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**Eric Fischl's Great New Work of American Art Can Only Be Seen on Facebook –
And Here**

By: Jerry Saltz

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Photo: Eric Fischl

At 10:17 p.m. on December 13 — one month and one week after the election — well-known artist Eric Fischl did something he'd never done before. On Facebook, he posted an image with the words "New painting fresh off the easel." It was of a large canvas, begun days after the election, depicting what seems to be the group mind going blind and growing paranoid, possessed, self-annulled, vulnerable, perverse, rotten. In it, Fischl also returns to ideas found in his work at the beginning: family, childhood, parent-child relationships, sexual taboos, swimming pools, and suburbia. But there was something new, too. Looking at Fischl's recent work, I felt I had fallen through a trapdoor into an infected field of American fissures formed by the election — a place artists will surely be exploring for a very, very long time.



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The scene is a stylish backyard dominated by an in-ground pool; four lined-up, upholstered designer chaise lounges; matching tables; and a large green-poled deck umbrella. The surroundings are immaculate, minimalistic, barren, a cliché out of any lifestyle magazine. Simply but lushly painted in blazing blue, white, green, and flesh tones, it's a suburban-American idyll — the territory behind bushes, hedges, walls, or within gated communities, isolated and invisible from the outside. Eden run on a skeleton crew. In the center of the painting, however, is a psychic avalanche: A hulking male figure, seeming about half human and half creature of animal instinct, lies on his side on a towel on the cement at the edge of the pool, contorted in some fetal seizure. His scrotum pokes between his legs. He's clown, clod, monster, victim. You don't know if this is a pose of fear, self-loathing, shame, insanity, radical exposure, masturbation, or rigor mortis.

One hallmark of Fischl's work is an absence of sequential narrative, which often leads to a kind of pictorial syntactic slippage — you don't know what you're looking at, exactly, nor how to look at it. Like a Zen koan, Fischl's work often manages to slow things down and create doubt and a philosophical framework for thinking. Those elements are strong here. To the right of the man stands a boy, maybe 10 years old. He carries a stuffed animal, wears white swim trunks, and is draped in an American-flag towel. He looks down at the man with his mouth slightly ajar. There's no other reaction; he's accepting, bored, almost ready to say, "Dad, where's the remote control?" In the background are male gardeners. They are as much like dark shapes and guardian figures as they are props and prisoners. Other than confirming that the painting was begun after the election, Fischl will say only that he "wanted to see if the man was sick, wounded, unconscious, depressed, a figment of the imagination. I kept putting people in and taking them out as I tried to figure it out. The boy was the final addition, and though he doesn't answer any of the questions directly, he feels he must be there also."

I read the painting a dozen different ways, all of them bigger than just a story of a man in a weird pose by a swimming pool, a boy, and a couple of workers. I saw dozens of different American narratives unfold. All the figures are male, so this is a story of the wreck of masculinity, something bankrupt, buckling, sick, unconscious of everything around it. Especially in the naked man, who is totally somaticized, I see an empire ending in an infantile whimper, a country identified by the heroism and pain it is forgetting, turning inward, being consumed by itself, pampered, deluded, duped, marooned, and wishing for stronger others to make quick fixes and take dramatic actions, to show the self-confidence that they lack, and to make those they feared go away by turning them into objects of open hatred and discrimination. So that we can be great again. Or forget that we haven't lived up to our own expectations. Or blame others. I see the boy wrapped in the flag while cathecting on a stuffed animal in place of real love or substance, seeing one of his futures as a man blown to emotional smithereens, shapeless, in a shambles. The most present-tense emotion in the painting is the workers stifling their contempt and being left to fend for themselves.

A great dysfunctional family unravels in Fischl's picture. This cowering, traumatized man being seen this way by a child or his son indicates perversity, incest, and irresponsibility. And, to be honest, I have to admit that in a political light, I see myself in this man. Me in my foul inconsolability, having witnessed the complete failure of almost every source of news and every institution in this country; losing my religions but trying to be reborn in stronger



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skin to pick up the fight. But am I molting or only an ostrich? Anyone who fears change now will be run over by events. So I'm there in the painting, thrust into the unfamiliar political terrain of trying to preserve myself and institutions while changing them only incrementally. I feel the precariousness of this position and want to burst out of this crouch and battle for control of the narrative.

In the man I also see other privileged liberals, their technocratic universe no longer ascendant, horrified by an aberrant political figure who is now president. The son, meanwhile, casually draped in the flag becomes an orphan or new nativist in this dawning American landscape. Apathetic, scornful, idle, he replaces the annihilated father on the spot. The gardeners in turn just become subjects for deportation, inspection, or plotting. If this is a sequential narrative read left to right, we may say that the monstrosity of the father begets the blasé nationalistic scion who's at home with hate, indifferent to the sight of his father in a state of chaos.

Getting darker, I fantasized about the reactions of those Trump voters I met over the last year. And my understanding of Fischl's misshapen figure flipped — suddenly I saw them writhing in self-abnegation and remorse. I thought of the dinner I had this summer after speaking in Aspen and the wife of a machine-gun manufacturer, a former Reagan adviser, and a billionaire collector who all happily told me they were voting Trump — and me hysterically carrying on about how none of them could come back from this ethical abyss and that they'd better tell their daughters they were doing this. And then I remembered their bemused faces as they looked at me like I was a progressive lunatic who didn't understand anything. I thought of the world-famous hematologist who told me the day before the election that he was voting for Trump because he wanted to “throw a grenade into the whole thing.” As soon as I heard myself say, “I don't want to blow it all up,” I knew that this mean-spirited aggressiveness was more prevalent and powerful than I thought. After he added, “This isn't something I bring up in polite society,” my wife shuddered and said, “Trump is going to win,” having grasped his nativism running cold, proud, certain, and condescending. I remembered Faulkner's line from *Absalom, Absalom!*: “Now the period which ended in catastrophe begins.”

The painting is perfectly titled *Late America*. To me, the late imparts the darkness of the American night, a period implying an end of history and death. I don't know what the America means anymore. Either way, we — like the figures in this painting — are sleeping under strange, strange skies.

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