Romaine, in *Image: A Journal of the Arts & Religion* (Summer 2003), 3307 Third Ave. West, Seattle, Wash. 98119.

Erich Fischl is one of a handful of artists who emerged during the 1980s “spearheading a return to figurative representation after the dominance of abstraction and conceptual art in previous decades,” says Romaine, an art historian. Yet it was not just a return. Many viewers find Fischl’s depictions of “the leisured suburban existence of the American middle class in all its physical and spiritual nakedness” unsettling. But this edginess, Romaine suggests, comes both from “a theme which appears in many of Fischl’s works: the public exposure of the private,” and the longing of his painted characters to return to “an Eden they cannot recreate.”

Born in New York City in 1948, Fischl grew up in the Long Island suburbs with a salesman father and an alcoholic mother. “The permeating message of his childhood,” says Romaine, was that “what happened in-

side the home, family, and individual was to be concealed from the world outside.” This tension plays out in many of Fischl’s paintings through figures that are literally naked—stripped, as Romaine puts it, “of the pretensions of society,” but also suggesting, in the artist’s own words, “the vulnerability of the human condition.” But his juxtaposition of clothed and naked figures can sometimes explore uncomfortable areas of sexuality. In one of Fischl’s more troubling works, *Bad Boy* (1981), a self-absorbed woman lies naked on a bed. Watching her, his back to the viewer, is the clothed young “bad boy” of the title. “But his transgression is unclear,” says Romaine. Is it his presence? That behind his back we can also see his busy fingers rifling through her purse? Or something else? As is the case with many of Fischl’s paintings, we get “only a fleeting glimpse of a larger, more complicated



Strange Place to Park (second version, 1992), by Eric Fischl

narrative.” Indeed, Romaine suggests, “the mind we come closer to understanding is our own. The viewer is the central character of *Bad Boy*.”

This kind of psychological subtext feels very distant from the Old Master figurative tradition, yet Fischl has expressed in interviews his affinity with such painters as Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Michelangelo, not so much for the doctrines of faith they depicted as for the spiritual drama they conveyed. He views himself as a “post-Fall Garden painter”—suburbia being only the latest effort to recreate Eden. His pictures are disturbing because the loss they portray reminds us of our own.

In *Tumbling Woman*, Fischl confronted America’s greatest crisis in modern times. Inspired by the television images of people leaping from the World Trade Center, the nearly life-size sculpture was erected in Rockefeller Center around the time of 9/11’s

first anniversary. Within days, recounts Romaine, outcry over the work had reached such a fever pitch “that the sculpture had to be covered with a sheet and removed.” The outrage was not universal; many viewers found the work profoundly moving. The conservative *New York Sun* defended Fischl.

Romaine believes that the sculpture embodies the ambivalence that has made Fischl such an important figure in the post-abstract art world. “*Tumbling Woman* confronts us not only with the disturbing and brutal facts of the fate of some on September 11, but it also challenges us to confront the collective spiritual cancer that lay behind that awful day. Her fall is a consequence of the Fall.” Like all of Fischl’s work, says Romaine, it “conveys a powerful visual manifestation of our fallen condition,” and “holds a mirror up to the hidden self that many of us would rather hide under a sheet.”

The Subterranean File-Sharing Blues

“Notes from the Underground” by Nicholas Thompson, in *The Washington Monthly* (Sept. 2003), 733 15th St., N.W., Ste. 520, Washington, D.C. 20005.

It’s no secret that the music industry has been ailing lately: Revenues from sales of recorded music were down by 15 percent over the last three years. The industry blames young people who download copyrighted music for free from file-sharing networks, and is doing its best to stop them. But instead of fighting technological change, says Thompson, industry bigwigs should take a few pointers from him, a successful young subway musician.

Since releasing his new album in January 2003, he’s sold about 500 CDs in the New York subways. Playing his Taylor acoustic guitar underground every few weeks, he’s made more money per hour than he does as a journalist. To succeed, though, he’s had to study his environment.

“When I first started playing in the subways, I experimented with different prices for my albums. The sweet spot seemed to be a price of \$5.” His conclusion: That’s what people will pay for a CD with music they like by a musician they never heard of. “So why does the average CD sell for more than \$17?” It’s not the manufacturing cost: Thompson’s latest album cost

only \$1.10 per disk. *Lesson 1* for the industry: For albums by artists other than the Rolling Stones or U2, which aren’t going to sell millions of copies, stop paying so much to marketers and other middlemen, and cut prices.

Lesson 2: Get beyond the set formats (alt-music, hip-hop, modern country), and “micromarket heterogeneous bands to scattered audiences.” In the subway, Thompson learned where to place himself to make sales. The hallways—where passersby hear the music only for a few seconds—are good for playing Beatles tunes or other familiar music. But his kind of instrumental guitar music does better on the subway platforms—which hold fewer people for a longer period of time.

Lesson 3: Embrace file sharing and figure out how to make a profit from the Internet, just as the movie industry did with videocassette recorders. Big artists lose with file sharing, which is why the industry is fighting it so hard. But it’s a losing fight—and that won’t be a bad thing for most bands or fans, Thompson says. “The Internet allows a wide audience to inexpensively sample a huge array of music. File-