

## Exhibitionism and Skoptophilia: Fischl's *Sleepwalker*

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The paintings of Eric Fischl immediately arrest the viewer with their curious blend of enigma and Eros. But why should the depiction of strange sexual dramas, often within a context of everyday activity or recreation, be so compelling? Why is there such pleasure in perplexity? To answer these questions, one might examine one of Fischl's representative early paintings notable for an air of meaningful intent, of seriousness, that seems to be related to its explicit, near-pornographic sexual content.

Fischl chose deliberately to paint provocative images. In reference to *Sleepwalker* (1979) (Figure 1), a night scene in which an adolescent boy is shown masturbating in a backyard children's pool attended only by two vacant lawn chairs, he has suggested that the contemporary viewer's ability to respond to painting has been so debased by a perpetual glut of imagery that shock tactics are necessary. To engage the viewer, the content has to be powerful—shocking, titillating—in itself. On the most basic level, Fischl wanted to get attention: "My reason for starting the painting was to make a dirty picture . . . I thought I would do a pornographic picture to give it power, to offend somebody." But Fischl's own relationship to *Sleepwalker* changed as he worked on it. When he finished the painting he found that, in spite of his original intent, he had "painted a sympathetic image. It wasn't simply a trick to get power. It wasn't a powerful image detached from emotional context and history. I painted this sympathetic image of a profound moment in a child's psychological and sexual life." Indeed, his relationship to the painting was so unexpectedly complex, and the image itself so loaded with potential meaning as to result in the attenuation of prurience. "It seemed like I was watching a natural event in a child's life. I couldn't condemn it. The only thing that seemed awkward to me was that I was watching, that I was put in that position."<sup>3</sup>

Devotees of Fischl's paintings can sympathize, for many of his works are most emphatically about looking. As one realizes in considering the two empty chairs in *Sleepwalker*, the viewer's presence is implied or expected. Complicity is the viewer's lot. Indeed, the position of voyeur—the position Fischl has chosen for the viewer—is common in this artist's early paintings, such as *Bad Boy* (Figure 2), *St. Tropez* (Figure 3), *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* (Figure 4), and *Birthday Boy* (Figure 5), as well as in *Sleepwalker*. Thus, in enigmatic but powerfully cathected images, he presents, especially in the early work, variations on the theme of skoptophilia, which Freud defines as the desire, the wish-impulse, to look—a

desire rooted in childhood curiosity regarding the sexual life of the parents. This curiosity, tinged with guilt, has its origin in a real or fantasized witnessing of parental intercourse, in what Freud calls the primal scene.<sup>4</sup>

The artist's feeling of awkwardness before *Sleepwalker*, along with the mixture of pleasure and fear that attended its development, is analogous to both the boy's imagined feelings and the viewer's response. Similarly, the boy's assertion of power, of self-mastery, of independence and defiance, is indirectly that of the artist himself. It is worth noting that the title implies a dream state, and dreams invite conventional psychoanalytic interpretation. Freud, as it happens, includes among "typical dreams" in his *Interpretation of Dreams* those in which one appears naked in public. These, he argues, are for the most part dreams of infantile exhibitionism. But the word he favors appears in English translation as "exhibiting"<sup>5</sup>—a word having special relevance for the public dreams of an artist who himself means to be a "bad boy."

One can go on interpreting. One can continue in a psychoanalytic vein (the boy stands in thalassic water, giving the expression to some complex desire to return to the womb or to possess the mother) or shift to something more outré: that an ancient idea of standing in a charmed circle and raising spirits is here mocked with another kind of "raising." But the important point for my purposes is less the content of interpretation than the *act* of interpretation and how it "justifies" one's interest in such a work of art. This idea is developed brilliantly by literary critic Norman Holland, who, using contemporary cinema as a paradigm in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, discusses the pleasure we take in art whose meaning is elusive, and whose symbols serve more to mystify than to communicate.<sup>6</sup> Holland accepts *a priori* that these works often take a rather casual attitude toward sex in all its forms and just as often make a statement about the moral and social confusion of our times. Yet "the quality that still stands out is the puzzlement they create." That is, we think they mean something, but what it is we do not know. We see the boy in *Sleepwalker* isolated in the center of the canvas, engaged in his solitary activity. We note his posture and his concentration. We recognize his act. But the enigma remains: why is he there, and what does it mean?

Holland postulates that the intellectual promise of meaning justifies the simpler, more primitive pleasure: "the puzzling quality . . . gives us an intellectual justification for gratifying the simplest of visual desires, looking



at sexy things.”<sup>8</sup> The viewer in the public art gallery looks at Fischl’s adolescent committing, in an open space and under strong light, a usually covert act. The viewer’s public space is analogous to the boy’s arena. But there is no need to conceal the act of looking; the viewer is expected to pay attention to the painting, to reflect, to determine its meaning. The boy’s defiance of convention and propriety is the artist’s too. By painting the scandalous act Fischl provides the opportunity to look; by locating it in an incongruous setting, and by designating it art, he provides the excuse.

In addition, the impulse to grapple with any disturbing moral or emotional content in the puzzling work of art is displaced into the search for intellectual or aesthetic meaning, in Holland’s view a much more pleasurable, and manageable, task. *Sleepwalker’s* audience is thus occupied in trying to interpret it. The baffling and difficult questions clustered around the moral implications and emotional significance of the act are disquieting to address, and perhaps impossible to resolve. But the question of what is going on and why admits of a speculative answer at least. The painting is a disturbing text the astute, aesthetically aware viewer is asked to gloss.

Puzzling works like Fischl’s *Sleepwalker* and the films discussed by Holland typically present cryptic actions and enigmatic settings as a substitute for emotions and motivations that remained concealed. “We are seeing events without understanding their meaning, particularly their emotional meaning,” says Holland.<sup>9</sup> In the case of *Sleepwalker*, we acknowledge the boy’s action, and note its circumstances. But what is Fischl’s intention? What does he wish us to think it means? In Holland’s view, the experience reproduces in several respects a situation with which all viewers are familiar: that of children confronted by adult emotions and actions they cannot understand. Certainly the “plot” as well as the “subtext” of most of Fischl’s work is bewilderingly complex and slippery; the meanings of actions and objects is unclear. This elusiveness does have much the same character as the mysterious behavior of adults has to children.

Furthermore, the viewer’s confusion about the significance of sexuality in the painting, as in the films, resembles the child’s pervasive anxiety about adult sexuality. Holland says, “The child’s general uncertainty about the adult world finds a focus for itself in his uncertainty, arousal, and fear at this particular area of adult life—sexuality. It serves as a nucleus for his total puzzlement at adult emotions and actions, just as sexuality in the puzzling [work of art] serves as a nucleus of the total atmosphere of mysterious, baffling emotions and motivations.”<sup>10</sup>

Holland’s analogy has particular relevance to Fischl’s case; indeed, the sentiments Fischl identifies as the true subject of his painting echo the confusion felt by the child confronted by incomprehensible adult behavior:

central to my work is the feeling of awkwardness and self-consciousness that one experiences in the face of profound emotional

events in one’s life. . . One, truly, does not know how to act! Each new event is a crisis, and each crisis is a confrontation that fills us with much the same anxiety as when, in a dream, we discover ourselves naked in public!<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Fischl’s own sense of the anxiety and perplexity generated by having to act and react in a culture that provides no guidance and whose threadbare rituals afford no comfort or reassurance is also an expanded, more fully articulated version of the child’s confusion and the viewer’s predicament. Anxiety and perplexity are both the “subtext” of Fischl’s paintings and the responses of the viewer, driven by childhood experience.

This reciprocity of meaning and response, never quite perfect, will continue to be a consistent, and intriguing, feature of Fischl’s work. The viewer may be disconcerted by *Sleepwalker*, but this reaction gives way to the sense that something beyond the desire to provoke powers the painting. As in the case of the movies discussed by Holland, Fischl does not provide access to a simple or authoritative reading of the work. But in the intimations of meaning the viewer discovers the work’s psychological and moral context, which authorizes a plurality of possible interpretations. The viewer’s complicity, which, as we have seen, is signaled by the device of the empty chairs and impelled by Fischl’s skoptophilic strategy, can now be seen as something more than a guilty reflex; it is instrumental to the making of meaning.

The consciousness of the role this complex relationship among subject, response, and intention plays in the process of interpretation is part of the viewer’s pleasure in early works such as *Sleepwalker*. As the critic and theorist Donald Kuspit wrote in his introduction to an exhaustive interview conducted with Eric Fischl in 1986,

The task of art today is to maintain mystery in a world that thinks there is none. In this age of overexposure art becomes a subtle way of underexposing, not to artificially generate a sense of mystery, but to remind us that there are experiences that are incompletely analyzable but have a profound effect. . . Fischl’s pictures seem to promise us clarity about complex issues, but in fact suggest depth of a complexity that can never be fully deciphered. It is this that makes his pictures. . . abysses of meaning we can never quite climb out of once we have accepted their terms.<sup>12</sup>

With its manifestly sexual subject, ambiguous meaning, expressionistic style, and implied narrative, *Sleepwalker* is the first of those works that, at the end of the 1970s, guaranteed the artist notoriety. In this early work, Fischl contrived to paint a taboo, and the resulting image predicts the direction of Fischl’s work for the next few years. As we have seen, Fischl in his early paintings engages in a calculated flirtation with pornography. He avoided the precipice, however, in his brilliant manipulation of a “skoptophilic” fantasy that has affinities with

what Norman Holland calls the "puzzling movie." Inviting the viewer to look, in this Freudian sense, and to engage the enigma of the painting's meaning, Fischl evokes in his audience the anxiety and perplexity that remain the true subject of his art.

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- 1 Nancy Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truths," *ARTnews* September 1986: 76.
- 2 Donald Kuspit, *Fischl* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987) 34.
- 3 Grimes 76.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. Joan Riviere, (New York: Pocket Books, 1970) 232, 236.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1971) 274-281.
- 6 Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1968) 162-174.
- 7 Holland 163.
- 8 Holland 166.
- 9 Holland 169.
- 10 Holland 170.
- 11 Peter Schjeldahl, "Witness," in *Eric Fischl*, ed. David Whitney New York: *Art in America*/Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1988) 21.
- 12 Kuspit 7.





Figure 1. Eric Fischl, *Sleepwalker*, 1979. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Figure 2. Eric Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 1981. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Figure 3. Eric Fischl, *St. Tropez*, 1982. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Figure 4. Eric Fischl, *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*, 1982. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Figure 5. Eric Fischl, *Birthday Boy*, 1983. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.