

SKARSTEDT

BROOKLYN RAIL

Eric Fischl: *Hotel Stories*

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



Installation view: *Eric Fischl: Hotel Stories*, Skarstedt, New York, 2024. © Eric Fischl / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York. Photo: John Berens.

Eric Fischl, master of mind games, has discovered the ideal venue for performing them: the hotel room. In his current body of work, he turns those anonymous places we transform into temporary homes by littering them with dirty clothes and half-eaten dinners into theaters, or mini-theaters, like viewing cubicles in porn shops. In a pornography emporium, we know what we've come to see, but in Fischl's paintings we must figure out what's going on or, more likely, invent our own meaning for what we see.

Seeing is the key issue in Fischl's work. Saint Augustine, for example, found seeing dangerous because it arouses our other senses. He called it the "lust of the eyes," a form of desire. Curiosity, like lust, is a longing to possess the thing we stare at even if, as Augustine points out, that thing is hideous. Marcel Duchamp deploys curiosity in *Étant donnés* (1969) by turning us into voyeurs as we press our eye to the peephole to gaze at a female torso in a landscape. But all we really see is our own lust. Fischl does something similar with his painting *Breakfast Begins the Day or Ends the Evening* (2023), where a woman grimaces as she puts on a high-heeled shoe while an older man lounges, half undressed, in bed in the next room. Is her

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expression simply the pinched look we make slipping into uncomfortable shoes, or is she scowling about what she's done or is about to do with the man? And who is she anyway? Has she consummated a deal? Sold something other than her body? We can't know that, just as we can't know why Fischl has skewed the table and chair on the left into angles reminiscent of Expressionist movie sets. But our curiosity has been piqued.



Eric Fischl, *October 7: Heading Out*, 2023. Acrylic on linen, 62 x 72 inches. © Eric Fischl / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York. Photo: Gary Mamay.

King's Highway: Killing Time (2024) opens the door to history and contingency, important factors in this show. Tom Petty's 1991 song of the same name includes the memorable and apposite line, "I don't want to end up in a room all alone," which is where we find Fischl's character strumming a guitar, "killing time." The expression instantly becomes ironic when we see an AK-47 near the window. From idling time away we pass quickly to time to kill, with the automatic rifle as the weapon of choice, and soon consign Fischl's self-absorbed guitar player to probable madness. Our ability to absorb horror resurfaces in *October 7: Heading Out* (2023): we presume the woman dressed for an evening on the town is learning about the recent Hamas attack from a television report right before she leaves her room. The news may ruffle her feathers, but she's still going out. In a sister painting, *October 8: Heading Home* (2023) a family in a hotel room identical to the one in *October 7* is decamping. Time marches on, oblivion subsumes memory.

From contingency we move back into psychodrama in *Standoff* (2024). We view, simultaneously, a young woman showering, while an older man emerges from the bathroom half-wrapped in a towel, his hair still matted with shampoo. A grinning youngster sprawls on the bed, a dog by his side. Has the young man discovered that the older man is having an affair with the young woman? Is the older man his father, or is the woman his partner? Or, are the men partners, and the younger man has caught his boyfriend with a woman and is now mocking him? The triangular composition is open to myriad

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possibilities. Fischl again distorts perspective in the room, mashing the distance between the men, creating a floor covering that runs out of the room into the outdoors and likewise heightening the psychological tension on the canvas.



Eric Fischl, *Standoff*, 2024. Acrylic on linen, 78 x 96 inches. © Eric Fischl / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Skarstedt, New York. Photo: John Berens.

The show's *pièce de résistance*, the magnificent *Untitled* (2023) depicts a woman, a towel covering her hair, sitting on a bed staring at us, her naked body protected by a pillow. She is accompanied by two springer spaniels, one distracted, the other warily guarding his mistress and eyeing us with canine suspicion. His eye on us—a scintilla of white paint pinpointing his intentions—echoing the eye the woman focuses on the viewer. Fischl may be alluding to his own painting of a towel-wrapped woman sitting on a toilet, *Bathroom Scene #4, Untitled* (2005), as if he'd reprised the image and relocated the woman to the seat of desire, a bed. But who are we in this configuration? We're no longer witnesses, as we are in the other eight acrylics in this show, but, rather, participants. The interplay of white swaths—bed sheets, toweling, pillows—draws the work away from photographic representation, as if we'd dropped back a couple of centuries and revisited an Impressionist tableau. Saint Augustine's "lust of the eyes" certainly comes into play here, but it's unclear if the intent is sexual or murderous. The woman's dogs may protect her, but she will never be safe from our insatiable curiosity.