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A Gallery Show That Questions Art Fairs, Just in Time for Frieze Week

Kat Herriman
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Eric Fischl's "False Gods," 2015, is one in a new series of oil paintings showing now at Skarstedt Gallery that poke fun at the art-fair circuit. © Eric Fischl. Courtesy Skarstedt, New York

This week, the painter Eric Fischl hopes to hold a mirror up to the frenzy of New York's art-fair season, capped by the opening tomorrow of Frieze New York, with "Rift Raft," his new solo show at Skarstedt Gallery. Like this body of work, the fair circuit is relatively new to Fischl. "I started going to art fairs about four years ago for research. I had always tried to stay away from them," Fischl says. "It's like speed dating; there is nothing particularly pleasant or accurate about it. People are consuming art based on name recognition or some sort of sense of 'get in quickly' mentality. It was easy to rationalize going, because I felt like a spy."

Hung on both stories of Skarstedt's Upper East Side townhouse, Fischl's paintings portray a fantastical world populated by disenchanting figures. Staring into the voids of their cellphone screens, Fischl's well-heeled characters remain unfazed by the onslaught of look-at-me colors and purposefully provocative images. "You have artists who are asking you to connect with them, and then you have people who aren't paying any attention to that plea, but are instead



looking elsewhere. I think that really talks to a reality that is everywhere. We are in our bodies and out of our minds,” Fischl says. “I think over time artists have become even more extreme. It’s gotten stranger and stranger, and it still doesn’t seem to matter because people are more interested in something else.”

Amid the claustrophobic carnival of false walls and people, familiar images begin to appear in Fischl’s landscapes: a Tom Wesselmann nude, a Keith Haring dog, a bare-bottomed Sarah Lucas sculpture. “I was choosing work because of what it triggered in me,” Fischl says of his curatorial choices. “Some of it I admire, some of it I think is silly.” His own work isn’t exempt: “Girl With Doll,” a seminal piece from his ’80s heyday, makes an appearance too.

The depiction and commodification of the female body complicates several of Fischl’s compositions. A painting titled “She says, ‘Can I help You?’ He says, ‘It can’t be Helped’” depicts a man looking at a female form through the barrel of his iPhone — presumably snapping a picture to marinate on later. These binaries pop up again and again: the apprehensive female exhibitor standing alongside the brazenly topless cartoon, the old man transfixed by the dazed young woman. “I think that it’s something that was in the early work. Themes of my life, themes of my art, are about connection, about the longing for connection. It’s about needs and desires,” Fischl says. (This summer in the Hamptons, Fischl’s first foray into the female form will be on view at the Parrish Art Museum’s upcoming exhibition “Unfinished Business: Paintings From the 1970s and 1980s by Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, and David Salle.”) “Basically, these are stories about men and women, boys and girls, and trying to figure that whole thing out — art that is sort of about females and objects of desire, and the awkwardness around that.”