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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Eric Fischl, 2008 June 4-5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Eric Fischl on 2008 June 4 and 5. The interview took place in Sag Harbor, NY and was conducted by Robert Enright for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Eric Fischl declined review of the transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is Sag Harbor. It's a Wednesday, June 4 [2008]. I'm interviewing Eric Fischl for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

Eric, I guess I want to go way back and get you to kind of plumb your childhood memories and talk a little bit about what you recall about growing up. Before we get to you being an artist let's sort of talk about you being a human being in the early going. I mean, what was the family life like?

ERIC FISCHL: Wow, family life was, you know, up until maybe seven years old it was heavenly, or I thought it was heavenly. And then—was it seven? It was around when I was seven or eight years old there was a kind of terrifying incident where there was a huge fight in my family between my mother and father. My father left. We were sent to bed. The next thing I know, my mother is passed out right in front of my door to my bedroom. My father comes home. I sort of climb over her and run down to tell him that I think she's really sick or there's some—actually I said, "I think she's really drunk or something." And he said, "No, no, she's sick," you know, and kind of went to deal with it.

But it was at that point that it became explicit in our family that there was a major problem and, you know, then the relationship of everybody to everybody else began to turn on that. And also my sense of innocence changed.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What on the surface would appear to everybody else, including to you for those first years, was the kind of perfect American family, that whole thing, just disintegrated and some other awareness came into being?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Well, it became explicit anyway. But, you know, I actually had grown up from early childhood with ferocious temper tantrums. I, you know, would throw these irrational, violent, you know, always misdirected. Oftentimes I would express it by banging my head against the wall until I was like dizzy, if not passed out from it. So there was like a—so on some level I knew that this wasn't a perfect environment. But it was post-war, suburban American idealism and, you know, everybody was really trying to look towards this sort of fantasy future optimistically.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was it the sort of household, I mean, did you get encouragement about—was art ever part of your mother and father's life at all?

ERIC FISCHL: Art was a constant frustration for my mother. She was, you know, partly it was the generation of women, stay at home mothers who weren't expected to do anything but raise children and keep a nice house and keep their husbands happy and whatnot. And she was an incredibly bright woman, incredibly well-read, with very little support from friends and neighbors and whatnot for her passions, her interests.

So she was very frustrated and she was also wanting to be creative. I think she was creative. I just think she lacked the discipline and she also didn't have the courage to fail. And so she would do things. She'd write a novel and then stop halfway through it. She'd take painting lessons and then get disillusioned with that. She'd take sculpture lessons. You know, she was always starting and stopping and whatnot. And it wasn't that she would take us as children to museums and she always had to be seeing art; she didn't do that at all. So, you know, we weren't actually—the only art we were exposed to were her attempts at art, for the most part, except for, you know, when a school trip goes to the Met and looks at the mummies.

And my father was somebody who fancied himself as creative. He felt that he was a creative salesman. He worked for a company that made industrial films for promotional, internal promotional films or whatever for corporations. And he was the one that would sort of come up with ideas for the films and then go pitch them to corporations and the company would, you know, hire his company to do it, blah, blah, blah. So he always felt that he had some kind of creative energy there. And actually at the end of his life after he retired he became an artist, so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So art wasn't a part of your life then? I mean, you weren't a museum-goer as a kid, you didn't do a lot of drawing or making little installations at home or that kind of stuff the way a lot of kids do?

ERIC FISCHL: There was two sort of independent creative acts that I did as a child that I remember and were, I think, actually important. One was spontaneously—maybe it was a rainy day or something, nothing to do—I did a drawing of Cain killing Abel, but I only drew Cain. And I remember to this day sort of being really like careful about the anatomy. You know, like really trying to get the biceps muscle. I mean, I have no idea what it looks like now because I, you know, it's long gone. But I do remember spending a lot of time working on the musculature and this sort of, you know, gesture which I believe kind of looks like, you know, the javelin thrower, the Greek. You know, both arms outstretched and a big rock in one hand and loin cloth and so on. I remember it vividly, like I could almost go on the floor and draw it again for you. So that was my first spontaneous act.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But only the victor, not the victim?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Okay. All right, as long as we got that straight.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I'm not saying these things are not, you know, deeply psychological. The next one will prove that point. The next spontaneous creative act I did was I took a—I had this Empire State Building that, you know, was a kind of metal thing you get when you visit the Empire State Building. You get it as a tourist thing, a little model casting of the Empire State Building. And I stuffed it full of peanut butter. And so I consider that my second inspired [laughs] creative act.

And my third spontaneous creative act, which actually was around the same time as the peanut butter one, was a suitcase that we had that was, we would use to go to my grandmother's. You know, pack overnight to go to my grandmother's. And the interior of it was all these drawings of Snow White and, you know, cartoon characters, kids' characters. And I remember one day just pissing in it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Good Lord, Eric. [Laughs.]

ERIC FISCHL: So those were the earliest creative expressions that I recall.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You could have become Karen Finley, you know. I'm surprised you're who you are.

ERIC FISCHL: Performance art, exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So how did you translate those extraordinary acts of creativity into some interesting art? Because, I mean, when you finally go to university you decide to take art. Was that a decision you'd made?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, actually I went to university not to do that. I didn't, I took some—you know, when I was in elementary school we had to take art classes and I remember having a lot of pleasure doing it. I actually worked with a neighbor—this girl, Ruth Harmell—who was very talented and she was very smart and stuff. And so she and I would like collaborate on—so the school had this thing where Halloween they arranged for students to go and paint windows in the town with Halloween decorations. She and I worked on a very elaborate piece for one of those. So I remember that being a, you know, a lot of fun to do.

Then in junior high school, high school it shifted out of that to sports and girls. And then as much as I didn't really want to go to college, my father kind of talked me into doing it. And because I had no motivation he said, "Take business courses," which I did. Anyway, I took business courses first semester, flunked them miserably. Then I shifted over to psychology, very naively thinking that psychology was a discipline that wasn't particularly disciplined. It was just about thinking and feeling and sitting around talking about those things.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you could figure out why you put peanut butter in the Empire State Building, too. It would have been useful.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, maybe that—I had no idea that it was like, you know, doing some serious mathematics and, you know, data research, and I just gave up. And so I completely failed, flunked out of school. It was 1966, '67, so it was right at the rise of my generation's, you know, sort of alternate lifestyles and counterculture and whatnot. And I took off. I left home, went to San Francisco and got involved in the hippie thing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Were you political in any way at that time or was this just—

ERIC FISCHL: Not in any active way. I was actually, for me it was much more of a spiritual pursuit. It was about sort of finding myself through drugs and alternate lifestyle and anti-establishment stuff. But, you know, I mean, I

certainly protested from time to time but I really wasn't an activist in that way. It was more sensorial or something.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So when you go to Arizona State [University] what do you go there to do?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, first I went to Phoenix College. What happened was in San Francisco, after sort of attempting to do this other thing, the combination of being lost and being overly medicated on—you know, self-medicated, I went into a pretty steep depression and ultimately ended up going home. My parents had moved out to Arizona. So I went home and I just kind of sat around the house until my father went insane trying to motivate me. He kind of forced me to get just any kind of job to get out of the house, you know. So I got this job teaching—not teaching. I got this job driving trucks for patio furniture.

And it was at that time that I met a guy named Bill Harris, who was a part-time person there and a part-time student at Phoenix College, which was a community college, two-year community college. So I—and he was taking art classes. I'd go hang out with him. He was the only person I knew and I'd go hang out at his house and watch him do these things, you know, that were his school projects. I'd get stoned and, you know, talk and look at him do these things. And what he was doing was not my definition of art so I kept arguing with him, saying, "This isn't art. I mean, you can't just glue bread to windowpanes and call it art. You know, Rembrandt is art. This is not art." And he would say, "No, this is art, actually." You know, and he would argue with me about it.

You know, and at some point I guess, you know, just watching him be creative without having the discipline, you know, of what I thought art had to be, which was, you know, anatomical drawing and, you know, being able to paint like Rembrandt and stuff, I got the idea that if he can glue bread I could find something else to glue and, you know, so maybe I should go to this place, too. You know, and we were having a lot of fun and stuff. And I also thought, you know, this would be a good place to meet girls because I'm not able to meet them at the furniture store.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Delivering patio furniture, that's right.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, so that's what I did. I went and enrolled. And the other thing, of course, was I thought, you know, you take art classes and you're no good at it, what do you get, a C, you know. Nobody failed art. So that was going to be okay. That was my strategy.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So but did you then find you liked what you found in the—

ERIC FISCHL: Almost instantaneously. What I found was two things I had never identified as a need in me but were the things that actually were the biggest absences in my life and I didn't know it. And those two things were that through making things it was the first time in my life I could concentrate, which I had never considered was an issue because I had never tried. And the second thing was I could tolerate being alone, and that was—those two things made me, what they did was they made me feel integrated as a person.

So I knew then that no matter whether I was good or bad, this was the way I was going to ground myself in daily life. And so that became an easy sort of non-decision. You know, you just, I was just, that's what I do now, you know. And then the rest became sort of trying to become better and better and better at it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But were you already developing—I mean, the tolerance that you got in the arguments about what could be art, you're thinking, "Well, I can find something to glue to a window," did you begin to develop an idea about what art would be or could be by this time?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I had a terrific teacher the first year at Phoenix College, a guy named Merrill Mahaffey, who was a wonderful painter. At the time he was doing these sort of kind of regional pop art type paintings. But he was a teacher who really was inspirational in terms of getting you to break down your preconceptions about what art should be, getting you to include play, include fun as part of the energy that you would tap into.

And he developed a group of energetic students around him that—we were all competitive with each other in a kind of healthy way, pushing each other to blow each other's minds and stuff like that. And there was a lot of extracurricular activity. Merrill was somebody who would set up drawing, nude drawing outside of the school because you weren't allowed to do nude drawing in the school. And so he'd, you know, rent the Unitarian church and do it at the Unitarian church. We'd do like meetings, rap sessions at his house. It became like a real intense experience.

And then the next year, I think partly on his encouragement to keep going, I went to Arizona State, which was for me a huge kind of commitment. Now I was taking myself seriously as an artist because I was going to a big university with a big art department. And I was fortunate while I was there to have my first painting class with a guy named Bill Swain, who was a graduate student. He was a teaching assistant then and they gave him this first year painting class. Bill was like a magical being. I mean, he was somebody who when you talked to him or

when he talked it was like through images or something and it was mysterious and it was elliptical and it was, you know, you just, you couldn't keep up with him, you know. And it was exciting that way. And he also was somebody who introduced me to abstraction and he introduced me to the kind of spiritual aspect of abstraction through Kandinsky and, you know—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Malevich and that tradition?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly. And he also introduced art as high purpose, right, so it started—now the pursuit took on a deeper kind of significance. Besides the liberation of playing and, you know, the kind of irony or something of my first encounter, now a deeper kind of sense of purpose was emerging. And towards the end of that year at Arizona State he handed me this brochure and said, "You ought to check this out. You should go here." And I looked at it and it was a brand new school starting in California called California Institute of the Arts [CalArts]. And I, you know, it looked like this amazing place. It was advertised as like the most avant-garde, the most extraordinary vision of the arts. And I thought, "Well, you know, this is way above my thing."

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Way above what you felt you could achieve?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, that this was like—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You still were convinced—

ERIC FISCHL: This was going to be like the best artists, students, in the country were going to go. This thing was like important, you know. And so I was like, "No, I'm not even, they wouldn't even accept me." And he was like, "No, no, I think you should apply." And then I applied and I applied late. I applied like in June or something to this school starting in September. And I got accepted, which blew my mind and then also saddened me because I realized that I got accepted but it cost like $6,000 to go there and who had that kind of money, you know. These were like '60s dollars, you know.

So I called the admissions and said, you know, "Thank you but no thank you. I can't afford to come." And I talked to this woman, Nancy Chunn, who was working in the admissions at the time and she said, "Let me get back to you." And she called back a few hours later and said, "I got you full scholarship." What?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs] You thought this was a joke, right?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. She said, "All you have to do is, it's a work-study thing. You're going to come work in the admissions office, dah, dah, dah, but you can come." So this was like, wow. So 1970, September, they opened their doors. So I moved to LA, found an apartment, shared an apartment and started at this school which had no history to it whatsoever, no cliques, no whatever. All these precocious artists, students, came there to seek this ideal fulfillment, and it was absolutely insane. It was, you know, southern California in 1970 was a pretty wild place to be. Anyway, and it was insane. It was funny. It was crazy.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is where you meet Matt Mullican and David Salle. I mean, the group of artists—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, Ross Blechner, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Bloom. I mean, there was like, there was, you know, and there was like artists, filmmakers, dancers, musicians, designers. You know, such a large body of creativity and everyone trying to do this thing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So it was a good place for you to go, then?

ERIC FISCHL: It was incredibly difficult to be there. It was good, I think, ultimately. I look back on it favorably. At the time I hated it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, the school opens its doors 1970, the same year—maybe the August issue or whatever—*Art in America* comes out, or September issue, I don't know. "Painting is dead." Headlines, "Painting is dead." I'm a painter. So I walk into this avant-garde environment where everyone's accepted that painting is dead except for a few of us who are just idiots, you know. And so it was a constant kind of struggle to maintain, you know, this thing of learning how to paint and trying to make it seem exciting and whatnot. You know, we would have these critiques where, you know, it was like a Roman arena. It was a blood, you know, ritual of some kind where the whole thing was to inflict as much pain on a student as you could because if they cry, if they felt pain it meant the thing they were doing was meaningful, it was alive. [They laugh.] So we were unbelievably brutal with each other, to the delight of the faculty.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Who was teaching you at this time, overseeing this blood ritual that went on on a daily basis?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, the head of the visual arts was Paul Brach, second generation abstract, New York

abstractionist.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Who still believed painting was alive?

ERIC FISCHL: He did. He did. And then this young painter who had come up with a skyrocketing career as a young artist as a lyrical abstractionist named Allan Hacklin, who was in the few years that—I was there for a year and a half and then within like three years his career was completely—disappeared. You know, it was one of those things where that movement, the lyrical abstraction movement, was instantaneously there and equally fast disappearing. But in that time, you know, he was actually a very dynamic and motivational kind of artist, very much believing in paint and very much super critical, unrelentingly critical and sort of pig-headed in a way that, you know, you learned to be tough, you learned to form your arguments, and defenses and stuff like that. So ultimately it was good.

But the thing that I found the most difficult about CalArts was that it was absolutely New York-centric and it really believed that the only true artist was a New York artist. And you had to graduate and get your ass there as soon as you can and become part of the big conversation and blah, blah, blah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So this was just off Broadway for the real story then, right, way out there in California?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And I found it difficult because one, you know, I was forming myself and I was trying to find a kind of spiritual thing that made art a natural activity. It wasn't a commercial one. It wasn't, you know—it was something that you did and, you know, that you brought people to it. It wasn't that you went out to get the people. You know, I just had a sort of small and a romantic sense of it. And it took me—I graduated in '72 and it took me until '78 to kind of find my way into New York.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: We'll get to the circuitous way that you get to New York, too, but were there—I mean, when you say it was insane was it crazy, was it sex, drugs, and rock and roll as well at CalArts?

ERIC FISCHL: It was all of that. I mean, it was crazy because, I mean, first of all, you had—everybody there tacitly believed that there were alternative means, methods, forms, subject matter, content, et cetera for art. And the school was set up, especially in the art department was set up in a way that they were so afraid of labels. They didn't want to predetermine your creative output so they hated naming your painting class Painting. So they changed the names of the courses every semester or trimester. They'd sit there and, you know, "Now you're taking Liquid Color Medium. Now you're taking Brush Practice." You know, it's like there was this kind of silliness to how they were trying to avoid being categorized, right?

And then they had classes. I mean, there was one class called Mobius, you know. "What do you do in Mobius?" "You get credit for it." "What do you do?" "Well, you know, it's, you know, like, man, a Mobius strip is a continuous surface. Inside and out it's the same surface." So, you know, it's like, "Okay, I'll take the credit anyway." You know, we had a—Charlemagne Palestine did a class in aura reading and you got credit for that. There was a class in marijuana.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Now, what—

ERIC FISCHL: Started by the guy for legalization of marijuana, and so we had a class on—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You smoked dope in class?

ERIC FISCHL: No. It was like, you know, the history of, the chemistry of, the legal thing of marijuana. You know, but it was a—you could get it for credit. There was an anthropologist, Beryl Bellman, who was one of these sort of post-Margaret Mead types who would go live with the, you know, with the tribes and learn the rituals and become a shaman, you know, dah, dah, dah. So his class was on shamanism, you know. So there was, all of that kind of stuff was your academics. That was your academic credit.

And then, you know, then the studio, of course, so much of—you know, they were trying video and performance and great kind of people. You know, what's his name, Nam June Paik and Shua Abbe had this, like, laboratory for basically psychedelic video, you know, just these kind of color patterned wall-to-wall screen. You know, you'd go get stoned, go in there and just groove for hours on end. So it was things like that. I mean, it was pretty nutty.

Plus, the school wasn't, the building wasn't finished in 1970 so they rented this Catholic girls' school in Burbank, Villa Cabrini. It was, you know, there was a kind of level of informality the first year as they had to make do, so that kind of contributed to the craziness of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you did the degree program there? I mean, you did all of your academic and studio courses?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I, because I had some credit from my first year—even though I had failed college I had a few

credits that I could, held, and I had to do stuff at Arizona State—I actually came with enough credits that I didn't really have to take any core stuff. And so I took them electively when I wanted to but I didn't have to. But basically I was there as studio practice.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why do you think they let you in? I mean, did the portfolio, did you have to present a portfolio for admission and you sent paintings?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, I was completely surprised. I didn't think there was anything to my work and so I was really surprised that they accepted me and even more surprised at how much they actually wanted me to be there. And I, you know, I give them all the credit in the world for that. But they believed in me way before I believed in myself.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So it's out of your connections at CalArts that you end up going to Halifax to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design [NSCAD], isn't it?

ERIC FISCHL: It was Allan Hacklin, yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why did he think that would be a good school for you? I mean, from the way you describe CalArts, NSCAD was absolutely, you know, it was a formal, rigorous school, and conservative, but it was considered pretty radical at the time. The famous Sol LeWitt article is it's North America's finest arts school.

ERIC FISCHL: Greatest arts school, yeah. Yeah, they had a—CalArts and NSCAD had a strong relationship. Some graduate students from both places went back and forth. Tim Zook, for example, who was a graduate at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, was a graduate when I was at CalArts. We became friends, et cetera. There was a dialogue between the two schools. Plus, they were, like CalArts, focused on avant-garde, on conceptual art, performance, things like that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And certainly questioned the validity of painting as well when you go there.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, there was—it was a non-discussion almost, it was so given that painting is not important. In fact, that's how I got hired, I'm convinced of it. I mean, they had—I was living in Chicago. After I graduated CalArts I spent two years in Chicago working as a guard at the Museum of Contemporary Art, after doing several other things before I got that job. And I get this call like in November from Allan Hacklin saying, "I think I just got you a teaching job at Nova Scotia." And, you know, obviously I hadn't been looking for one, I hadn't thought about it, I hadn't applied. And I'm like, "What?" And he goes, "Yeah, they just fired their painting instructor and they need somebody right away for January. So it's just for three months and I convinced them that you've got a lot of energy and you'd be good. And so you should do it. I think it's a good idea." And I was like, "Okay, I'll go there."

So I packed it up with my wife at the time, also a young painter named Lannie Johnston. We'd just been married for like—July we got married, so this is like November. So January we take off, drive in the dead of winter. I'll never forget how high the snow in Trois-Rivieres was. I'd never seen that much snow in northern Quebec as we're driving. I'm thinking, "Where are we going," you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You didn't know much about Nova Scotia, I gather?

ERIC FISCHL: Didn't know anything about it. And just showed up January 1st, showed up in Halifax. You know, they—and it was clear that painting was like such a non-issue for them that they could hire somebody who had no skills, had never taught, had no, you know, had a B.F.A. but had no degree for, you know, a higher degree for that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And no exhibition record.

ERIC FISCHL: No exhibition record. Nothing. I was two years out of school. And, you know, "Here, teach these kids painting." Because what they also knew was that 60 percent of the kids who go to art school want to paint, so they had to offer painting. So I ended up there and ended up there for four years. It's sort of typical of schools, right, that once you're in, you're in, you know. [Laughs.] And that was a very interesting time. It was, Halifax was an extremely important time for me on all kinds of levels. But I credit it with, you know, really forming what has become my art and become what I'm known for. It gave me my first professional experience as an artist with museum shows and gallery shows and stuff all coming out of that. It was, you know, I met my dearest friend, Bruce Ferguson, there, who was a curator at the time. And met my wife, April Gornik, there at the time. So it was like all good things, you know, came out of that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And this kind of mad but rigorous experience, that is to say this ability to argue and be brutal in crits about painting, I gather in some senses CalArts also prepared you for the kind of intellectual rigor that one was going to encounter in NSCAD as well, but going in as the sacrificial painter to a school where they just

assumed that blood would continue to flow on the floor. You were ready for that then, presumably.

ERIC FISCHL: I was familiar with it, yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, yeah, the positive aspect of it was, you know, the argument you make you make strong by making strong work, you know. So, you know, you just have, you come up with the goods. And you impart that to the students as well. I mean, I wasn't—I was unformed as an artist so I was teaching what I had been taught to a large extent. You know, in terms of problem solving for the students it was things that I had been given that I didn't even fully understand but, you know, I did them, they did them, we talked about it.

We also talked about, you know, about the sort of importance of painting, the connection that it had to, you know, real experience and real communication and this and that. And then, you know, we'd sit around at faculty meetings and, you know, hash out the program and whatnot. You know, both Gerry Ferguson, who was really the power behind the throne, and Garry Kennedy was the president of the school, and they were the ones—and Pat Kelly, who became a very good friend of mine, but he was the third in that triumvirate of power, old power there, who had brought conceptual art to and kind of made it an important place for European artists and American artists and stuff. And they were obviously territorial about it. They were, you know, and we'd get into these faculty things that, you know, and really just go at it for direction the school should take.

And the mistake that they made was they hired a lot of their graduate students back who were non-painters but were of my generation in which painting was being rediscovered and over the four years became painters. And it was totally Oedipal in that dynamic because here there's the former students, their loved ones who they'd hired back into the fold were now doing the thing that they hated most.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's such an odd apostasy for them to have this happen, when you think about it.

ERIC FISCHL: It's fantastic. [They laugh.] And, of course, they also turned to painting. You know, they all, every one of the old guard ended up painters as well, and quite good painters. And so, you know, it's just one of those things.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It wasn't just that the old guard was there. The thing that NSCAD did that it's legendary for is the kind of visiting artist program where everybody from Beuys to Judd, I mean, everybody came there.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was it exciting?

ERIC FISCHL: April's graduate speaker was Joseph Beuys. First time in North America, you know. There he was. One of our graduate students stole his hat. I mean, you know, that would be like taking the pope's hat, the pope's miter.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That would be worth a hell of a lot more money right now than the pope's miter, too, as it turns out.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, that was an embarrassing moment.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I didn't know that story. [Laughs.]

ERIC FISCHL: Oh, yeah. No, this actually was April's ex-boyfriend.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Stole Joseph Beuys' hat?

ERIC FISCHL: Stole, ripped it off his head and ran away with it and then—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What was under the hat? I never, never knew. I mean, I never, ever saw a picture with his hat off. [Laughs.]

ERIC FISCHL: Thinning hair, you know. But, you know, it totally upset him, obviously. I mean, to take his hat would be like to take his arm or something, you know. And, of course, it was embarrassing to us. We had to go find them and get the hat back [laughs].

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was it—

ERIC FISCHL: But yeah, they brought the—Kasper Konig was the, when I got there he was in charge of like their prints and publications. What they had done very smartly was they had this lithography studio that they published prints by artists who were unheralded in New York at the time that became the important artists of the '70s: Sol LeWitt and Vito Acconci and Carl Andre and, you know, these conceptual and Minimalist artists and stuff like that. And what they would do is they would bring them up there to do a print and then while they were

there they would give a talk or look at student work or, you know, et cetera. And it became, you know, such a dynamic place that way in the middle of nowhere. And then they would bring artists from Europe over and stuff through Casper, who, you know, he organized the first show in North America for, you know, people like Paik and Immendorf and Beuys and stuff like that. You know, British artists like Stanley Brouwn and—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's funny that this outpost in the Maritimes becomes so extraordinarily sort of vital and central to contemporary art. It still seems anomalous when you think about it historically. I mean, it's one of those curious blips on the map of history that happened once.

ERIC FISCHL: I think in the same way that they hired me naively the funding, the provincial funding for this school was something, and the federal funding for this school and things like that, they were so un-knowledgeable about anything that it was just, you know, something that the Canadian democratic system said, "Yeah, there has to be an art school in this province, and so this is it. And we'll just keep giving them money even though we have no idea what they're doing there." And so they actually for, you know, in the '60s had quite a bit of dough to throw at things. So, you know, by the time I got there Canada was beginning to turn into a very nationalistic kind of environment and they, you know, they were making it a little bit harder for American graduate students to come there. It began to close down a bit.

One great thing came out of that, which was *Time* magazine trying to stay in Canada—because the government was saying now that magazines, foreign magazines had to have 75 percent Canadian content to it, et cetera —*Time* magazine as a PR thing launched this huge show called "Canadian Canvas." Do you remember the show?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I do, indeed.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Curated regionally across the country.

ERIC FISCHL: Every province represented, you know. I think it was predominantly a painting show. But it was, yeah, it was "Canadian Canvas." It should be. But it traveled to all the major museums in Canada with purchase money for work, a certain amount of work and whatnot. And, you know, when they came to curate the—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The Maritimes.

ERIC FISCHL: The Maritimes, they came to my studio. I was working on these large abstract paintings and they chose them. So, you know, even though I was not really a Canadian I got included in my first show, which turned out to be a museum show and turned out to be the first purchase I ever had because Edmonton bought—the art gallery of Edmonton bought my painting for $1,000. I mean, the first thing I ever sold was $1,000. Canadian, though.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is Karen Wilkin, and Karen Wilkin was there.

ERIC FISCHL: Right, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The director. They were very keen on Clement Greenberg and—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, that was the stronghold of the Lake Louise crowd.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Emma Lake, yeah.

ERIC FISCHL: Emma Lake.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Emma Lake, that's right.

ERIC FISCHL: Sorry. Yeah, Emma Lake. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, that's where the brief reputation you had as being a Canadian painter emerged from, because in Europe you can still find catalogues that list you as a Canadian.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Well, if you go to—I mean, at the National Gallery in Ottawa. I haven't been there in several years, but when they would hang my work they'd put my name and they'd have like, "Eric Fischl (born USA 1948) (Canada 1974...)." It was like I was a born again Canadian or something. It was fantastic.

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: You go there as an abstract painter. You're included in the "Canadian Canvas" as an abstract painter. Your work, though, clearly begins to evolve pretty dramatically when you're in Halifax. Do you want to

try and trace what it is that's happening in the kind of pictorial world of Eric Fischl while this is going on?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I mean, it's, you know, we're talking 1975, '76, the mid-'70s. Those paintings that were in the "Canada Canvas" shows were pretty much the last abstract paintings of just pure abstraction that I was doing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: By the way, did you like your abstract paintings? I mean, did you feel you had a sense of what abstraction was about?

ERIC FISCHL: I was very limited as an abstract artist. I was very painterly but at the same time painterly in the sense that Brice Marden was painterly. You know, rich surface, a sort of more stolid kind of abstract forms. I wasn't a gestural painter. But I was, you know, I was very much involved in the materiality of paint and working with sort of large, you know, architectural or geometric kind of forms.

But I was somebody that didn't have a broad—I didn't have a broader, particularly deep abstract imagination. So I was actually telling myself stories without giving them shape, without giving them images. I would paint something and I would say, "Okay, this is a feather or this is a tiger's tail," or this is, you know, and then I'd get onto something. I'd be thinking, you know, "Okay, this painting is about the princess and the tiger. It's about choices. It's about dah, dah, dah." You know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: There'd be no evidence of that on the surface. This was only inside your head.

ERIC FISCHL: None whatsoever. None whatsoever. Or what I thought would represent the tiger, how could anybody tell that that was a tiger? You know, it wasn't orange and white and black even. So but there was a lot going on in the art world at that time with feminist critique, with feminist artists like Ree Morton and stuff who were starting to use images and words. And then there was people like Jonathan Borovsky, who was like, you know, breaking down the idea that an artist had to have a style. His style was all styles, you know, and he also dealt with psychological, the interior realities. And then there was Joel Shapiro, who was like making things that were both a house and an abstract form, or a chair and its abstraction. You know, so the geometric rigidity of abstraction was now taking on isometric shapes that became images. You know, so there—and, you know, there was gender issues and race issues and all of those kind of things that were forming—

[Audio Break.]

ERIC FISCHL: I lost that thread.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's okay, I can pick it up. Well, you talked about all these things coming together in a sense. I love that idea that Shapiro would be someone you could see an idea and something narrative almost could be attached to the idea of a kind of abstraction. Obviously whether you knew it or not, or did you know that this was an area that you could begin to use somehow?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, it was ultimately an area that I began to pursue. And at the time, I mean, I was still, you know, sort of staunchly anti-New York. I was still wanting to—I actually thought I would live the rest of my life in Canada, for one thing. And I wanted to at some point see if I could, you know, hook my art practice up to a local content. I mean, you know, what was compelling about Halifax outside of the school was the fact that, you know, it was—even though it was a fragile thing at the time, there still was a fishing industry, there still were people that were rooted in a much older and more sort of hand-to-mouth, you know, kind of life. You know, it was dangerous. It was dire. It was powerful. It was still the sea. There was still the romance of the sea and whatever. And so I was trying to see if I could, you know, find a contemporary language to make things that were, you know, connected directly to the community of the Maritimes. I was also—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Because you felt a sense of responsibility you mean because you were there or was it just—

ERIC FISCHL: It was because I was there and because I was also tired of what, you know, seemed like an elitist argument or, you know, an intellectual argument for art-making that was so disconnected to the people that it was, you know, nobody—they were losing their audience. It was becoming so introverted and solipsistic. And then on top of that, the things that I was making people would look at—I'm thinking, you know, different kinds of emotional experiences coming off of the work and then what was coming back to me from people who were just reading it as formalistic, you know. So they're telling me about whether this edge is hard enough or, you know, this push-pull thing works in this way or, you know, the compositional this and that. And I'm like, "No, no, man, this is about, you know, choices one makes or this is, you know, this is thinking about, you know, I'm feeling this kind of way, you know." So I felt I'm not communicating. And so I, you know, I was also being really naive because I don't know anything about fishing. I don't know anything about the real lives of these people, but I tried to imagine it. I tried to imagine.

So I created a—I did two things. One is first I started to make smaller paintings that were, I was doing them on

plywood. I wanted, I had been looking at a lot of sort of oceanic art and American Indian art and things where the object was a power object. It had a spirit to it. It had a purpose. It was a utilitarian thing, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Talismanic, in a sense?

ERIC FISCHL: It was talismanic, yeah, exactly. And so I took this piece of plywood and I cut the corners off of it to make it more like a shield and then I sort of began to paint this kind of architectural or, you know, rectangles, verticals and horizontals on it. And as I was doing it it began to talk to me about houses. It looked like I had just drawn a kind of an isometric house. And so I said, you know, it's a shield but it's a house. A house is a, you know, the form you live in. This, that, whatever. It had the simplicity of the kind of houses, the fishing houses in Nova Scotia, you know, real utilitarian sort of form to it.

And then, you know, I'd do another painting and I'd sort of do that and cut the bottom corners off and then I'd make this thing. And now I had a house and at the bottom was a boat, and a house and a boat, and a houseboat and this and living on the sea and, you know. And then I did one and it became like a tunnel and I started to use just sort of moving these geometries around within this sort of shield form and creating this kind of world that was, you know, had objects that were the house, the boat, the tunnel, the bridge.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The clear thing missing is that this is an unpopulated world. I mean—

ERIC FISCHL: That was phase two.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Somebody has got to come into this world.

ERIC FISCHL: Which I wasn't going to do at first. When I ran through that, all of those configurations, and started to feel like, "Well, now I have to do something else," my next instinct was to move inside the house but to find things like chairs and tables and ladders and whatever that would have that same dual message, that same double entendre that the house/shield/boat/houseboat, all those things had.

And I couldn't find it. I couldn't make it. I could turn a table upside down. I could, you know, I could flatten it out in this way or that way. I couldn't make it be more than a table or an upside down table. A chair was a chair was a chair was a chair. So it wasn't playing with the abstraction that the house had been playing with where you could, you know, work with colors that butted against each other and one would drop away and become a sky color, which would open up the form of the lower form to become something else and then solidify again and become a house. I couldn't get the chairs to do it. I couldn't get the tables to do it. So I began to think of the people that lived in the house.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: An interesting displacement that you were involved in. You keep shifting back and back until finally inevitably you would have had to have found the fisher family. I mean, there would just be nowhere to go if you were going to stay on that particular road.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, a lot of, I guess a lot of making art is fooling yourself in a way. You know, you feel like you're moving in a direction you need to go in without knowing what that is or what the end result will be, and all along the way you feel the risk of it because it's taking you to places you didn't think—you'd already said no to or it's taking you into an area that seems like it's getting more and more personal and less and less universal. You know, so there's traps. There's all this stuff that's going on. Plus I'm also at that point still drawing off the energy of other artists that are blazing a bigger trail, a wider trail. So I hadn't really found my originality yet.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Other than having drawn Cain and left Abel out of it, I mean, you hadn't done any figurative work prior to this. How does the figure—I understand the rationale for the figure emerging but what does he and she look like when you start out in Halifax?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, it's not entirely true that I haven't done figurative things. I actually had, but had dismissed them. I had done—when I was in sixth grade Ruth Harmell and I did this window and I painted a witch.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Of course.

ERIC FISCHL: My memory of it, it was fairly realistic. But, you know, I mean, the witch face had a real feature to it, et cetera, et cetera. And then when I was in CalArts, actually my last year, I began gluing photographs onto paintings that had, you know, cowboys on them and stuff like that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: These are found photographs?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, they'd be, I'd cut them out of a magazine or something like that. I'd glue them on there. And

I actually painted a house and painted like a Western house and a wreath with, you know, berries on it. You know, I was doing some images and things like that. And then also when I was at CalArts we were in a bar one night and the owner invited us to paint on the wall and I, you know, I was totally bombed but I ended up painting like a portrait of Nixon or something. You know, it was just—anyway, so part of me went in that direction and then I fought it with what I thought was my more formal, more serious work.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I've got to say, a Cain, a witch and Nixon aren't the—I mean, you really, you had an unusual sense of who your figurative heroes or heroines would be at the time, Eric.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, actually those pretty much describe my family [Enright laughs], you know, if you—or the feeling of the patriarch, the monarch and the child at that time. Yeah, that's not an uninteresting grouping to describe what my family life was like.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So back in Halifax how does the fisher family emerge? I mean, do you decide that since you're already in quite literally the vocation and terrain of the sea it makes sense to have a fisherman and his wife, their children? Is that how it develops?

ERIC FISCHL: Yes, and I started to think of the—you know, yeah, I wanted to create a narrative connected to the language of the area I was living in, Halifax. And the reason I wanted to create the narrative is because I wanted it to be ongoing, something I could keep adding stuff to the story. And so I was looking for a kind of archetypal structure to the family and whatnot. And so, you know, there are fishermen. So he's a fisherman, and so, and I called him Fisher and the Fisher family. And he would go off. Like my father went off in the morning as a commuter to New York, the fisherman would go off in the morning to fish.

And I was thinking about her and staying home and her job as caretaker in the family. He has to go out and get the food but she has to keep the family together and when he brings the food home, deal with it and stuff like that. And so part of it was thinking of her not trusting him. You know, that's, it's one thing for him to go off and come home and see that she's screwed up and, you know, the kids are not taken care of as well as they could be. It's another thing for him to screw up and come home and there's no food and they all die, you know. Something, her leap of faith on some level for trusting his ability to do it might be even too much to ask. So if I were her I would resort to something else, which is I would resort to magic, sympathetic magic. In some way I would like to try to get my energy, spirit, whatever, out into a place that could help him do this thing, which was to provide food for us.

And so her life became ritualistic inside the home and then I would find things like the bathtub, which resembles both the boat and, because it's full of water, represents the sea. And then when she would sit in it she would be the fertility of the sea as well as in control of the bounty and stuff. And so she would be doing sympathetic magic while he's out at sea, you know. And so I'm sort of creating these really scratchy drawings of this life, you know, and I'm trying to create a cosmology of images that also become part of the ritual. And so, you know, elevating the fish to a sacred symbol and—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Which it already was in—

ERIC FISCHL: Which it was.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: —religion and everywhere else anyway, wasn't it?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Except, of course, I'm narrating this from the most secular and skeptical point of view. And I'm creating odes, songs, psalms that are, you know, to attend to this sacred thing, which is still all done within a very primitive domestic and domesticated kind of, you know, primitive environment of, you know, taking a fish and putting it on a chair and elevating that chair to altar status even though it's just a chair and it's just a fish. It's, you know, writing some kind of poem and the poem was like a nursery rhyme, you know. It's so elemental, so simplistic, you know, but full of sincerity.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's fascinating to me how from the get-go in a sense, whether you knew it or not, how absolutely central to your sensibility narrative was. You're painting abstract paintings where you're telling yourself a story. Suddenly you find yourself in this context. You start telling a simple story of domestic anything, which you are able to elaborate out into large, mythic narratives. I mean, your compulsion to narrativize the world has really been consistent for a long time, hasn't it?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, which, you know, I mean, Abstract Expression was a narrative form, narrative. I mean, you know, you'd see a de Kooning painting that was all schmeary paint and then there's this sort of blue, vertical, four-inch wide brush stroke and he, you know, calls it a door. You know, the painting is called "Doorway" or something like "Portal." You know, it's like, okay. Or some blue line running through it and it's called "River," you know. So there is definitely a narrative that was part of it. I was never able to let the narrative go and just—once I had talked my way through to make the painting I wasn't able to let it go the way they would

to it just being a sensorial experience that may resonate as something else. I wanted it to focus people more on the, follow the narrative more. So I began to shed the abstraction of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I'm fascinated how you say, you use the word "skeptical." Was the skepticism directed towards your commitment to that narrative, that it was a kind of construction, or it wasn't a skepticism about Maritime fishing or anything like that, I assume?

ERIC FISCHL: It was, I am, you know, I'm cynical of and certainly skeptical of religion. And so on the one hand the attraction I have towards power objects and towards cultures where the—and even our culture back when it was making Christian art, you know, which was probably one of our highest forms of cultural expression, that I, you know, the feeling of absence of the ability to believe enough to pick up those narratives in the same way. I didn't think I could do it. So on one hand I was like trying to invent a narrative parallel to some of the great narratives. At the same time I was thinking that this is a failed idea. You know, this can only yield a damaged product, a fragile and damaged thing, because what it will ultimately show will be what's absent, you know. There's no renaissance happening through this method.

And then I was also, felt the same way towards painting itself and towards imagery itself, that that, you know, we were, we didn't have the same investment in the object of painting in its formalism or whatever to transcend itself. And so I'm, you know, definitely proceeding along this thing, knowing that I'm also, it's a corrupted form and it's a damaged form, it's not going to be transcendent in the same way. It's just going to be effortful and sincere.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, that's what, that's exactly right, but that's the nub, isn't it? I mean, you're still doing it.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, the procedure is still going on whether or not you can commit yourself to the belief in the power of either the object or the thing being made. The making matters enough.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you're at it tooth and nail.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it was, you know, I mean, there were days when I would say, "Well, what else am I going to do?" There were other days when it's like, "What am I doing?" You know, but I was being drawn into it as well, and meeting with a certain kind of success among my friends that where—success in the sense where they got excited about it. They would see it. They would, you know, it became something where we seemed to be talking about it on the same level that it was being made at, so I started feeling I was actually communicating.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is your studio practice. You're still teaching in an environment where there's still a pretty significant degree of skepticism about the whole procedure of painting. Was that a division that you had to deal with psychologically or were you able to compartmentalize your making and your role as a professor in a skeptical university?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I mean, you know, by this time everyone is painting at the school but now the arguments are over whether painting is a conceptual activity and really the kind of painting you make, the content of the painting is either purely optical or purely procedural and the result is, you know, nothing more than that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It sure ain't about content or narrative, is it?

ERIC FISCHL: It's not about a content brought into the—it's about a content that would be just a part of the way it was made, but it wasn't a content that was applied to it. It wasn't a narrative. It wasn't any of those. Yeah, so that was the argument. That became the dialectic. And then there were, you know, other people that were younger artists teaching there like Mira Schor, for example, who was a feminist and also somebody working very much with imagery and kind of direistic imagery, you know. And so she and I were teaching more out of that to try to find personal narratives, personal iconography. Eventually Tim Zook started, Richard Desjardins started to find ways of making imagistic art.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Did you recognize in some ways that the Fisher family was a surrogate in some ways for your own family? I mean, was there a way in which there was any autobiographical residue that you were aware of at the time?

ERIC FISCHL: I was trying at the time to absolutely stay away from it, even though I was drawing on its source the whole time. But I was absolutely petrified of people dismissing it based on it's just my fucked-up family, you know. "Why are you trying to interest me in your problems" kind of thing. And I didn't want it—I wanted it to be

universal. I didn't want it to be limited to that. So I was trying to find ways of covering it up.

You know, when I found glassine paper—I had been working with these drawings, these fisher family drawings on this paper that I would soak in linseed oil and they'd become very transparent. And then oftentimes I would layer them, put one or two areas, one image covering another, and then I'd write stuff on them. And I got interested in that transparency and then I found this glassine paper which had this really, you know, slick texture to it and it had a—it was four feet wide and a roll was 10 yards long. So I could actually paint large things, life-size figures, you know.

And I got excited about that and I got excited about being able to narrate in my studio the scenes by putting an object on one piece of paper and putting that on the wall and then just talking to myself, you know. "Where is this chair? Is it in the living room? Is it in the dining room? Is it in the kitchen? Oh, it's in the dining room. Okay. Is there a table? Yeah, there's a table. Go get the table, paint the table. Now there's a chair and a table. Are there other chairs? Yeah, there's a couple of other chairs." Boom, boom, boom, boom, you know. "Is anyone sitting in the chair? Are they standing by the chair? Are they walking past the chair? Who is it? Is it the mother, the father, the sister, the brother, the husband, the wife? Is it the lover, the this? Is there anyone else in there? Yes. Is it a dog? Is it a cat? Is it a chair, a lamp?"

And I just would go on and on. And each time I said yes I would go get a blank sheet of transparent paper, lay it on top, paint the thing. It would either be yes or it would be no, actually it's not there, and I would take it off and save it and maybe find another narrative in which that person would show up. And so it began to evolve. And I was being very programmatic about how, you know. I was saying, okay, furniture is isometric silhouettes, minimalist. It's about, you know, it's not specific time chair. It's just chair. The furnitures are nouns: chair, table. And I said, and then the body I'm going to draw. The body will be the gestural form, be in some kind of motion or position and I'll do that by outline. And I'll paint the face, the face, the head of emotion, psychology, whatever. I'll render in a [inaudible] form.

And at first I said, you know, I'm not even going to let, I'm not going to connect the head to the body. There's going to be three. So there's the furniture, the body and the head and those are the three things I'm working on. And I, you know, kept them separate. It's such an odd thing. But I was so afraid of being a straightforward figurative painter that I had to find these ridiculous ways of not doing that.

And then eventually as I, you know, would go on with this Fisher family and, you know, and it was the matrix of the family—the mother, the father, the sister, the brother, the husband, wife, son, daughter—and I would sort of say, "Okay, what's going on today?" At one point the fisherman, husband, became blind. So now he was rendered impotent. Now he couldn't—even though it's the only thing he knew to do, he could no longer do it. So what did he do? So now he would do things like get dressed to go and turn the table over and sit on the table with his, on a chair on an upside down table with his cane and re-enact the days when he could fish, right? It was kind of tragic memory drama of what he used to be able to do and, you know, the good old days kind of thing.

And of course, you know, she was still the, you know, the magical being in the bathtub and ritualizing, extending herself past her physical form. And, you know, and then the kids were going around sort of discovering their bodies [laughs] and discovering each other's bodies. You know, kids will be kids [laughs].

[END OF TRACK AAA_fischl08_3818.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And here we are. We're in Sag Harbor and this is the second disc with an interview with Eric Fischl for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

Eric, it's intriguing to hear you talk about how the—the language you use in talking about a lot of this sounds like in a sense the language of ritual, that you needed music and there were words involved and magic. Were you aware that part of the narrative structure you were plugging into was one in which ritual was not just faintly involved but was, in fact, sort of central to how it was you were telling the story?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, mm-hmm.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why do you think that was necessary?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I, you know, had felt that it was, that art had become too rational, too formalistic, too sort of inverted in a way that it wasn't, it certainly wasn't answering my greater need in terms of, you know, emotional and sort of psychological and spiritual content. So I was looking for something, some form that would kind of be able to hold those things. And also I was feeling, you know, that art had just removed itself so far from people's lives and then artists were kind of bitching and moaning about it, you know. It's like they didn't understand why people didn't love and seek out their work when they had made no effort to make their work talk to people, you know, that they were trying to get interested in. So, you know, things like that, I guess.

And yeah, you know, there was definitely, you know, art was under a lot of attack from a lot of different angles both outside art and inside art. You know, with marginal, the marginal voice being, becoming the dominant voice and the marginal art-making processes attacking the hegemony of, you know, historical forms and stuff like that. You know, I always felt like I was in retreat and trying to find, you know, encampments and things like that where I could, you know, sort of stake the ground and hold it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Didn't you also get involved in some performance as well when you were in Halifax?

ERIC FISCHL: I did. I mean, you know, like any good student, you know, at CalArts, I tried alternate forms. I tried video and performance stuff throughout. And yeah, I did a—well, probably the most successful and, you know, I think the most fully resolved was out of the fisher family activity I wrote these songs. And so I contacted Carol Wainio, who was, who I knew was a singer and she was an art student at Nova Scotia, a painter. But I knew she was a singer with a beautiful voice and she was living with or has been married to for a long time a composer named Paul Theberge. And so I thought, well, I would see if I could get her and Paul to like put this to music and then they could sing these songs. And it ended up being a collaborative thing where we, rather than them just doing a song they got me re-involved in it and we came up with a performance idea in which what I did was I made a large, I made a photograph of Carol, nude, laying on a table, in which I drew with light this bathtub around her. And so the image was, like in the work that I had been doing, the image of this naked woman in the bathtub, only this was now done with black and white photograph with this kind of light. It was actually a pretty amazing image when it came out. It had a great effect.

And then I had the idea that I would expose a large mural-sized piece of photographically treated paper to the image and then we would perform these songs in a darkroom environment, a sodium vapor lamp, mercury vapor lamp, whatever they use; I forget. Mercury vapor lamp environment in which after each song or during some of the songs I would go dip my sponge into a bucket full of developer and I would schmear this mural with developer and part of the image would emerge. And over the course of the seven songs the whole image would finally be there. And what I was doing was the songs were—when we ultimately put them together they were actually about different stages in a woman's life. And so the combination of these songs sort of building these stages of a woman's life combined with this ultimate image of a woman in the bathtub was the effect of the whole thing. And then at the end of the performance after the image finally appears the lights go on and the thing turns black and disappears, and that was the effect of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It sounds pretty good.

ERIC FISCHL: You know, I think it probably was. I think as an interactive kind of thing it was. There were a few things that were great about it. One was the effect that that building the image along with the audience participating in it by, you know, sort of witnessing how the image formed and that it was a construction that seemed to come through voice, came through song, came thorough the creation of woman through voice. I think it was pretty effective.

And the other thing was that, and Paul came up with this idea. There was one song which was an internal-external dialogue that the woman had or that the boy had about saving the woman. And it started out something like, "I'm no doctor but I want to help." And it kind of went back and forth between, you know, being ill-equipped to save somebody and desperately wanting to save somebody and, you know, this sort of external-internal argument going on. And so Paul came up with the form as being one in which we would take every other line, the internal line, and I would say them backwards, say the whole thing backwards into a microphone, into a tape recorder, and then we would play it forward so that the internal voice had a distortion to it. So I had to like actually phonetically write out and say, you know, maybe the first line was, "I'm no doctor," or something. That would be the internal voice. And I'd have to figure out how to say "doctor" backwards, you know, "rotcod," whatever. And when it came forward it sounded like "doctor," you know. [Enright laughs.] It was like so strange. But it created this incredible kind of tension between, you know, the action man and the, you know, this internal voice holding you back for fear or inexperience or something.

And I was pleased to see years later that—not because he would have known about it but David Lynch used the same thing in *Twin Peaks* where he had this weird, surreal dream scene where a midget came in and talked and it was all reverse stuff so that he had this really bizarre thing. So—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: He was an art student in Philadelphia. Maybe he did somehow get it. What was the name of this performance, by the way, do you remember?

ERIC FISCHL: I actually can't remember the title of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But it got performed in Halifax, Montreal?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. We did it in Toronto, Montreal and Halifax. Yeah, and I think by the time it hit Toronto it was actually quite a dramatic event, you know. We were all wearing black. We looked so punky [laughs]. But it was

fun.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So the "Canadian Canvas" thing, this performance piece is circulating. Are you also showing the glassine, the drawings as well in galleries in Canada at this time?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, what came out of the "Canadian Canvas" show was, besides the sale was an interest by a young Montreal dealer named Roger Bellemare, who had a—who is an incredibly elegant man, a young man, and he had a really sort of small, hip gallery where his biggest artist was Betty Goodwin, who had, you know, quite a place in Canadian art at that time and stuff like that. And so he was very—even though she was doing those big tarps, you know, and wasn't doing images at the time but she was doing those. But it was like a real art gallery. So he gave me my first gallery show and that was these linseed oil drawings with the words on them. And he sold—and I have fish in them too, because I was doing these carved fish that were then coated in wax and they had words written on them and stuff. It might have been in that show, too. But he sold work to the National Gallery [of Canada] and other things, too. So that was happening. The glassines were not shown at the time. I was doing, I did do something at the Anna Lee Owens Gallery and Nova Scotia at the school at one point showed them. But basically I was just inviting people into the studio to see them.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Your description of how the glassine worked sounds so highly intelligent because in a way it allows your imagination to become manual. You can literally move your ideas around and see whether they work. It was a perfect solution to the way you thought.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, and I tell art students this. You know, first of all you have to find a size that allows your hands, whatever you are, whether you're a knuckle painter or a wrist painter or an elbow painter, you have to find the scale at which you can best bring out the forms that have life to them. And for me the large scale of the glassine was the one that informed me about that, that I could draw the figure better when I was using my whole arm as opposed to when I was using my knuckle, which was scratchy and stilted and whatnot.

The other thing was, and I tell students, you have to find a material that unlocks the creative voice. And for me it was the feeling that the brush had dragging oil paint across this slick surface so was satisfying, and the fact that I could erase mistakes right away made me free to move. And then the transparency was an enormous thing because what it showed me was this is actually the way my mind works. This is how I construct meaning, you know. I project and if the projection is wrong I have to get rid of it and I have to redo it and think of another projection and get that. And if that sticks then I know I'm moving in the direction I want to go in.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's kind of perfect. The bodies are giving you the soma but they're also giving you—the transparency is giving you the psyche. It's giving you the depth of what's going back.

ERIC FISCHL: Right, the layering. Exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

ERIC FISCHL: And the layering was a big thing. And it's funny, too, because at the time in the broader art discussion, the way of trying to break with the flatness of modernist space without going into the Baroque depth, deep space, the illusionistic space, was to create layers. And so we were exploring. I was exploring it in this very literal way. You know, David Salle was doing it in his layering of different kinds of paint language, from pencil drawing to fully formed things but one on top of each other type of thing, you know. There was a whole bunch of artists who were playing around with, specifically with layering as a way of creating space, time, reading.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: For you it's also helping to create psychology. Clearly you're interested in not just a story but what are the psychological implications of the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we have to inhabit because of who we are and where we've come from.

ERIC FISCHL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's clearly going on in your work.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, and I also learned that, you know, very quickly that if you have somebody doing something where if you put them at a table and you put a book in front of them it looks like they're reading. If you take the table away and you take the book away and you put them, it's exactly the same gesture but now they're looking at a dog sleeping, somehow there's a very different feeling to it. And if you take the dog away and you put a kid sort of not paying attention to the person that's staring at them now it becomes an even different reading. And using the same gestures and putting different things in front of it you begin to really develop a psychological, emotional structure for the narrative. So, yeah, so that was definitely developing at the time.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So you said earlier that when you went, ended up in Halifax and you were so staunchly anti-New York, you thought you'd end up living in Halifax all of your life. By May of '78 you and April decide you're

going to go to New York. What shifted in your thinking about what New York represented for you in the art world that made you go right into the dark heart of the devil?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, there were a few things. One is that Nova Scotia was very New York-centric as well and they had a loft in lower, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan that the faculty and students would use when they visited the city. And it was incredibly cheap to fly from New York to LaGuardia, I mean Halifax to LaGuardia. You know, it was like $90 round trip or whatever. So there was a lot of contact with New York artists. There was a lot of sort of coming and going, and I began to go visit New York on a regular basis. Plus a lot of the kids I went to school with at CalArts had moved to New York, had set up there, were forming a larger group of my generation. And I would come down and I'd visit them and connect to their scene, and so I was becoming a little more comfortable with that.

But ultimately what it was was April wanted to go and, you know, she kind of said, "I'm going. You can come or not, but I'm going." And I'm sitting there thinking, "Okay, I'm coming because I'm not going to leave you." You know, so I kept trying to say, "Are you sure you don't want to just move to Toronto or Montreal? Wouldn't that be more interesting?" You know, dah, dah, dah. She was, "No, I'm going to New York."

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Her cultural ambition meant New York was the only place to go.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So when you got here, because there was already a kind of community that had developed in a sense, was it easy then to fit into the New York you found as opposed to the one you thought you would have found years earlier?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. It was my people, for one thing. You know, it was my generation that was there. You know, we were like kicking up the dust. And I was familiar with a lot of them and certainly familiar with the issues that we were struggling over, both with each other and against each other. And so I was comfortable with that. And it was exciting. I mean, New York at the end of the '70s was so exciting because everything was breaking down. I mean, the city was dangerous. You know, the system itself was kind of crazy. I mean, it was falling apart. It was broke. It was, you know, there was violence and stuff going on so it was precarious.

And the art world was breaking down. The art world was—all these alternative spaces were cropping up. You know, now you had three generations of European artists that had been stacked at the door waiting to come, be allowed in, were now flooding in. You had, you know, the feminist critique, the racial critique. You had—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Inaudible] cultures.

ERIC FISCHL: Gender critique. You know, the sexual critique. There was, yeah, you had painting versus blah, blah, blah critique, you know. I mean, there were so many things that were happening. And that kind of pluralism was something where, you know, everyone was doing, running as fast as they could to catch up, to find out where to hold onto, what to put forth. So there was a lot of opportunity, you know. And these people who were starting alternative spaces and the young galleries really recognized the moment. The alternative space people, Helene Weiner at Artists Space, they knew that—the artists she was showing, the Cindy Shermans, the David Salles, the Robert Longos, Jack Goldsteins, they didn't want to remain alternatives. They wanted to be at the center. And so, you know, she and others took, went from alternatives to actually forming galleries, commercial galleries to say, you know, we want this the same as everybody else. And so, yeah, it was a very exciting time of possibilities and we felt like we were, you know, really pushing the issues.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Now, when you left you couldn't have saved a whole bunch of money and you probably didn't have a whole bunch of money when you came to New York. What was it like just to get by? I mean, you had to find work other than being a painter, I assume, for the first couple of years.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I came to New York with I think $13,000, which was my severance from Nova Scotia, which was certainly enough to live on for a year, easily, at that time. April had no money or little money and she went out and got a job like day two, a waitressing job. It drove her crazy that I was, I would stay home and work. [They laugh.] You know, first of all, it was like I wasn't afraid. You know, I would work until the $13,000 was gone and then I'd go look for a job. And she was like, "You can't do that. You have to look for a job now so that we have something to fall back." You know, so there was a lot of tension and anxiety at that point, for sure. But I eventually, I don't know, maybe six months later or whatever, went out and got a job, you know, renovating lofts and stuff. And then from that I got a job crating art at a place in SoHo. I'd had—when I was in Nova Scotia an artist, David True, who I had brought up as a visiting artist. He was one of the new imagist painters whose work I responded to and—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was he from Chicago originally?

ERIC FISCHL: No, he was from New York. I mean, I don't know where he was originally from but he was a New York artist, not a Hairy [Who?]—

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: Okay, I know where we want to pick this up. You were just saying, actually I had asked you what you were doing when you got this job in SoHo and then you started to talk about Edward Thorp and how you, I gather, started a show. But before we do that I guess what I want to pick up on is when you're still in Halifax the last work we talked about were the glassine drawings. Were you also painting at the time? Had you started painting?

ERIC FISCHL: No.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No. So you actually came out of there just with glassine drawings rolled up.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And packed away, okay.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I had been—the only sort of painting painting I'd do, I had done sort of before the glassine. No, I'm sorry, that's not true. I did a couple of paintings on plywood at the time, sort of at the end of my stay in Halifax. One of them was—really opened the door and it was, I decided to do a painting of the boy's boat. I had done drawings of the boy's boat, which was this very primitive thing. Ultimately I made a sculpture of it, you know. It was like a punt or something, you know, sort of a low, flat boat where I'd actually made either end—there was no forward or backward but two ends were just squared off. And there was even, inside it was like right at the end were like two compartments or something, open compartments. And then there was the main body of the boat. And I'd painted it red when I made this sculpture. And so I made this painting on plywood of the boy's boat and it turned out to be, there was a very beautiful light to it and it was, you know, this dark blue water and this red boat and these yellow oars. I really surprised myself at how it glowed. And it was so funny because, you know, it was red, yellow and blue. I mean, it was so primal and primary in that way. But anyway, so that was the first real fully realized illusionistic painting that I had done.

And then I moved to New York and I'd been offered a show. David True introduced me to Ed Thorp and Thorp had expressed interest in showing the glassines. So I moved to New York with the idea of doing this glassine show and then I started painting paintings when I got to New York. Ultimately I did some things and then ultimately started on *Sleepwalker* [1979] was the first figurative painting I did.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In New York, really?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you'd already done—because the fascinating thing, the drawing for *Sleepwalker* is actually fairly close to what the painting ended up being. There are other of your paintings that you became famous for early on in which there wasn't so much direct relationship between the glassine source and what it became.

ERIC FISCHL: Right, and what it became. Well, also the glassine painting of *Sleepwalker* followed the painting. It didn't precede it. I had done it afterwards.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's interesting. Did you do that a fair amount where the—

ERIC FISCHL: No, I didn't. I did it very infrequently. And I can't even remember why I did it, but it came after the painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Do you remember what it was that would have provoked you to do *Sleepwalker*? It's such a significant painting. Why that painting? Not just in New York, but why that painting to begin with anyway?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I ask myself that to this day. I mean, I know exactly why I did it and it was for all the wrong reasons.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Do you want to let me in on them or do you want to keep it to yourself?

ERIC FISCHL: No, you know, the conversation in New York at the time, the generational conversation about painting, you know, it was dead, it wasn't dead. You know, those who—you know, was abstraction the only thing or could you use imagery? Was imagery dead? Was imagery a cliché? Could you make a painting that had imagery that even though the imagery was a cliché it was strong enough or resonant enough on some levels that, you know, people recognized that there was supposed to be content there? You know, what was the

strategy for making imagistic work?

You know, there were certainly those artists who believed that painting was dead and they set about making dead paintings to prove it. Self-fulfilling prophecies. There were those who believed that all imagery was a cliché but that there were certain images that you could use that had a kind of cultural currency, that even though you didn't have a specific meaning for why you were using them you knew that you could get people to react. So, you know, if you painted a portrait of Hitler, no matter how you painted it—you could paint it beautifully or primitively or, you know, poorly—whatever you did, if it looked like Hitler that's all you needed, right? And so there were certain political imagery that people, artists were using. There was, you know, pornography was another area where the imagery was loaded even though the content was not specific. You could use it in an inspecific way. It was still loaded. You know you could get people to, you know, sort of go, "Ooh, sex," you know.

And it was sort of in that vein that I decided I would make a painting, a sexual painting also. And, you know, I figured if my friends were using pornography, painting sex, you know, I would do the same. I'd make a dirty picture as well. So it was, you know, I set out to do that. Now, what was different with what I did as opposed to, say, how David was using, you know, his sources, sexual sources, which was right out of porno magazines and stuff, was, you know, to find a sexual moment in this boy's life who, you know, was still, I was still connected to the fisher family thing and so now I decided I'd paint the boy. I'd done the boy's boat. Now here's the boy and he's, you know, at that age, at puberty age where he's discovering himself. And, you know, one thing led to another. I began to paint this sleepwalker, which I wasn't thinking would have the—I thought I was painting taboo and that my, people would look at it and be shocked and that that would be good.

What I didn't realize was that what it took for me to actually paint the painting in terms of dealing with all of the things connected to it myself was that I would come out the other side of that experience with a painting that I was not shocked by, that in fact I now understood in a sort of deep way such a natural and compelling, you know, and loaded moment in the life of a child that it was uplifting and it was—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Inspirational, one almost might say.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It was an inspired moment. You know, there was something so truthful about it that you couldn't look at it and think, oh, this is, you know, sensational or it's dirty or it's whatever. It was just like, wow, you know, an intimate moment is what I—I wasn't going for intimacy but I ended up with intimacy.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's interesting, because so many of those paintings that were so, I mean, you very quickly became famous in the art world because of the content of your paintings. I'm thinking of *Daddy's Girl* [1984] and —

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, *Bad Boy* [1981].

ROBERT ENRIGHT: *Bad Boy* was extraordinary. Did they all emerge—I mean, if *Sleepwalker* started out as transgressive in your mind and then became, in fact, something quite different, did they all develop that kind of emotional relationship to yourself as well? They were all about those moments of initiation or rites of passage that were a kind of celebration in a way, even though they were conflicted?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's absolutely. I mean, what *Sleepwalker* did was made me want to look into other taboos or to sort of pursue that to see if the taboos were—which I had never questioned, you know, on any sort of overt level questioned. I'd either accepted them or rejected them without knowing what, whether they, you know, what exactly the extent of their meaning was. So I started to look into, you know, things that were, you know. I mean, intimacy was one of the taboos as well. And, you know, trying to figure out what the difference between intimacy and privacy is and where the boundary is.

And then, of course, there was the, you know, finding that you could, that sex, sexuality was—sexuality, not sex, but sexuality was like such a profound way of self-identification and, you know, you could learn so much about who you are by how you negotiate that, so that sex became a form of currency. And then so it was about trying to insert that currency into situations to see whether the currency actually worked or whether it was an inappropriate currency for that, you know. And so you start, I started, you know, what if I, you know, put into a situation a racial tension based around sexuality, throw in a strong black man into a white environment, which is a taboo, you know. It's something that makes us deeply anxious on a racial level. Can I normalize it or does it hold that it's a dangerous situation and shouldn't ever happen? You know, and then, of course, you paint through it to see that it's a totally normal, you know, environment.

Anyway, so I was just beginning to work into those things for my own edification, trying to find if there's meaning here or if the meaning is positive or negative.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And your methodology for making them is still coming out of this rather remarkably workable way of moving objects and figures around. I mean, as you've described the way that a painting like *Bad Boy*

develops, the narrative you tell yourself from the point of departure when the painting begins and what you end up with, you take yourself through an elaborate story, which is kind of fascinating. Is that going on while you're painting it, the story is ongoing and things are being removed and put in?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, exactly. What starts me on the journey painting to painting is not where I end up. It's just where I start. And so my reasons for starting a painting can be, you know, relatively cavalier or relatively arbitrary or something, or superficial. You know, I can start out with thinking that, you know, this is really going to shock somebody or this is, I'm going to really, you know, stick it to the person that made me feel this way, you know. I'll show them. You know, whatever. And then—or wouldn't this be funny, you know. I bet you've never seen this in the kitchen, you know. And whatever it starts out as, the ideas are really superficial. Because what happens is I get into it. Now, in order for me to paint, to actual paint, very quickly the paint has to start talking to me. It has to start feeding me back. I have to find pleasure and I have to find a kind of compelling connection to it that keeps me struggling through how to render it, keeps me trying to find the saturation of color, the right sort of shape, the right sense of the materials and the effect and, you know, whatever.

If I'm not engaged in it I can't sustain interest in it and it, you know, I have to destroy it. So I have to have very quickly this thing where the, you know, "Oh, this is fun to paint. This is keeping me." And so, yes, this was the right gesture, this was the right, you know, room for this gesture to happen. And if it doesn't happen I start going, "Okay, maybe if she were facing the other direction. Maybe if she were looking away from that rather than looking at it." And so then I'll have to, you know, at the time I was doing it that way. I'd scrape her out and turn her over and either find another photograph where a gesture was looking in that direction or I'd composite it or I'd have to in my head reverse what I was looking at in the photo. And then, you know, and then now she's looking away from something, not looking at it. Well, is there something else in the room that is drawing her attention? You know, and now I'm talking to myself. Now I'm, "Oh, what do you mean it's not in the kitchen? Well, where is it? Oh, my God, it's out by the pool. You know, now I've got to get rid of the room. I have to paint the pool." You know, and it would go like that.

You know, in some paintings, obviously, the start to finish, the changes were smaller to get it and in some like *Bad Boy* it was an enormous journey to arrive at this final sort of revelation of what was happening.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It is in some ways your most famous painting still, I suppose, because it's just, you can't find a book, for instance, on erotic art that doesn't want to find a way to reproduce it, if not—

ERIC FISCHL: Somebody just sent me a bootleg Frank Zappa album image that they got off, they bought off the Internet that has *Bad Boy* as the cover.

[They laugh.]

ERIC FISCHL: So yeah, it's—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I rest my case.

ERIC FISCHL: Exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So how did it develop? Why did it end up being the image that it is and what was it telling you at the time? By the time you finished it what was the narrative that emerged from it for you?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I'm definitely not the one to say what the work means to anybody else. You know, it's, I can't do that. I think what I had, what the painting had done was created a very dramatic, very real moment that was fraught with meaning. You know, it was like everything in the room seemed to reinforce this meaning and the meaning is really complicated. The experience of it is immediate and the meaning is really complicated. And so it, you know, I don't know how I did it but that's how it got to that thing. And, you know, it was, I guess, one of those moments where some cover was pulled back and what was seen underneath was known and feared and, you know, driven and, you know, it had this truth to it is what it was.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The same thing emerges in a painting like *Birthday Boy* [1983]. The question that comes up is this voluptuous woman naked on a bed with this young boy who you think is her son and then you think, but that's kind of not right. I mean, the paintings encouraged and obliged you as a viewer to ask so many questions about the context. The discomfort that they produced came precisely out of the situation which you suddenly begin to think through and get really nervous about.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Is that how they would work for you in the making as well?

ERIC FISCHL: Oh, yeah. I mean, I had to, as I do with my art, I have to go through the experience myself. You

know, I have to find where the truth is and the truth is past, you know, past initial hesitations. It's past, you know, the voices in the head that are saying no. It's past or it's driven by, you know, feelings of excitement, feelings of elation, feelings of need.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Shame.

ERIC FISCHL: Fear, shame. All of those things are at play. So, yeah, definitely I have to kind of come into, you know, and the process is one of painting towards, painting away, painting towards, painting away. You know, you—I find often I would be painting something and I'm not ready to look at it and so I start to change it. You know, I'm saying it's not right, I'm not there, I don't want to go there, that wasn't what I wanted to do. And I paint away from it only to find that there's no meaning where I've gone. There's nothing of interest at all. I've just painted to an emptiness, to a deadness. And then I start to paint back and by the end of it I've actually come all the way around to accepting that at this moment this is the thing I need to address and I'm painting this and this. And then, you know, let it stand for what it is.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So were you implicated personally in all of these paintings not just because you made them but because you were making such an investment of emotion and psychic energy?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I mean, I think I found fairly quickly that, you know, by the time the painting is finished I've resolved my relationship to it. So somebody coming up and trying to accuse me of the feelings that they're being made to feel by the thing and that they're not having, you know—they think they're trying to get at me and my deficiencies as a human being for feeling the way I feel, I've already been there. [Laughs.] You know, I already did that.

That's ultimately what that painting stands as, as the testament to that journey. And yeah, the only thing that I'm doing is asking you to go with me on it. You can walk out the door and say, "I'm not going to," and that's fine. But if you're going to stand there and look at the painting you're going to go through that experience, though, and you're going to go through it alone except you're not going to go through it alone because the painting is there as testament that somebody else went through it, so it's okay.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And your argument presumably would be that in fact a culture has gone through it, that those moments of transition from one recognition as a human being to another sometimes involved in time how old you are, sexuality, all that, these are all rites of passage that we pretty well all go through, whether we're prepared to recognize it or not.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, the story is a bigger story than just your personal—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I'm looking for something that, you know, resonates on a universal, an essential level as opposed to, you know, a social one. And yeah, so that there's a monumentality to it, you know, through the archetypal, and just trying to find a language that's contemporary enough that people will recognize it not from the safe distance of historization but through the direct experience and direct memory of that experience.

I mean, you know, I remember sort of even writing about this sort of, you know, feelings of, you know, that my work has that quality of finding yourself, like in a dream, naked in public. But a lot of that has to do also with this sort of, you know, that those rituals that are so important to our growth as an individual and as a social society and a culture had been disregarded or let to weaken and to fade and to become unritualized and therefore chaotic and terrifying. But, you know, we don't celebrate birth in a strong way. We don't celebrate puberty. I mean, that ritual went out the window a long time ago. Marriage. You know, certainly aging processes and then ultimately death. All of those things were, you know, because the church got weakened and lost and, you know, wasn't answering those questions, politics and psychology and all of those things didn't come up with a ritual strong enough to be shared or, you know, general enough, universal enough to be shared rituals to form a solid core society. So it was kind of working out of that.

And I consciously at the time began to explore, okay, let's look at puberty. Let's—you know, I did some paintings trying to deal with marriage as a thing, you know, and ultimately dealing with death and stuff, too.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, the show then, the first show you had of these paintings at Edward Thorp's gallery, was it, do you recall, was it pretty electrifying? I mean, I'm thinking of the paintings that would have been in that show. The ones we're talking about, a lot of them would have been. It must have been a remarkable show to mount and put up and the reaction to it was pretty extraordinary, wasn't it?

ERIC FISCHL: I was really surprised at how positive the response was. I mean, I hadn't shown them to a lot of artists. I'd shown them to, you know, people like David Salle, and talked a lot about it, you know, talked generally about things. But I hadn't really shown it to a lot of artists. And I was really afraid that the feminists

were going to go after me big time. So I was expecting, you know, a lot of negative things. And I don't really remember the opening, frankly. I remember kind of being there. I don't remember. I do remember one thing which was a big relief, which was that Miriam Shapiro, who was one of the figureheads of feminist critique and feminist art at that time, was moved by it and compelled by the work and so, you know, had no critique in that way about the content of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The gays and naked females didn't come up as a major issue since you were undressing everybody anyway.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You were pretty open-minded about who got naked in your paintings.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, certainly the strategy for painting people without clothes was, you know, it really was about nakedness. It was like let's take it down to our most vulnerable self and then move it out into the social construct and see how we fare, you know. Like let's see how homey, how welcoming is a kitchen when you're stark naked in it, you know. When you're, you know—how much of a distraction to your soul, you know, in terms of, you know, a soothing distraction is a TV set when you're standing naked in front of it or it's, you know, it's off in the background bringing images of strangeness into your environment.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Also, I mean, there are paintings that emerge around this time as well that seem more directly autobiographical, a painting of a woman collapsed outside of her car and dogs around and a young boy trying to deal with a woman who was either ill or has passed out drunk or whatever. Were you also mining your own life more directly in these paintings, using them as a kind of deflection?

ERIC FISCHL: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. I was painting from experience and, you know, trying to fictionalize it to give it a broader kind of audience and also buffer it a little bit from that confessional thing. I mean, I wasn't interested in making confessional work but I was, I think I recognized that there were experiences in my life which, you know, not only formed me but were profound, that were worth using, you know, for, you know, as a core for the narration.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Did they function as a way of exorcising that past or did they just get you even more—

ERIC FISCHL: I think over a long period of time they probably did. I mean, you know, the thing is there are themes that one has in their life which are the themes of their life. Themes don't go away. You evolve. Your relationship to the theme keeps evolving but the theme is always the theme. And so, you know, intimacy, boundaries, sexual identity, relationship between self and other, relationship between self and objects, objects of desire, you know, they've remained the same all the way along. And my relationship to them has changed, you know. It evolved.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I think of a painting like *The Sheer Weight of History* [1982] which in the drawing for it has a man and a woman standing above the statue that you, I assume, take from the Uffizi [Gallery, Florence, Italy], *The Hermaphrodite*, and underneath is the young boy sort of cowering or lying underneath. By the time it emerged as a painting the two parents have gone.

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MR. FISCHL: This is, we're talking about *The Sheer Weight of History*.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: *The Sheer Weight of History*. I gather that's still a residual effect of how you'd been working in Halifax in that you're able to move the characters and the objects around, and when you decided to finish the —or when the painting emerges you don't for some reason need the mother and the father. It's just the boy and his relationship to what looks like the sheer weight of art history somehow.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I mean, it was funny. First of all, the room where the Hermaphrodite comes from, the Uffizi—you're correct—it was a photograph I took when I was visiting the Uffizi and it was a room that you weren't allowed to go into. They had roped it off, so my photograph was from the doorway looking in. And I was compelled by the—first of all, the light in the room was very beautiful and in the middle of that was this, the back side of this sculpture of what I assumed was a woman laying down sleeping. So I actually didn't know until after I'd painted the painting that it was the famous "Hermaphrodite," which seemed incredibly appropriate ultimately, but not conscious in its intention because I'd only seen it from behind.

And I had, yeah, I had started that painting off as a man and a woman, presumably husband and wife or whatever, having an argument across the length of the torso. They were sort of—I had done a transparency drawing of that and that's what I was starting with. And then I couldn't, I couldn't get it right. It didn't, you know, it wasn't working. So I got rid of them and I filled the room up with kids. And it was like a school group at a

museum: laughing, running around, you know, whatever, sort of not paying attention. And then that didn't work, either. And as I was pulling all of the kids out, painting them out, painting the room back in, et cetera, there was one kid that was under the table that did seem to be there, needed to be there, and so I left him there and that was the end of the painting.

And, you know, the tension in the work is between these two, you know, sculptures on the wall, busts of Roman senators or whatever they are, the male gaze onto the female torso which is sleeping. You know, they're sort of locked into a kind of timeless relationship of regarding/disregarding her. And then, of course, the kid underneath who is sucking his thumb and seems both hiding and lost and vulnerable and, you know, and is sort of trying to negotiate that, what is that relationship really, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I also read it as a portrait—

ERIC FISCHL: Protective mother figure, you know. Sort of hiding under the protective mother thing with the strong male presence.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: See, that's interesting that you read it as a psychological, clearly, narrative. There's also a way to read it as a portrait of the long distant in the future artist as a young boy under the sheer weight of the history of art-making, which is European and even classical.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And so that's another way of reading it.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, that was intentional. I mean, the title of the piece is precisely that, the history, the sheer weight of history is the history of art, culture, and it's also the history of man's relationship to woman. It's also the history, the personal history of the boy's relationship to family. It just, you know, it was spinning out for me in all of those different ways, absolutely.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Did you realize what the success of the show of these paintings—you obviously sort of, you know, started off the mark pretty fast. There was all kinds of energy then that you had and you knew that you were going to continue working in this vein, that whatever this area of inquiry you had entered into was one that was going to pay you back well? I'm not talking financially; I'm talking sort of psychically.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I'd been committed to the long-term before the success of the show because what I found was that once I got onto this, once I got onto the narrative, once I got onto the figuration, once I got onto the sort of manner of painting, I had no trouble going from one painting to the next. I mean, I knew that I was onto my source because I'd finish a painting and then I'd start another one. I'd finish that, I'd start. You know, it's just it was flowing, and that experience was something that had not happened certainly with the abstract paintings where every abstract painting was the last painting I could possibly ever do, you know. The imagination to bring me to the next painting, you know, and even to identify and fix what was bad in the first I didn't have, you know. It was like I—so I wasn't in my strength.

You know, by the time I did the show at Thorp of those paintings I was so in my flow that that wasn't the thing. In terms of other people's acceptance and enthusiasm for it, you know, I mean, it was a dream come true for me because I certainly wanted to be a part of the conversation. I wanted to be a major part of the conversation. I wanted to be a reference point of that. I wanted to be an inspiration. I wanted to be a leader, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Those ambitions were there from the start?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, they were. Not easy to accept, although—well, you know, I mean, part of my avoidance of New York was not accepting that that was a major part of my makeup was how competitive I was, how, you know, much I wanted to be recognized and, you know, the sort of will to power or whatever it was that I hadn't been ready to accept.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, you became famous in a way. I mean, it was, you know, I think it wasn't that long into your career that that famous *Vanity Fair* article [Schjerdahl, Peter. "Bad Boy Brilliance." Vanity Fair 47:5 (May 1984): pp. 66-72] with you, the painting of the woman. Between her legs is the *Vanity Fair* magazine and it's, "The bad boy of American Art" is the cover article that is staring at her crotch.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, I thought that was a pretty witty play on your own career at that point. But were you surprised by not just the acceptance but how that translated into what was suddenly a meteoric career? That's the word that was used consistently in your earlier period and people talking about you.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You know, you came from nowhere, it seemed, and there you were.

ERIC FISCHL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you were a fixture. You had to be dealt with.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I think when you, you know, when you think about success and you think about fame, all before you have it, you don't actually know what it is. You know, you don't know how big it is. You don't know what the shape of it is. You don't know what the downfall is, you know, the tricky parts. None of that. So for me fame was and success was, you know, getting all the people I knew to talk about it, you know, and that's a pretty small group of people.

So, you know, when it got out past that, once you start having somebody say something to you that knows about you and you don't know them at all, you've never seen them, then you begin to realize you're now reaching people way outside of your experiential thing and stuff. And, yeah, and then it took on a different dimension. I mean, you know, I was definitely trying very hard to stay real and to stay connected. You know, the friends that I had then I still have as friends. I mean, you know, it was like I wasn't wanting any of that to affect me, to change in that way. So, you know, it was a very conscious effort to keep it real.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And your point of entry just happens to coincide with something in the art world that's extraordinary too, and that's the kind of '80s boom, so you enter the art world at a propitious moment from that point of view. It really caught on as well.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, we were the last generation. We were the transitional generation where success and fame were still not directly connected to each other. Your ambition was towards fame, which wasn't necessarily your ambition towards wealth. That it was something that you wanted the success and the pride of being recognized as important within your community and within the historical legacy and all of that. But, you know, so we weren't.

But we had models. We had artists that were successful and rich and, you know, famous. You know, we had Frank Stella and we had Lichtenstein and Warhol and people like that, and you could see that that was a possibility. But we also had artists who were, you know, the Acconcis and the Baldesaris and the Don Judds and the Andres and people like that that were successful, famous, but, you know, were just getting by. So we knew that, you know, you just had to keep your priorities straight. This is what I want. I want to be respected, known, make an impact.

And all of a sudden the '80s happens, in which it becomes a commercial thing and the next thing you know there's money attached to this in a way that you hadn't thought about, hadn't considered. The gallery structure starts changing, you know. So, yeah, that was—and then you start, you know, teaching, lecturing, whatever, and you find that the next generation of artists don't really ask you art questions anymore. They're asking you business questions. And so all of a sudden now that generation is totally comfortable.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Did you consistently think of yourself in the American grain? I mean, one of the other intriguing things about the '80s is that the '80s also is a time when obviously American art and European art, the transavantgarde, all of that is all meshing and it's getting really rich and interesting. You always seemed to me at least to maintain some very strong attachment to what I call the American grain, that your tradition you come out of is one that you can trace through a number of American painters. And even though you were very much a part of that international art world, it seems, there was always something attractive to you about where you came from, that American tradition. Is that the understanding you had?

ERIC FISCHL: No. I mean, yes and no. I say no because it wasn't attractive. I did it for a different reason. I mean, first of all, it wasn't attractive in that I didn't see the American, both the history of American art, the place of American art, you know, American content art as having a kind of historical weight to it or grandeur to it or something that would compete well on the, within the whole history of art culturally.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: "The Sheer Weight of American History" would be a much less dense painting than *The Sheer Weight of History* then?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It wasn't for that reason. What it was was it's the same reason that I stuck so closely to the autobiographical, which is that I didn't feel—I felt that my whole practice could have been dismissed by the intellectual arguments against it, by either the post-modern—by the modernists or the post-modernists critique or by, you know, the painting is dead thing, anyway, it could be dismissed. Or imagery is dead, dismissed. And, you know, that I could be overrun by cynicism. You know, the irony could spill over into just full-blown cynicism.

So what I did was I decided very early on that I would do the things that I had experience of, that I experienced,

that couldn't be taken away. You know, someone could not say, "This didn't happen. This can't happen. This isn't real. This is a fiction. This is an imaginative construct and the imaginative construct is a cliché so therefore you're dismissed." I would stick to the real and I would try to make the real dramatic and dynamic and whatever, but I would—no one was going to say, "You can't do this."

And that led me to—which was a big deal and other people of my generation discovered it as well, which was the suburbs, you know, which was something that up until my generation was not a legitimate genre. I mean, you know, there was no art to be made out of the suburbs. The suburbs was a nonevent, a nonexperience. You know, there was the urban genres which were, you know, either the grand life or the demimonde. There was the pastoral, the honest farmer, bucolic, Edenic. There was the grandeur of landscape, et cetera, and nature. Those were all fine. The suburbs, what was that? So, you know, but my need to protect myself from that kind of dismissive critique led me into saying, "No, this happens in this environment. This is real." So that was another one.

And then the other side of it is that, you know, the American experience does not frame itself as a historical one. It does not have a language, a historical language to describe its experience. It's anti-historical. America is always about the new. You know, it's changing now but it never really had a very strong—like Europe—a very strong historical genre. So things get couched in the vernacular and the big moments happen in the small moments. You know, the universal soul is expressed as an individual soul and things like that.

So I felt more comfortable in that than, say, what was going on with someone like Kiefer in Europe where, you know, he was finding a way of addressing, in the grand European historical manner, the experiences of the individual as a, you know, a German youth during the war, you know, a child during a great tragedy.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And Kiefer can look to Casper David Friedrich and you end up looking to Hopper.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Where the same kind of incidental monumentality is possible.

ERIC FISCHL: Right, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The small gesture.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Well, I mean, yeah, exactly, because Casper David Friedrich will paint the church in the background. Hopper won't paint the church in the background. He'll paint the lighthouse in the background. You know, he'll turn the spiritual architecture into a quotidian architecture, to a house illuminated.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting, Eric, and this has always impressed me about you, how thoughtful you are. I mean, you are the antithesis of "dumb as a painter." I mean, you're always thinking through why things are happening. Is this something that you realize in retrospect or was the thinking about where you were, how you were placed and situated in the dialogue, always part of your making as well, that you were never unaware of it? Because you talk so consciously about what you were faced with, what you were dealing with, how you had to make your way.

ERIC FISCHL: Right. Well, of course, you know, now, you know, after how many, 30 something years, it's, you know, and a lot of talking, it clarified itself that way. I mean, at the time, you know, as you've seen from the way I describe it, a lot of it's intuitive, intuitive movements through. A lot of it is, you know, being very aware of vulnerability and protection. And so you start to develop a way of rationalizing something that doesn't feel rational.

I think my process for clarity is the same both in making a painting and in trying to understand art and my relationship to it and whatnot. So I have certainly struggled to keep defining and, you know, redefining, rearticulating. Not so much defining but articulating things. And plus, I'm like so thrilled to be an artist, you know, and so thrilled to be a part of a community that I desperately want to earn their respect that I'm like thinking a lot about what they do, too. You know, I'm thinking, you know, what are they doing? Why are they doing this? You know, is this something I can use? Or, well, no, I'm doing this so I have to then come up with, you know, what the difference is so that I can share it with them, which they're more often not interested in [laughs].

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But that earnestness is actually quite natural and generous in you, isn't it? I mean, you do stay engaged.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you're one of the artists who continues to go to shows all the time. You stay involved.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, not as much as some others. I mean, Ross Bleckner is probably one of the best, and Chuck Close. I mean, those—I do it for a while and then I get depressed and I have to stop, or I get angry and I have to stop.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you kind of stay engaged with what's called the discourse, without making it too formal.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, you're interested in the world of ideas and the world of painting and how art intersects with society. I mean, if anything that is becoming more intense for you, the relationship between the artist and society.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. No, absolutely. I mean, you know, I was talking to Tip Dunham today. I don't know if you heard him say it. We were talking about this show, the "America Now and Here" show and he was saying, "Yeah, you know, it's like, I don't know, the art world, we've gotten—you know, the artists and the critics and the curators, it's like we're all drinking the same Kool-Aid." He said, "You know, none of us are feeling like we're doing the thing that we want to do. You know, we want it to be the thing that we think it's supposed to be. We're all like in some other world in which the art, you know, that's got nothing to do with our reasons why. And yet we're participating in it because we're—and we don't know why, you know."

I mean, how could you say it better than that? It's true. We've lost some connection that I feel very strongly we need to reattach to, you know. That art is—you know, because it was so helpful for my life as a way of understanding the world, and it is helpful in my life as a way of organizing experience and a sharing. You know, art is essentially an empathetic one. It's how we—it's a cultural glue. It attaches us and gives us a language through imagery and through experience and consideration for communicating with each other. It civilizes us. You know, it's all those things we really want and we need now.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You know, Shelley, the British poet, had that wonderful phrase where he talks about, he says poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. You sense that he's really saying that that's the role that the artist, not just poet, should play.

ERIC FISCHL: Should play, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Clearly you're of the Shelleyian world in that way and that it's, if not legislation, a kind of moral arbitration is something that the artist should bring to society.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You believe that that's a role that artists should play.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, on—I mean, one of the sort of, you know, images that I amuse myself with in terms of the artist is somewhere, the artist is somewhere between like a scout and a fur trapper, you know. It's this person who goes out by themselves into the wilderness trying to find pathways to other places—other places of, you know, knowledge, experience, revelation, et cetera, et cetera—and then comes back to say where the path leads. And what they come back with is the furs. They come back with these evidence of the journey which then get traded, right? And really what's great about the thing that they trade, their furs are the paintings or objects they make along the way, and they're the thing that connect us to the—they're the stories. They're the evidence of the story.

You know, underneath it all is the spirit of exploration and the experience of communication, which I think you can say that those are the two essential things of being human. You know, we have this, for some reason this, unlike most animals, this need to leave home and to leave way away. Not leave home but leave place, leave country, leave world. You know, we want to go. But we also want to construct networks or systems and all of our cultures have found unbelievable ways of doing it, of communicating back home. So as far away as we go, we find a way of reconnecting to home, networks of, you know, whether it was smoke at one point, or drums or whatever, to roadways to pathways. You know, whatever it is, to telephones. We have found ways of doing that and so, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting. We're sitting next to, in this studio, four big paintings of a subject that certainly caught me by surprise. You're doing bullfights. And the only reason I mention it is because the bullfight is a tradition that European painters had handled from Spaniards to French painters as well. That raises the whole question of your relationship to this larger question of art history. Painting for you is an art form that—you've said so eloquently you can look at a 400-year-old painting and it speaks to you as directly and viscerally as the day that Rembrandt made it.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What has been your relationship with European painting as well as the American painting tradition of which you are a pretty seminal part? You've cultivated it, don't you? I mean, you're a close looker at all of that painting.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Because you learn from it?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, because it actually talks to me, you know. I mean, it—you know, I suppose because I am a painter I can look at something and say, "Oh, he moved it this way. He chose this instead of that." And within that becomes a question as well as an observation. It's like, "Why? Why would you put—well, you put that there because of this. If you hadn't done that then this wouldn't have happened." And now I'm moving along a thought path, a feeling path. That's not mine, but his, you know, the artist's, et cetera. And the work is taking, it's talking to me in that intimate kind of way. So I connect to it for that.

And, you know, it's not that—I like that you look at a painting or look at a work of art and it's both sort of apparent and not obvious at all what—because what it is is it's an interpretation. And that's what you want to get to in art is to understand the interpretation, because the fact that, you know, for example, that Caravaggio paints, you know, a painting directly out of a Christian narrative that has been painted a zillion times by a zillion artists but in this case he paints the feet of the Mary, you know, the Virgin Mary, and they're dirty feet, not—you know, they're feet from a street person. Well, now that narrative has just taken a corner turn that no one has expected. That brings it into a whole other relationship to the whole history of that kind of painting.

I mean, those are the things that move us forward, you know. They're the things that grasp the moment where, you know, someone like Caravaggio now takes the sacred text and moves it into the secular language and all of a sudden it becomes a humanist rather than a spiritual dialogue or a spiritual story. I mean a secular story. It becomes more about a woman and a child than about the Virgin Mary and the God and, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And then, you know, what grows out of that turn becomes a whole humanist tradition of reinterpretation of myths and religious narratives, you know, et cetera, et cetera. That then moves into the Rococo and becomes a totally decadent form [laughs], you know, one in which it, you know, moves into such an elitist and socialized frivolity that it empties out again, you know. You know, Neoclassicism gets reinvented as a way of trying to fit, you know, these things, fit content back in in some heroic manner. I mean, it keeps moving because it's about interpretation.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What's most fascinating about you and the way you talk about painting, and this has come up in those conversations we've had for *Border Crossings* about painters as different as Matisse and Bonnard and Beckmann, your looking at painting is also a compelling and constant search not just for the thing that's different but also for the way in which the story can in a sense be retold. I mean, you are a story watcher of the most kind of intense kind. Is that always what paintings are, paintings are finally always telling us stories?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, to the exasperation of certain artists that I know who think that I make a story out of everything [Enright laughs], I would say yes. You know, I see everything as a series of decisions that are made that have meaning and that meaning is, you know, is resonant. It's metaphoric or it's poetic.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It may also be painterly and formal. Obviously those are also painterly decisions. If you put that orange under the hoof of that bull, I mean, there's a reason for that that may be something additional to its narrative implications, I assume.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I mean, the decision I would make as a painter who painted this painting is that that orange, those oranges are there to somehow satisfy the whole illumination of the light quality that's in the work so that the painting doesn't go dead there. So that, you know, it has that formal quality to it. And it also functions as a way of sort of becoming an abstract shape that catches your eye that pulls you away from the wound. You know, it pulls you away from the wound long enough for you to gather the strength to return to the wound.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's a necessary distraction.

ERIC FISCHL: It's a necessary distraction. You know, and it's necessary—it's a distraction that's tender, you know, because it's tragic. It's like, you know, I wish I could remember that—shit, there's a Hemingway poem that's, it's Hemingway and it's like a three-, six-word poem or, you know. "Children's shoes for sale." It's—do you know this thing?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No, I don't.

ERIC FISCHL: It's like "Child's shoes for sale, unworn," or something like that. And it's like, you know, it's just a sign that says, you know, we've got these kids' shoes, do you want to buy the shoes, or there's a reason why those shoes were never worn, you know. So it's a kind of tender distraction in a way that reveals, you know, a

sadder reality.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This sounds like a goofy question because it sounds like a question, you know, real men don't eat quiche. But when you talk about tender that's an interesting word. It has always seemed to me in your work for all of its surface content, which can be pretty sensational and dramatic and all the rest of it, that you've always wanted to somehow mitigate that by a kind of undermining quality that is about gentleness, is about lyricism, is about a side that one would want to call softer, more feminine, whatever. As soon as you get into the language you find yourself in a certain trap.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But is that something that you have found necessary to cultivate or is it just engendered in you, it's there because where else would it be?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I definitely don't feel as angry and hostile as my—certainly not the work I've been doing but in the past as that work would first appear, you know. But, you know, yeah. No, I don't think you can paint a kind of human drama without caring about the people that are suffering from it, you know, that are experiencing it in their way. So, you know, yeah, it's important to have that aspect of it as well. Lyricism I'm not sure was ever something I would have described my work as having. I don't know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, your technique is now so remarkable that, I mean, you can make a brush stroke, a movement of paint across a surface, be pretty and beautiful, elegant and lyric. I mean, I guess it's in that sense. I'm talking more of formally than I am as the nature of what you paint. It's the how rather than the what.

ERIC FISCHL: Uh-huh, yeah. Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I definitely have wanted and tried very hard to try to take difficult things and paint them beautifully. I mean, I think that's—art functions best when it embraces and not only embraces but actually holds in a kind of exquisite tension a paradox. And so tragedy combined with, you know, a beautiful form, a beautiful gesture, is certainly one of those paradoxes.

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: Eric, I guess I want to pick up a little bit of stuff we were talking about yesterday about narrative and talk about the Krefeld Project. In some ways it seems to me it's the natural fulfillment of this way that you have developed story in your painting practice in lots of ways, because it's an elaborate story which you actually set out, in a sense, to construct. Do you want to talk a little bit about what the ideas behind the Krefeld Project were and how you feel it developed?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, like most of my work it starts out with the simplest of ideas. I had been invited to do a thing at the Haus Esters in Krefeld [Germany] and, you know, it was a Mies van der Rohe house. It was one of his first residences, modernist residences. They wanted the artist who shows there to do something that has some kind of dialogue, relationship, whatever, with the architecture of the house or the history of the house. And so I told them that, you know, the fact that it was once a house and that people lived there and that I do things, paintings and whatever, about people living in houses, families, et cetera, that what my proposal would be would be to hire a couple of actors and furnish the house and take photographs of them as though they lived in this house. I'd follow them around room to room and then I'd go home and make paintings that sort of reconstructed the experience, created some kind of fictional narrative about people that lived in this place.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you took some 2,000 photographs, did you?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, about that. And, you know, there was a lighting crew and makeup people. You know, it was almost like a film event. And the actors, they spoke German. They spoke English but they spoke German. But I had written no dialogue. It was really not about that. And they were very good at creating their own dialogue. I would give them little problems to act out, to solve, which had been the advice of some friends of mine who were in the theater business, in the film business and stuff, you know. And they had—so I would give them these problems and then they'd just go to town. I'd take lots of photographs and they'd create their own dialogue.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was that an exciting process, the watching them work out the problems and become these characters in the sense you've given them permission to be?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I'd never done it. I'd only worked with models in the past or taken, you know, sort of street photos. So I'd never actually worked with actors who obviously animate character in a totally different way. And so it was very exciting to see that. It felt very real. What surprised me, because I wasn't thinking along these lines and I certainly didn't think I'd be able to perceive it, was how quickly you could tell that whatever they were working on wasn't happening. It wasn't going anywhere. And I was surprised that I could see that because, as I said, I hadn't constructed anything for them to do. At that point I would stop them. I'd redirect them, give them

a different problem or whisper something in one of their ears that changed the direction and they'd start again.

And the other thing that surprised me was that, how when they were onto something sometimes it was so intense and so real that I would stop photographing. I'd be just watching, like an audience at a play.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's not why you were there, I guess.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Missed all the good scenes.

ERIC FISCHL: Yes. But yeah, it was good. And then, you know, afterwards I went back with all my 2,000 photographs and had them scanned into the computer. And then I would cut and paste and reconfigure scenes that would take place in the living room or the dining room, the sun room, the bedroom or the bathroom, which were the five rooms that I worked with.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was it the rooms that determined or the incident inside the particular room that made it seem like it was particularly appealing to make a painting from?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I don't know how to answer that. In a way it's both. But the fact is that in some, in most instances they weren't necessarily—the gesture that I cut out of one wasn't necessarily in the same room or it wasn't in the room at the same moment that the other gesture was, the other, you know. I was really using them as raw material and then writing the thing in paint to tell to some extent a different narrative. I mean, I was creating a different narrative.

The thing that I could never tell as I painted one painting to the next, hoping to answer the question for myself, was, you know, like who are these people in relationship to each other. Are they, is this a husband and a wife of a short-term marriage, a long-term marriage? Is it a man and his mistress? Is it his house? Is it her house? Is it, you know, is she taking him as an afternoon lover? You know, and I just, I couldn't find the thing. And there was a tremendous amount of tension that was going on between the two of them, so wherever it was it seemed like it was towards the end of it, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you never answered any of those questions for yourself?

ERIC FISCHL: I could not. Each painting started out saying this one's going to reveal, and it just became equally ambiguous as to the thing. The thing that I absolutely didn't expect as I painted, and I think when you see the collection of the paintings together you can perceive this, which is that sometimes the events are perceived through his eyes, his consciousness, you feel you're feeling it through him, and other paintings you're feeling it through her. And so it just kept flipping back and forth between his consciousness and her consciousness as to what was going on. And that's, I guess, another reason why I couldn't quite tell whose place it was, whose—what exactly their relationship was. It just kept, the questions keep being in both of their minds.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting, so but in painting them you must have realized that the point of view was itself shifting, that sometimes it was from her perspective and other times from his, then?

ERIC FISCHL: I, it became apparent but not for several paintings into it. And as I said, it wasn't a conscious strategy of like, "Well, now I'm going to sort of present this thing from her point of view, now from his." It was just that, you know, there'd be something about her way she was sitting in a room, her gaze, that I would start throwing things in front of her to see what she was thinking about and then vice versa with him.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting that you paint yourself into a series of questions rather than painting yourself a set of answers. I find that a fascinating process because you'd think that the opposite would happen, that the painting would be a resolution of some of these questions that you're raising.

ERIC FISCHL: Right. Well, I don't think—the one thing you don't want is to resolve the questions, you know. If you set out to do that I think you've, there was no point in painting it in the first place. What you want to do is find the balance between an evocation, an evocative moment and its potential resolution, you know. It's like you want to take it to a point where it seems most pregnant with meaning even though you don't know what the meaning is, and so you then begin to think about and say, "Well, maybe it's this or maybe it's that. If it's this it feels like it means this. If it's that it's, you know." Then I think you're the most engaged as an audience.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In their dining room and living room they've got a Beckmann, they've got a Nauman, a Warhol, a Richter. This is a pretty upscale household from their art collection. Were those meant to be tributary or why were those particular pieces dropped into the paintings?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, yeah. It occurred to me at one point that I probably should give these people some art, and because it was Germany it was really quite simple. I chose, you know, the favorite artists of the Germans and I

gave them very good works of art. You know, an extraordinary collection that they had.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But those weren't in—the Nauman. You didn't actually borrow them from the collection at the —

ERIC FISCHL: Oh, no. No, those are just, you know, off the Web and dropped in. You know, easy to do in painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It is lovely, though, that there is the tributary painting to Beckmann, who is one of your favorite painters that you do put into the dining room.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And use in one of the sort of fuck scenes in the, among the paintings.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. It's funny, too, because, while in the foreground you have this couple in some kind of, you know, mad sort of sexual moment in the dining room, some kind of spontaneous and perhaps even desperate scene. You have behind them this Beckmann, which is a picture of a women looking at herself in the mirror and just kind of self-involved, narcissistic, you know, delight. And from where I'm standing as the viewer I'm looking over the shoulder of the woman who is getting screwed and she seems to be looking past the man who she is coupling with to this woman who is sort of just looking at herself, so it—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It doesn't auger well for him.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I think the reason that painting is pretty clear.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. And in the foreground there's an homage to Richter. There's this candlestick, which sort of tips its hat to Richter.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You've also done—and the other thing that's interesting about your sequencing in lots of ways is I think of a series like The Bed and The Chair series, the Questionable Pleasures, the Travel of Romance. You also tended to take a single figure often and then also work them through a series of either gestures or narrative incidents. Is that again an extension of your need to kind of complete a story for yourself in the painting?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, the difference between putting a single figure into a work, into a potential narrative moment, or putting two people in or three or more, is a very big difference in relationship to how the viewer is engaged. So when there's a single figure you become, as the viewer, the other person in the room. You become the other person in the room and if the person is looking away from you in the painting then you have a relatively comfortable relationship to your viewing, your scene. If she turns or he turns and looks at you, if now he's looking out or she's looking out at you, now you have a confrontational experience in which you are fully implicated in this moment of whatever it is.

If you put two people in a painting you're to some extent returned to the safer, voyeuristic position where you're watching two people interacting who, you know, aren't aware of your presence and you're peering into their world. I mean, I've done ones where one will engage the audience while the other is oblivious to it, things like that. Those are all ways of making a kind of dynamic interaction between what's going on inside the painting, what's going to take place outside.

And then, of course, as you get into groups, you know, that becomes more, you know, a more complicated kind of orchestration because you can have, it can break down into smaller groups of interaction. You know, you can create a kind of chaotic viewing where the eye can't land on any particular moment within the frozen moment that they can rest on, or you can have them find something in a lot of activity where they can spend a moment of quiet in. You know, there's ways of working with those different elements.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So in lots of ways what I'm calling series of paintings then are ways of you working out those variations of relationship between and among characters inside paintings and, indeed, the relationship between the viewer and the content of the painting itself then?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, Questionable Pleasures is the, you know, what she's doing in the painting is sort of mysterious in a way. It's abstract, you know. She's sort of posing herself in a way and you can't quite tell why, you know. Is she doing it because you've asked her to this? Is she doing it because she's trying to entice you into something? You know, is she performing for you? And then what are you, you know, how do you feel about what she's offering or not? Do you feel, you know, uninhibited, inhibited, whatever?

And in Travel of Romance it's slightly different because in the first, the opening scene of it there are two people

in there. And then as it moves into the next four paintings the one person, the male, the black male figure disappears except as a reminder of his presence through image on a tapestry or a head, a sculpted head or something like that which recalls him. But the thing is, you know, the first painting was only meant to be painted. I only did it as a single painting. But when I stepped back from it I was looking at it and I couldn't believe what I was seeing, which is people, two people in such a tight, enclosed and close space. You know, almost touching each other, they were that close.

And yet when I was viewing them I couldn't see them at the same time. It was like her look, her whiteness, her pose was such that I totally became absorbed in her and then I noticed him. And when I noticed him, he was the opposite. He was completely animated and, you know, kind of fabulously gestural and whatever. And then I'm like completely looking at him and I forget her. And I'm thinking, "How could this be? They're right next to each other. How could it be one and not the other, one and then the other and not the, you know, dah, dah, dah, dah." And so I thought, you know, it's probably that one is the figment of the other's imagination, one's not real in the corporeal sense.

But I wasn't sure, so I thought, "I'll do another painting and see, see who's there and who's not there," you know. And so the next painting I did had her sort of on the floor, in a crawling position. I had him on the floor as well, laying down and whatnot, or sort of half his torso, sort of like she was crawling towards him. But I couldn't keep him inside the picture, so I removed him. And her gaze is clearly towards something that's right outside the picture frame so I thought, you know, he's in the room but he's not in the picture. So I did another painting and now she's standing up and she's looking. There's a mirror on a chair but she's not looking at herself in the mirror. She's looking past the mirror to, potentially to him on the bed or something like that. There's a bed post there so it's, you know, is that where he is and she's thinking about him and stuff.

And then the next painting she's now bending over. Now she's rummaging through her suitcase and he—and no longer looking for him. She's looking for something else now. Maybe her identity, you know, her passport, her baggage. She's looking, she's rummaging through her baggage is what it is. And then in the last painting, you know, she's alone, sort of recalling the first pose, which the first pose is she's crouching in a very sort of white, egg-like, fetal position. And in the end she's all balled up in the middle of the floor with this sort of light that's like so intense it's, you know, dissolving her almost. So within the course of that trajectory he apparently was her fantasy. He disappears except as a, you know, an imagined type of character.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's really intriguing to hear the way you think through that kind of thing. What it leads me to recognize is that you never put anything in a painting that is accidental. I mean, a bed post or a glass of iced tea or anything. You're just not putting props in to fill space. These are clearly clues to a kind of psychological reading of the painting.

ERIC FISCHL: Right. Yeah, exactly. I would hope that, you know, once the painting is done and moves on into the world that everybody would feel free or encouraged to consider each thing in the painting as signifying some aspect, pointing toward some reading of meaning that, you know, further animates what their gut feeling was or initial experience was. Absolutely. I mean, you know, like you say, if you see a bed post painted into the painting you can assume the whole bed is there just outside the picture, right? And then—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Who is in the bed and—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. If somebody is looking in that direction are they looking to an empty bed or are they looking to a full bed? If they're looking to an empty bed there's a melancholy. If they're looking to a full bed there's a hope. You know, I mean, and for me I'm not going to answer which one it is but I want to set it up so that, you know, one begins to feel the possibilities within this person's life that they're looking in on, you know, and engage it in that way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: When we were talking a couple days ago about David Salle one of the things you said you admired about David's work is the way he combines different almost styles of painting in a single painting. It occurs to me when I was looking at a work like *The Empress of Sorrow* [1992] and also that painting you have, the homage to Fellini in which you've got a kabuki singer and some kind of an MC and a tennis player and then in *The Empress of Sorrow* it seems to me it looks like a portrait of David Salle himself.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, it is.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It looks like all that content is the equivalent to the way he brings painting styles in. You're bringing in so many narrative possibilities that it's almost a kind of collage.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Is that the way you were thinking about those particular works?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I was thinking about that. What I find is that I more often than not can speak within a narrative or paint within a narrative mode, but there are times when I'm dealing with feelings that don't resolve themselves as narrative in the sense of a scene. They become more allegorical. Things become symbolic rather than literal or whatnot. It's one of those things where I don't, I can't predict, you know, when it occurs that I'm actually dealing with a set of feelings that can only express themselves in a dream format, you know, in a thing where it's imagistic, it's evocative, there's this feeling and meaning within each sort of symbolic form but I can't express it in a straightforward way. And so *The Empress of Sorrow* was one of those paintings. What's the other one?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's an homage to Fellini.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I forget what the name of it is [laughs.] There's another. I mean, there's one. You know, *First Sex* [1985] is a painting that kind of takes that. From time to time it happens. I don't predict it. But, yes, David is in the painting *Empress of Sorrow* and the figure, the kabuki figure came from a street person in street mime in Paris who was re-enacting in mime the Madame Butterfly suicide scene. You know, it was kind of one of these great transgendered, you know, kind of characters where he was playing her in this incredible melodrama and, you know, mime on the street. I was completely charmed by the whole thing and so that, you know, I wanted to put him into the picture. Then, you know, the carnival, the carousel thing seemed like an appropriate sort of environment for this melodramatic enactment.

And at some point I thought I needed, I need an impresario. I need someone to, you know, and I thought David would be the perfect impresario for this kind of carnival, this carousel of life type of thing about, you know, melodramas and identities and, you know, cultural references, et cetera, et cetera. So I put David in standing there kind of witnessing this moment, slightly off stage but still on the carousel. And then I titled it *Empress of Sorrow*, which is a pun on impresario. And then I told him, I said, "David, I just put you in a painting. You've got to come see it." And, you know, when he had a chance he came over and looked at it and it was exactly like one of those times when someone says, "Oh, I dreamt about you last night," and then tells you the dream and you're sitting there, "Why me? I have nothing to do with this thing." Right? I mean, he was looking at this painting going, "Why am I in this painting?" [Laughs.] Oh, well.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You have been, I mean, I guess for a while you've done portraits but in the last decade or so portraiture has become another aspect of your practice. What was it that attracts you to it? Is it about paying tribute to those friends, because you basically paint friends rather than strangers.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, although it's probably changing. I'm becoming more of a public portraitist. But, yes, it was one of those things where I began to realize that I have an extraordinary life that's extraordinary because I know extraordinary people and the people that I know all do things and they do things in a contributing kind of way to our cultural moment. And I thought, you know, one aspect of the history of painting is its memory and celebration of that, of your time. And so I thought, you know, I should at least acknowledge that so I started to paint, you know, people close to me who I, you know, admire. So that's where it began. And then, of course, the problems with portrait is interesting, too.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Which are what?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, it's essentially nonverbal. It's a non-narrative form, right? It's hard to make a portrait that is fresh and feels fresh, new, contemporary, when the history of it is so deep and the restrictions are so strong. So it's a painting challenge. And then it's a confrontation with, you know, one person's expectations based on what they think they look like, how they think they come across, versus how one is seen. And so in the painting process, of course, you're battling, you know, self-consciousness. You're battling, you know, do I want to say this about this, does this feel like I want to show this to that person? You know, is this the way I want it to be? So you kind of, you actually clarify your relationship to the people that you're painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's interesting. So you mean you worry about that? I mean, you consider the feelings of the sitter, in a sense, or the subject of the photograph that you're painting?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. You know, I don't set people up when I photograph them for portraits. I don't tell them what to wear. I don't tell them how to stand, sit, or whatever. I basically just go into a room with them and start photographing them, and in the course of that time there's a lot that gets revealed, you know. And a lot of it gets revealed without them knowing that it's revealed, and at the time without me necessarily knowing.

And, you know, I'll give you a good example would be something like I did a portrait of Lorne Michaels [2002] and Lorne was somebody that I didn't really know. I knew, but I didn't really know, so it wasn't like a deeply familiar person. He was somebody that I knew and certainly respect and I was—he comes in and, you know, we chat. We start to get to know each other. I'm taking photographs. We talk. We talk about what's going on in his life, et cetera. You know, and I end up doing this portrait of him.

Now, when the painting is done what it's captured is a kind of world-weariness. There's a—it seemed like my life intersected his at a point where in mid-life he's rethinking a lot of stuff. You can tell that, you know, there's a level of exhaustion that's there with all of the stuff that he's had to do or all the hands he's had to hold or all the people he's had to disappoint or, you know, whatever it was. You could see that. He wasn't talking about any of that stuff but his body language was such that when he finally sort of fell into himself in the chair you could see what the weight had done, you know, and it comes across.

So now he comes back to see the portrait and I think it's a very powerful, very sort of elegant painting, but it holds, you know, it doesn't hold back any of that thing. And he was like, you know, sort of speechless that what he was looking at was vulnerability rather than the strength which he had thought that he had, you know, presented to me. You know, and I wasn't trying to undermine him in any way but it was like the truth of the moment was very clear from photograph to photograph that this is where he's at in his life at this time. And it took him several hours of sitting in my studio looking at this thing and talking and, you know, and not talking, and looking and whatever to finally come to a level of acceptance about what, you know, this experience was. It was pretty interesting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So in that sense it's your reading of the character always in a portrait but it is the subject emanating his or her essence at that time. I mean, that's how you would read the portraits always?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, I'm not—as I said, I'm not trying to direct them but I am receiving. I mean, it's not just in the portraits. In the Krefeld series when I finally put the show up—and Krefeld, of course, invited the actors to come and see what I had done, you know, a year or two years later, whatever it was. And they came and I was all excited to get their response to it, you know, because they had no idea. They knew my work but they had no idea how they were going to be put into these dramas, et cetera. And, you know, one and then the other kind of came up sort of again a little bit unnerved, shaken, dah, dah, dah, dah. And I'm like, "What do you think? Why are you, you know, you seem not too happy with this. You know, what?" And they both said, you know, "These people in these paintings are like they're so unhappy and they're so, you know, their relationship is so bad and, you know, I was in the middle of breaking up with my boyfriend while we were photographing this stuff." And the other one had admitted to me after he saw the paintings that he had just left his wife and kids a month before or something.

So all of the sudden I got this smile on my face after that because I thought as I was painting this thing and these people in the painting were so unhappy, their lives were so full of tension and disconnect and misinterpretation and missed moments and stuff like that. And I'm thinking, "I'm so sick." I'm like, "I can't even paint a happy painting. I can't even paint people having just a quiet, simple moment in their own house," you know. And then it turns out that I couldn't do it because the vibe coming off of these two was like so strong about relationships not working out and, you know. Anyway, so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You're just a good reader of character, as it turns out.

ERIC FISCHL: I think that probably is a strength of mine, that I actually—people show me, as they show everybody, and I see it, you know. I feel it. And then it comes, you know, it comes back out.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You've done very—I mean, there's one notable self -portrait, the one in which you're kind of wearing a mask and looking like you're doing a shtick, but you've basically stayed away from self-portraiture. Is that because your work is itself an aspect of self -portraiture, why just declare yourself that directly in the canvas?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. It just seems redundant, you know. I mean, I don't know. When I go to do it I take an ironic distance to myself. Because, see, I definitely think that if anybody really wants to know what I think and feel—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: They just have to look at the paintings.

ERIC FISCHL: They look at the paintings, you know, and they get it pretty straightforward.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That said, one of your favorite painters is Beckmann and he has done some of the most remarkable and intense and powerful self-portraits, oftentimes in the guise of sort of putting on a character, playing a character.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, he's a character actor. I mean, you know, his *Man with Saxophone*, "Man with Bathrobe," and *Man in Tuxedo with a Cigarette*, even some of his brooding, dark whatevers have a theatrical tone to them. I mean, I think, you know, he included himself in his own circus, for sure. But, you know, he just, he fit himself in as one of the characters. It wasn't a kind of an existential investigation.

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: Do you have other—your practice is quite varied and I want to talk a little bit about the role that drawing plays, because you've drawn always and it seems like very, sort of, prolifically. Are the drawings basically also a point of departure for you in that they often end up elaborating themselves into a painting or is it also a practice that is discrete and you just love because you like the quickness of it?

ERIC FISCHL: I think it's really practice in almost like an athletic sense. It's practice. It's a way to keep the mind fluid, keep the hand fluid, you know. It's a way to, you know, a time to be lazy without being really lazy. [Enright laughs.] At first I struggled with it because I thought, you know, they were so separate from the paintings and I thought, "Why, they should be." And there was something that I was getting from the drawings, especially the—I mean, it turns out that my, the way I draw best is with paint as opposed to pencil, which I don't quite understand. Charcoal I can handle, but paint is the thing that, you know, because it's color and it's gesture and there's an immediacy to it that I get. And I include watercolor as part of that thing.

But what I couldn't understand was why am I—I'm getting this kind of pleasure and directness and, you know, sort of feeling, a good feeling from these drawings. Why can't I translate that into the painting? Why is when I get to the paintings it slows down, becomes nudgy, overdetailed, dah, dah, dah, you know. Was it just the scale of it? Maybe if I can learn how to up my gestural scale so that I could, you know, take a brush stroke and enlarge it to a bigger gesture I could sort of bring the feeling of the drawings into the paintings. And I tried many times and I just, I couldn't do it. There was something about the scale that was too much for me physically.

There was also a thing where a different kind of seriousness took place or something. Once I got up to a life-size figure I wanted more information. I wanted to know more about the person than just the image of the person being there. And so, you know, naturally the paintings got slower and more detailed, more bogged down. But it drove me crazy for a while. And then, you know, sometimes I would do drawings where a figure or two figures would be pulled over into a painting, but rarely would the scenes that I was portraying in the drawings come over fully, you know, interpreted, interpolated or whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Some aspect of them could be, though?

ERIC FISCHL: Some aspect would, and oftentimes not. I mean, oftentimes it would just, you know, just be for drawings. And then I began to realize that that was okay, you know, that there was an aspect of drawing which was satisfying the eros side of my being, the pleasure side, the unfettered, erotic and the spontaneous. And then, you know, the paintings were not that. They didn't have to be that. They could be more monumental, more specific and more complicated or complex in terms of, you know, not eros but sexuality and things like that, so more psychological.

And then when I started to do watercolors, you know—paintings and the oil on paper drawings always come from photographs. Then I started to do watercolors and then the watercolors came from photographs as well, but they started to talk to me about sculpture. That was another surprise. I mean, I certainly have seen, you know, like Rodin's watercolors and his sculptures, et cetera. But I'd never thought that there was like an obvious relationship between something as thin and ephemeral as a watercolor and something as massive and stolid and, you know, fixed as a sculpture, and yet the relationship is ultimately crystal clear as to, you know, how one translates into the other, and so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And how does that work? I mean, one of the fascinating things for me is to see when you exhibit your watercolors and often your drawings, too, with the sculpture, they're perfect together somehow. They do seem like they belong in the same space. And that also comes as a surprise, I think, to the viewer.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But what is the integral relationship that exists between watercolor and sculpture that makes that ephemeral quality and that solid quality so commensurate somehow, so likeable, one to the other?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I think that there's a—well, one, they're both gestural and two, they're both pared down. And so they both exist so solidly within their materiality that that's part of it. You know, the watercolor declares itself as a watercolor. And, of course, the way I use it it's, you know, it's a very gestural form that has a shape. It becomes shapes. And sculpture is about shapes, you know. And so you begin to see in the watercolor how that shape could translate into a three-dimensional shape and it kind of works like that. There's no, you know, it's not about light and environment and relationship of person to object or whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The other part of your practice which has become really significant and laterally a major focus is sculpture as well. What got you started in sculpture in the first place? I notice in the German show they go all the way back to some of the Halifax work and they include that as sculptural objects, interestingly enough.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And I guess that's right. I thought about them as paintings rather more than sculptures.

ERIC FISCHL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But that notwithstanding, you've been involved in sculpture certainly since '88.

ERIC FISCHL: The figurative—yeah, I don't know exactly the dates but the figurative work came out of a real sort of moment in my career. I was living out here on Long Island. April and I were living out here for a year, through the whole year for the first time without going, you know, summers here or winters in New York kind of thing. We were—this is the first time we were living throughout the winter here because we were renovating something in the city and had no place to live. And so it was the first time of kind of getting out of the chaotic aspect of the city and started to sort of slow down a bit. The phone wasn't ringing as much. There wasn't things that were pulling me out of the studio.

And I kind of rediscovered play. I was, in my paintings at the time, you know, things were not flowing as easily. And I discovered play again, which, you know, the sort of the pressures of the city, the pressures of career had taken me away from. And I'd come to a point where there was—I was so familiar. I'd been using these photographs from San Tropez that I had taken and had done all these paintings of people on the beach and whatnot and I'd kind of developed this troop of actors from these photographs that I would use over and over again in different situations. So I'd become very fond and very familiar with them and probably overused in terms of painting inspiration.

And I just sort of thought to myself one day, "Well, I know these people so well from their back side or from their right side or their left side. I wonder if I could imagine them all the way around." And so I got some clay and I took, you know, one of the figures and I just sort of made a figure, you know, what I could see from the back and then I just sort of moved over to the other side and created their front or their, you know, the side I couldn't see. I wasn't thinking anything more about it than this is just a fun activity. And I would take that model or whatever you would call it, little sculpture, and I'd put it on a table and I'd go do another one and I'd put that over there, and then do another one.

Then, you know, after four or five of them I kind of looked over at that table and I'm looking at a beach scene. I'm looking at something that this is like what I do, you know. All these people in these different poses and whatnot. And so I thought, "Huh." And so I took lights and I lit them and then I took black and white photographs and I just sort of made up new beach scenes with these characters. And then I took the black and white photographs and started making paintings from the photographs.

And what I was looking for at the time was I was looking—in my painting I was looking for a way of freeing up my color from its local description. I wanted to see if I could make color paintings without it having to be blue sky and green grass kind of thing. And also—which is why I photographed these in black and white, because then I could see tonal range without having to see color.

And then the other thing was the figures were so sort of distorted in terms of, you know, their surface and in terms of their detail and in terms of their proportions that it automatically had built into it a kind of expressive quality. And so I wanted to use that to sort of free up my obsession with trying to make it more and more realistic. And so I did these paintings where I sort of, you know, used these black and white photographs of these sculptures. And what turned out was that the photographs were the best part of it, you know. The black and white photographs for me are the most interesting of all of it, but the whole activity got me thinking along the lines of sculpture and then I sort of moved from there up to a full-blown, large, life-size figure.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Which would then be cast.

ERIC FISCHL: That would then be cast.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you had never worked—you hadn't worked with clay before. I mean, it wasn't a material that you knew anything about particularly.

ERIC FISCHL: No. I mean, oddly enough, my first year at Phoenix College I did a sculpture, sort of spontaneously did a sculpture of a fat woman sitting down and, you know, and then not thought about it for 20 years or whatever [laughs], you know. And then all of a sudden rediscover sculpture.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, the sculpture for which you are probably best known, and it started out unfortunately for you because you were so attacked, was the *Tumbling Woman* [2001] and that came out of 9/11. I guess the obvious question is to talk a little bit about how that event changed your life and art. Because we've been talking all along about sort of psychological readings and the way that you've made a world as a kind of director in [inaudible] and I guess in some ways 9/11 makes everybody react in one way or another to them and suddenly there was different even political terrain in which you were operating. What's your sense, Eric, of how

things have changed because of that, using *Tumbling Woman*, I guess, as the point of departure for a radical shift in the way you think about the role, I think, of the artist in society?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, I've always thought that, you know, art was something that would really be at the center of great moments, important moments, and it was a way that art was this way of understanding experiences, being initiated in conversations about it, giving people some way of naming the experience. And so when I was watching—I wasn't in the city at the time. I was watching it on TV like everybody else was who wasn't there. But I was, one of the things besides being terrified and, you know, deeply saddened and whatnot, you know, terrified because we had a friend in the building who ultimately died in the tragedy as well, and so, you know, worries about them and him specifically.

One of the things that crossed my mind in this day of viewing was if there's a time now is the time that art is needed here. And so I began to at that moment begin to try to think is there a way of putting something on this that, you know, is there a shape that this can take. And there was certainly a lot of stuff visually that was happening that photography captured brilliantly and video captured brilliantly. It was there, you know. The drama of the shapes of the smoke and the stuff from the burning towers, the rubble. You know, to me one of the greatest sort of memorializations of that tragedy was the facade that remained that was like a stack of crosses. I mean, nothing was more horribly eloquent than that.

But what happened very quickly, because it was such an unusually—it was a unique experience in a way in terms of tragedy on that scale, was because of the collapse of the buildings the bodies were pulverized. There really was no bodies. What we witnessed, we saw no human. You know, with the exception of those who jumped that were captured on film, we really saw no bodies. And, you know, what we saw was things like the, you know, hospitals ready for triage and, you know, and so you had all these empty, you know, gurneys. No bodies. You know, 3,000 people die and there's no evidence of that. And that became—that was such a strange experience.

It became even more amplified by the fact that our way of understanding the horrible event turned very quickly to mourning the loss of the buildings, the architecture. Everything became about the architecture. People wanted to rebuild it as fast as possible to show the world that we were still strong. People wanted to preserve the footprints because it was sacred ground and it had to be literally the same size as the buildings and this and that and, you know, whatever. It just, it moved so quickly away from human loss, from human tragedy, that at some point it occurred to me that this is what needed to be remembered.

And so, you know, making a figurative sculpture, sculpture more than painting because sculpture really is a monumentalizing form. And so sculpture, it needed to be a sculpture. It needed to be a figure. And I, it didn't take long to sort of come up with the shape of the figure. And I was not wanting to make something that was about falling in the sense of the graphic and—I mean, as terrifying as it was, I mean, I think everybody, all of us who saw images of her who actually saw the figure, people jumping, realized that they were the ones that showed us exactly how horrible it was because they chose one form of death over another. And to be put into that moment, you know, was unimaginable, and yet there it was. And so I know we needed not to forget that. As difficult as it was to look at, we needed not to forget that.

But I didn't want it to be specifically or singularly about that because the experience was more than that in a way because it involved all of us in the country now entering a different relationship to our world. And it was one in which the rug had been pulled out from all of us. We were now in a state of free fall. And so my thoughts turned to that kind of movement, into tumbling. I sort of saw sagebrush just blowing in the wind. It's just going to go everywhere it hit, bounce off, you know. That felt more real to me as something that would include us all in that tragedy. So that's how *Tumbling Woman* came out of it. And I was, you know, being very specifically, you know, focused on calling it "tumbling" as opposed to "falling."

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And also in some senses her, certainly her sexuality is not emphasized. I mean, this is a woman who could as easily be read almost as male. I mean, you must have been very careful about even the gender—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, there's no—it's, yeah, it's figurative before it's gender specific. It's her but, I mean, it's *Tumbling Woman* as opposed to "Man." But in the sort of great tradition of Michelangelo where he sort of includes a masculine element to the female form, she has this also. And I chose woman over man in that I think that it, you know, that the female still does resonate as a nurturing figure, you know, in terms of a Mother Earth kind of thing. That's still very much a part of our understanding of the, you know, forces of nature and nurturing and also vulnerability. And, you know, so it seemed more, you know, dynamic or whatever to use the woman figure, form.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: We've talked before about this and every time it happens I'm again struck by how considered and eloquent was your articulation of that unbelievable event, and it makes me better understand how hurt you must have been with the reaction to it, that basically in some of the press you were accused of taking advantage

of the situation. A complete misreading—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: —of what your intention would have been. I would gather for such a committed New Yorker, an American, someone trying to deal with the dimensions of that tragedy, to be pegged with that kind of accusation must have been particularly hurtful at the time.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, it was, I was actually blindsided by it. I made it, you know, made the gesture out of a deep caring and sincerity and stuff and, you know, I mean, I guess if the critique had been that it wasn't good enough or it needed even more it would have been less hurtful. But the way I was attacked was as though all of my motives were corrupt, all of my motives were self-serving, and that I was willing to be doubly hurtful to those who were already suffering, you know. I mean, it was staggering.

The thing, you know, the thing about death, about loss, about tragedy, is that there is a hierarchy to it in terms of the way—because it's so wrenching a thing and we're so often not ready for it, we do whatever we can to hang on to it so that we don't lose everything, right, which is what we are feeling. And so there's a hierarchy that gets established and it gets established immediately and kind of agreed upon, and that is that, of course, the greatest is the person most closely related to the loss. So it's the, you know, the wife, the children, the family. They have the right to suffer openly the most. And then you have the circle of friends and acquaintances and, you know, it sort of spirals out from that: the community, et cetera, et cetera. And depending on how large the figure was in the social construct the rings get bigger and bigger and whatnot.

And in the case of 9/11 you had this hierarchy in which the, you know, the people who died and their families and then you had the heroes and then it was the people who were in the neighborhood at the time going about their business. And then it was like people who lived between Canal Street and 14th Street because they could still smell it and hear it. And then it was from 14th Street up to midtown, you know, was the next line of people that could. And then it was like up, you know, then it started to spread out and include New Jersey and Brooklyn. And all these people were, you know, eyewitnesses to it. They had, you know, they could tell their story first as to what, where they were at that moment, what they saw, felt and smelled and heard. And then it spread out, you know, across the country. And so by the time you get to the West Coast, you know, they, you know, they had a right to talk about it but not, they couldn't possess it. You know, it was that kind of thing, right?

And so part of the critique of this, you know, of my work was kind of pulling that hierarchy out, you know, that thing of like, you know, this outsider, how could he feel. He was out in the Hamptons watching it on television. How could he be the voice of, the feeling voice for, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And then there was the other thing which was saying that, you know, he was a sensational bad boy in the '80s and he's just trying to get his career going again now by doing a similar type of sensational thing, you know, it was just, it was unbelievable.

And it was saddening, too, you know, that Jerry Speyer and the Rockefeller Center people wanted to pull it so quickly, that they were—I mean, you know, I kept trying to convince them, and other people did too, that, you know, the first people to complain and to yell and scream are the irrational ones and that give it another few days and the same voices will start to come in to kind of quell this craziness and it'll pass. This will pass. But he was saying, "No, I can't do it. It's endangering the people that work in this building. My responsibility is to 5,000 people. We're getting calls of bomb threats and stuff." And I'm going, "No one is going to bomb now. This is, you don't bomb right after a bomb, you know. This is just insane people trying to vent." But, "No, no, I can't take the risk," and, you know, boom, it was gone.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You've kind of—it's interesting. My sense is one of the ways you've reconciled yourself to that whole period in lots of ways is for you to, it seems, assume a role. You're now curating and the ideas behind the curation have to do with again the body. This new project you've been talking about over the last couple of days where you want to get American artists involved in a rather extraordinary project. I mean, all of that seems to indicate that what's come out of 9/11 for you is a very personal sense of responsibility as an artist to talk to your country about what matters. I mean, it's intriguing.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, the fact is is 9/11 changed our lives, and I don't think anyone would deny that, really. I mean, and over the last eight years, seven years, you know, it's been, we've been sort of reeling from, you know, kind of not finding where our solid ground is. And everything's in play, everything's up for grabs, everything's being questioned.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's still tumbling.

ERIC FISCHL: It's still tumbling. And, I mean, I was—as strongly as I felt that the role of art was to move to the center of this problem and to deal with it through the gifts that we're given, which is the ability to make forms that give us, you know, a way of feeling and thinking about something, I was amazed at how adverse the art world was to take this on at first and how self-conscious artists were. I mean, I talked to artists that would only

reluctantly admit that their work had changed, that they hadn't really done anything specifically related to 9/11 and they didn't want to think about it or blah, blah, blah. And then they would kind of say, "But, you know, I was, I'm working on this piece where there seems to be some fragmentation to it," or, "My color palette has shifted to darker tones." You know, and it's like, well, of course it has. You know, we need to like, you know, figure this thing out and get at it, make these things compelling.

You know, it also showed how unprepared the art world was to take on things that were not, you know, strictly individual interests or tragedies or whatever but to have a language that was much broader, that could include a bigger community, a bigger understanding or involvement of a shared experience. And, you know, and there were so many artists whose work involved playfulness and, you know, innocence in a sense of a kind of, you know, holding on to prepubescent playfulness and things like that that now their skills were ill-prepared for what made us all grow up right away, you know. So I don't know. But I'm finding now that as I'm organizing this show that artists have been wanting to talk about this for a long time and have, you know, some things they're eager to get seen.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But ironically there hasn't been an avenue. The structure hasn't been there in a sense for them as individual artists. There has been no community or through any event through which they could speak. In one sense you're the impresario organizing the event which allows that articulation to happen.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it became, it is so clear that art does not have an important role in the culture. We're fooling ourselves. Artists are in their studio working their asses off to make things that touch other people and are going to be, you know, part of the historical memory of our time and, you know, whatever, and they're totally meaningless. You know, it's like they're really making, you know, craft-based—and I include myself in that. You know, it's like craft-based products for wealthy people who don't want to deal with those kind of issues anyway, or certainly not publicly. And, you know, it's, I don't know. As Tip Dunham said the other day, we were talking about it, he said, you know, "It's like we're all drinking the same Kool-Aid now and wondering what's going on."

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It is interesting that in some sense what you're articulating is in trying to find a role for the artists you're recognizing that in some ways artists are outsiders rather than being central. I mean, for Homer when Homer writes his poetry he's writing the values of the culture and while it can be violent and ferocious and all the rest of it, he is writing to his culture from inside it. In some ways the artist, I guess, has to find a way back towards a kind of centrality in the culture so that they actually speak for the values, the best values of that culture. I have a feeling that what you want to do is to find the way that that can happen because that is the impulse that artists actually have, to be central in the fullest and richest way.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, I think that modernism, which I don't dismiss—I mean, I think it was like a, you know, a great and historic and, you know, amazing time—had certain aspects of it that have become incredibly negative in terms of their impact culturally. You know, the fragmentation, sort of the artist in opposition, the Bohemian ideal, the artist in opposition to their culture, you know, the seeking of new language and individuality and, you know, private language and stuff, has fragmented the, you know, the relationship between the art and the culture.

The other thing is is that what was part of the impetus to the thing that, you know, everyone loves Picasso so much for was his childlike wonder and inventiveness and, you know, at the world. Well, that sort of youth energy, which culminated in our generation's youth culture, everything became about youth culture and still, you know, still holds. Well, we were the youth culture, youth generation focused on puberty. We were focused on the teen life and the teen life being sort of around 17, 18 years old, in between the, you know, sexual revolution and kind of entitlement and responsibility to the world. But still very much about doing your own thing, you know, still praising the individual effort and the individual identity and whatnot. And in the arts it was expressed very much through, again, an even furthering of private language and personal symbols and narratives and whatnot.

And then the next generation comes along and now they're interested in youth as well but they're pre-pubescent. They're like, they like treat sex as a kind of—sexuality as a dressing-up, game-playing thing that you see very much in, you know, eight-year-olds and 10-year-olds and whatnot. Sort of a dawning awareness of something that isn't there yet and so they, you know, they put on the ill-fitting parent's shoes and, you know, handbags and, you know, poorly put on makeup and stuff and doll around. And they still hold onto their teddy bears. I mean, the art is about dolls. It's about dolls and toys and that kind of popular culture, right? And it's kind of become very much a, you know, it sort of gripped the art world's imagination because it seems so innocent and so honestly wonderful and et cetera. But, you know, meanwhile we have this unbelievable crisis of education. We have children that we put on drugs because we don't know how to deal with the reality of childhood. We can't, we don't know how to discipline anymore. You know, we're afraid to touch children in any authoritative way for fear of, you know.

And nobody is making the connection, you know, but it seems pretty obvious that, you know, the 18-year-old youth generation mentality isn't ready to be the parent to this, you know, pre-pubescent thing, generation, both in terms of example, in terms of responsibility and in terms of, you know, setting precedent for art, you know. You know, so are we still refusing to grow up and allowing them to not grow up? And what's the next thing? Will it be art made from, you know, the mentality of two-year-olds in diapers, you know, the oral or the anal stage. Is that where we're going with this? And then it's going to be the fetal? We're just regressing in this kind of bizarre way.

Meanwhile, you know, this very real, very adult thing happens to us, which is that we suffer a tremendous wound, and, you know, if we don't deal with it where are we going to go with it? You know, if we don't grow up and say this is reality, this is the world and we actually have to take it on in a different way, so.

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is Sag Harbor. I'm talking to Eric Fischl for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

One of the things we haven't talked about is the role that travel has played, because maybe for a long time but certainly in the last 20 years or so you seem to be someone who travels a lot. Do you travel out of interest to find things that might be useful to you, or what's the reason why you go so many places so often?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I didn't really realize that I had as much wanderlust as I seem to have. Initially it was I was using April's sort of, using her because she seemed to express a greater desire to go very specific places and, in fact, she still does. I mean, our European thing came from her wanting to go back. She went by herself to Europe after she graduated and then came back and within a very short time wanted to go back with me, and so I did that. And that became a yearly event for a long time of going to France, specifically France. We went to Europe first, went all over, but France became the focus because she loved France and learned the language and loved the culture and stuff. So we went there.

And then out of that I've discovered the beach and discovered a way of painting and stuff that was so productive that I, you know, for me it was important to go back time and time again. You know, we were invited to go to India, which I had no desire to go to. I'd always been sort of terrified of that kind of—of India because it just seemed like the most difficult type of travel and the most extreme experiences. And it was something she really wanted to do and so we went. I think Japan was something that came up because we were both invited to do wood block prints for Crown Point Press and so we went there. Africa most recently. Essentially her fantasies about, you know, landscape and animals and things.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It turns out you like it. I mean, you're not just going along now as the reluctant companion to April. Clearly you—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. No, I liked it. I like discovering the world. I definitely do. You know, so I certainly go along but I'm not the initiator for the most part of, "Let's go here, let's explore this." April seems to be the one that gets it in her head that this would be interesting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I don't mean this to be—it sounds a naive question. How could you not be an American? But do you always feel when you're there or when you come back and find a way to use the travel in your work that you're always the American artist abroad and that you could never shake that identity, that that's the only perspective you can see the world from?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, first I always feel personally as an outsider in every situation. I mean, I feel that way in my own country, in my own town. You know, I'm that—I kind of move through space and interact but I'm always very much inside my eyes and I'm sort of there first. So you extend that out into foreignness, true foreignness, and yes, I'm first an outsider personally, then I'm, you know, an outsider in that I'm not of that culture. I'm very aware of what the differences are and, you know, sort of looking to see. Not as a participant; I don't really go trying to adopt the—I'm not there long enough, for one thing, to do it—the manners and the formalities and behaviors and attitudes. So I definitely feel like that.

But I try not to feel like a tourist, either. The difference between a traveler and a tourist is that a tourist will move through with impunity almost, or some sense of, you know, they're using other people's space to lay out their picnic blanket, and I don't feel that. I feel I'm there because I'm going to see something I haven't seen before. I'm going to experience something differently.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: When you went to India you came back and did a body of work of Indian paintings and they seemed different. How was it that India affected you that made you make that body of work? First of all, nobody is undressed. Well, no, that's not true. The holy man with his head in the sand is, but I think that may be the only image—

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: —from that series in which there's the Fischlian and nakedness makes its head apparent.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, the—well, you know, we had gone to Japan right before, within six months before we went to India and Japan was the opposite experience of India, so I'll start with that, which is simply that in Japan I felt that because they have such a codification to their culture and such an aesthetic culture it is, that I was always being presented with a fully formed, fully understood, aestheticized experience, which didn't allow me to have one, you know, didn't allow me as an artist to find another way of understanding what I was seeing.

And then when we went to India it was the opposite. It was like there was like so many different ways that you could enter this culture, enter, visually enter it. That it was such a confrontation in a dynamic way with otherness, but in a kind of chaotic way with otherness, that it was easier for me to try to find ways of ordering it for myself. That was, I guess, the difference. I mean, in Japan it was, there was no need for me to order it because it was already ordered, you know. And in India I was thinking, you know, this was going to be an intense experience and a varied experience, but I had no idea the scale of that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Of the disorder?

ERIC FISCHL: The disorder, the—everything was different, you know. Everything was different in an opposite kind of way. I mean, for example, there was no nudity because they never get undressed, you know. There's no—it's the opposite. They're like covered from top to bottom and they even have things on their head that changes the shapes of the human form. I mean, they're just like, they're like these amazing spectacles of, you know, color and form and stuff moving through space and doing and moving from and to, without knowing from the outside why, you know, and where, and what are they going to do once they get there.

And the, you know, kind of just levels of, you know, the way they inhabit space it's different. They have a different relationship to personal space so they come in very close. They come in with open faces, very close, you know, looking with wonder at your otherness and stuff, and it's unselfconscious. And I couldn't read, I just couldn't read any of the body language. I didn't know whether it was aggressive or friendly or, you know. And then there was spectacle. There was fabulous ritual spectacles.

So, you know, everything was such that my mouth was open and agog from the moment I landed to the moment I left, you know. And though I had not gone there to make paintings or whatever, when I came home that's all I could think about was trying to put some way of re-presenting this incredible experience of otherness. And, you know, I was very much aware at the time that, you know, I'm going to do these paintings of India and everyone's going to accuse me of 19th century colonialism. They're going to throw me in with Jerome and Tissot and, you know, all of these like horrible academic colonialist painters et cetera, because that's the tradition that you inherit here. But what is not in those paintings is a feeling of ownership.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I was going to say, Jerome and Tissot, they go there with all the answers and just find the answers and paint them. Your Indian paintings are bewildering and perplexing. They don't give the viewer anything that they can hang onto in that way.

ERIC FISCHL: Right. Right, and at most they make you feel like, yeah, you're the outsider. You're going, "I have no idea why I'm here, what I'm looking at, what this is. You know, these people seem to know what's going on. I have no idea." Exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: There is, though, I mean, a painting of a woman dressed from head to toe, which is a beautiful, sensual painting as well. I mean, you could claim, your eye could claim a certain sense of beauty and elegance in that experience at the same time that the confusion is made pretty apparent.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, are you talking about the "Dancer" painting?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, which was, you know, yeah, she danced for me. I was able to get this woman, who is an amazing dancer, did these wonderful, you know, sort of dancing for me to take photographs of her. And it was fabulous, but even in that, yeah, you see the beauty and you see the ritualistic sort of gestures, et cetera. I have no idea what the narrative was, you know, that she was doing, which are all very important to them. But I didn't, so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: When you go to Rome it coincides with a fairly dramatic event in your life. Your father dies just before you go. Obviously you hadn't planned that.

ERIC FISCHL: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Were you close to your father, by the way? I'd never asked you what relationship with your dad was like.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, we always had a very difficult, contentious relationship that became close towards the end of his life. Yeah, we kind of—we ended on a very good note.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So was his death then in—the paintings that come out of Rome, it turns out, tend to be memorial, somber, reflective paintings. Was that a direct causal relationship, do you think, in your own sensibility?

ERIC FISCHL: Yes, I think so. Yeah. I mean, I say about Rome that if you have to mourn, go to Rome, because Rome is all about memory, you know. They have a way of understanding the layering processes, that you don't bury the past in any permanent way, you know, that it's something which keeps coming up and keeps being reasserted and reinterpreted and whatnot. And not only that, but in Rome you have such a layering of, you know, crosscurrents and cross-purposes of, you know, spirituality and politics and social structures and whatever that, you know, have family as metaphor. You know, the dominant sort of iconography of the city of either, you know, the patriarchal iconography or the nurturing mother, you know, the Italian Catholicism is very based, especially in the south, it's very much based on the Madonna and child and family is everything and whatnot. So you kind of enter, you know, a culture that embraces all of the language and structure of family and that I found very soothing.

You know, then, of course, you have the dramatic light both of, within the town itself and also within the architecture. There's, you know, these cathedrals and stuff where, you know, they're so dark and then beams of just radiant light penetrate it and, you know, create these incredible black and white moments. It has a kind of theatrical magnificence to it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting you say that, Eric, because it seems to me that that body of work is the body of work of yours in which you are furthest away from your subject. The figures are contained within architectural spaces and the figures are, I would think, actually smaller than the figures often are in your paintings.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. That's a good point.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And I wonder if that was a conscious drawing back or was it just a reflection of where you found yourself and that was the way you could put people in architecture?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I mean, I actually hadn't really thought about it in that way but for sure it's true. And part of it is that the architecture of the Basilica [Saint Peter's Basilica], the architecture of the cathedrals, the churches, whatever, are grand. You are minimized in those spaces, and intentionally minimized, because their language is based on the hierarchy of, you know, human to saint. You know, human to martyr, saint to God, angel to God, et cetera, et cetera. It's all sort of vertical and transcendent and you're just the small one in here. So there is that quality to it, too.

And maybe, you're right, that there was another kind of distancing. I mean, I was also impressed with, you know, the city of Rome is peopled with sculpture and the sculptures are of people. The people are both real people and there are also fanciful people there. There are angels and demons and, you know, magnificent gods and things like that. But they're all based on the human form and stuff. I mean, it's like if an alien lands in Rome they have no question what inhabits this place.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's a place of statues.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Well, they know what they look like, you know. They would get it. But if you landed in New York you would think maybe people, you know—you wouldn't think about people. You might think there's some strange kind of geometry that built this place. Do you know what I'm saying? It's like Rome is a place that comes out of the human effort, out of the human imagination, in a magnificent way, and still is attached to the human. And so I find, I found that, and still find it very comforting.

But I also found that there is, you know, you had people and people going about their business and then you had statues and the statues were going about their business. And there are certain times of day and especially at dusk when those statues get very animated. You know, all of a sudden they start to flutter their wings. They start to dart around in a way that, you know, you get surprised by it. There are certain times of day in a cathedral where—which are intentional, architecturally intentional—where a beam of light hits one sculpture and all of the sudden that sculpture is way alive, you know. And so there's a level of animation which is based on the imagination that takes place.

And these figures are representative of our best and our worst, you know. They're the super heroes in the sense that they are so good, you know, or so bad, or they suffer the most or they are the best samaritan, the most

helpful. You know, whatever it was. They're our best effort and they're up there around all the architecture, inside, outside. And we sit there moving through our day watching them behave as well, you know. I just, I love that experience. Again, I found that very comforting.

And so a lot of the work that I did from Rome puts together sculptures and humans in which oftentimes the sculptures seem as animated and as conscious of what's happening as the people, or even maybe more of a witness.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting. I think they tend to be the witness to our human grief, that the statues in that body of work are looking down on us essentially in a benevolent way, with a kind of benign interest in these smaller creatures who are so full of grief that they're almost overwhelmed by it. And all of the gestures of the humans are asking somehow for understanding, and they seem to be getting it in some curious way from all that statuary around them.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was that, do you think that somewhere in the back of your psyche that that was operating?

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. No, I mean, I certainly felt that comfort there, you know.

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ROBERT ENRIGHT: I think we've sort of done the Roman paintings, although they stand in a lot of ways your most—I don't know about grief-stricken. They are the most somber of the paintings in some ways, aren't they? I can't think of any other body of work that carries the emotional weight just on the surface without much complication. I mean, they don't seem to involve tricks in any way. I don't mean that pejoratively. I mean they're pretty straightforward. I guess that was a reflection of where your heart was at the time.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Again, you know, tragedy can afford you that opportunity to, you know, to be straightforward, I guess.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The reason I was asking about, I mean, Rome and India and all of that is that your relationship to European art is a very complicated one, isn't it? I mean, not just to the American tradition that you clearly work within but you have been a close looker and thinker about the relationship that you have as a painter, too. I mean, you look at this room again, you can't help but think of European painting when you're dealing with a subject of tauromaquea, bullfighting.

ERIC FISCHL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Have you in any sense rationalized or thought through what your relationship is to European art, because you've in some senses made paintings that comment on the American's relationship to European culture. Is there a clear answer to how it is you use it or is it much more episodic and particular than that?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, it's a—I mean, I look at it all the time and it's, you know, obviously it's the deeper tradition between, you know, American and European. It's a deeper tradition and it's a deeper tradition in the sense that it holds, you know, it holds our histories, it holds our stories, it holds our, you know, great moments and our defeats and whatever. And it, you know, it has such a—it's been articulated so often in so many different ways it just, you know. And it also holds more greatness, you know. It's like there are more masters within the European tradition, which has been the longer tradition, than there is within the American tradition. So it makes sense to sort of keep, you know, keep constantly aware of what's there. There's more to think about, more to mine.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And is that the standard? I mean, does your ambition aim at, you know, Degas, Rembrandt, Caravaggio? I mean, is that where you would necessarily place yourself? I don't mean in achievement but in what it is you aspire towards as a painter?

ERIC FISCHL: Absolutely. Yeah, you know, you obviously can't choose to put yourself, you can't put yourself there but you can aspire to be considered among those when they, you know, when it all shakes down, for sure. Yeah. I mean, there's so much to learn from from them, from these masters, that it's not fixed or dead. It can be reinterpreted, reused. You know, there's a—I mean, a good example is, you know, the *Tumbling Woman* and a Michelangelo sculpture where, you know, which has to go through Rodin anyway, and in that, you know, there's a certain way of bringing back into life a kind of masculization, not for the purposes of sexual content but for the purposes of symbolic revival or something like that, you know, that had sort of fallen by the wayside.

You know, it's like, you know, we all know that that's what Michelangelo did. Why would we be doing that now? Except all of the sudden you have an event that requires it, you know. Had I not been aware of Michelangelo would I have been able to have come on that on my own? I don't think so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In the show that you recently did in Germany, "Ten Breaths" [Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover. November 30, 2007-February 3, 2008], there you complicate the relationship among characters perhaps more than you've ever done in your sculptural work before. I couldn't help but think in seeing the original pictures of it of *The Burghers of Calais*, the kind of complexity that Rodin gets there. What were you getting at in the way that that show was installed in "Ten Breaths" and what's the kind of message that you wanted the viewer to come away with?

ERIC FISCHL: Well, you know, there are these sort of different tableaus that all kind of have a, go towards a feeling, I guess. They deal with tragedy. They deal with, you know, deep pain, inflicted pain of some kind. You don't know where it's coming from but clearly there's a disaster. There's a dying woman with a blown-up leg or, you know, a dead dog, people trying to help her. There's a samaritan of a wounded man with a missing arm who is helping another wounded person that may or may not be dead yet. And you have a sort of revisiting of the *Tumbling Woman* now life-size rather than monumental, and she's a kind of relationship to a figure exploding out of the ceiling, out of a cloud that could be another falling figure or it could be an angel or something, you know, in the Baroque kind of tradition.

So, you know, death is everywhere. Death and disaster and destruction is everywhere. And then in the backdrop of these sculptures is a group of dancers, inexplicable in their energy. And, you know, they're to me like a kind of Greek chorus or something. They're phantoms of some kind that either seem to be dancing unaware of the destruction that's around them or they're the energy that's created that disaster, you know. But it's a kind of—they, to me, represent chaos. You know, they're like, they're the thing that when you're looking, you're desperately trying to see if you are needed, if you could help, should you help pick this person up, that, and then there's this craziness that's there that's like confusing you.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: They're not Degas' dancers, that group.

ERIC FISCHL: No, they're Degas' dancers even though I, you know, they have the association simply because they're wearing costumes. You know, sculpture wearing costumes always goes to the ballerina. But I, you know, there's another tradition and now I'm forgetting the name of it. There's a—in Rome there's a sculpture, Pasquino. It was a sculpture that is the only one that the pope allowed to remain. It was a thing where people would mock the pope. It was a sculpture where they would graffiti it or they'd dress it up in costumes and stuff once a year or something. It became like a thing. And they would—and the pope would allow it. It would be a protest thing, something, and he would allow it to happen at this thing, right?

And so, you know, the sort of dressing the figures is partly that. I mean, it's called, that sculpture is called "The Congress of Wit." And there was this tradition of dressing up these sculptures. There's the one that's stationary in Rome and there are others that would be in other towns where they would dress up the sculpture. It was called, they were called, I think, "A Chorus of Wit." You know, and it's always a play on that as well. But, yeah, it's the first time I kind of moved into sort of making vignettes and sort of extending the narrative.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Do you see that as something that you want to continue? I mean, has it opened up another territory for you?

ERIC FISCHL: You know, having not made a sculpture since I made those, I can't say yes or no. But I would imagine that I'll feed off of that thing. I mean, I also lit them very theatrically and I allowed, you know, the dramatic shadows to fill the space to create an even more sort of chaotic sense of disaster.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What has provoked you to do the bullfight paintings you're doing?

ERIC FISCHL: It wasn't really a provocation. It was an invitation [laughs]. My dealer from Germany, Rafael Jablonka, had visited a bullfight a couple of years ago and he just, he thought, oh, I could do a good bullfight. He thought it would be interesting to see if I took on what Goya did and Manet did, what I would do if I could participate in that. And I'd never been to a bullfight and he arranged for us to go and sort of experience it in a very sort of direct way. And so I did, just being open to the idea without knowing whether it would affect me or whether it would be interesting or not.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And clearly was seduced by it.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. I found it very compelling, yeah. I don't have the, you know, that sense of it as a, you know, a kind of—the dance part of it I didn't attach myself to. The heroic, you know, the sort of male dominated thing I didn't attach myself to, but the murder I did. The sort of [laughs], I mean that there's, I don't know. I mean, there's several ways that I sort of approached it, but murder stands at the center of that thing. Not in a moralistic way but just as a, you know, it's tough to watch something die, you know, to be murdered. And there's one painting I did where the bull is dying and he's watching the person walk away who just did it and I just, you know, I think that must be the worst experience in the world to sit in this kind of uncomprehending way sort of thinking, "Why?"

There's a, it reminds me—not my painting, but speaking of that sense or that question at the center of death—of this incredible mosaic in Naples that's from, I think it's from the Greek period and it's like a battle scene; a great battle, historic battle scene. And what blew my mind was that in all the fallen soldiers, you know, the horses are racing over and, you know, there's still some battle going on but there's some dying or dead soldiers there. There's one soldier who is looking at himself in his metal shield, watching himself die. Amazing in the chaos of this whole thing, you find this one thing which is like your worst nightmare in a way, watching yourself, you know, die.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, that turns Narcissus dark, doesn't it? That's a new twist on that particular mirror.

ERIC FISCHL: Isn't it? Yeah. Yeah. Definitely more than we bargained for. I mean, that particular mosaic is an amazing thing anyway because it's such a modernist idea. That self-reflective, you know, reflection, self-reflection type thing is doubling up.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's not as if you—

ERIC FISCHL: You don't expect—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's not as if you're very old but do you find now that you're taking on different themes? Does mortality, as you get older, become something that you feel you're going to engage with? I mean, throughout your career there have been images particularly that seemed to be highly elegiac in that way and that they're recollections of mortality and all of that. I wonder if that's something that you can see filling your head more and more.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, I think it—I hope so. I mean, I've always wanted to stay more or less in the moment, you know, of my life. The stages of my life I wanted to stay in. I wanted to record it. I think that's the honest life. It's a brave life, you know, to keep pace with what's happening within your evolving relationship to your body, to yourself, to your loved ones, to your country, your ambitions, desires, fears, et cetera. Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This may be a completely unfair question, but since you legitimately placed yourself in the context of the great painting, that's where you are and what you aspire towards as well, how do you feel the gig is going so far? I mean, what do you think your contribution to painting is?

ERIC FISCHL: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: A guy should be hit for asking a question like that of a living painter.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's hardly your job to answer it. But you must have a sense, though, of where you situate yourself, what your contribution has been, what you're aiming for.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Well, I can't, I certainly am not going to be the judge, the final judge of my place. You know, when I say placing myself in the, amongst the great ones, I don't say it as something where I feel I'm great. What I mean by it is that I'm using their, what I understand from them, which I think is the most revelatory, the most beautiful, the most sensitive, the most complicated, you know, and trying to put together that same kind of complicated experience for people now, you know, to sort of understand life in that kind of way is my ambition, which, you know, that seems to be where the great artists lived, you know. So that's what I meant by it. I didn't mean that I—I can't judge that, you know.

I would love to have, you know, people—I mean, for example, you know, I look to Manet for certain things that he did incredibly well, like he had a way of codifying form that gave you both a sense of the observed and a sense of the abstract. He did it because he wanted to take content out of painting because the narratives that he was drawing on or the genres that he was drawing on had been played out. And so his genius was to find a reductive form that both made you recall those genres, at the same time gave you none of their real meaning, right? So he was putting painting on a different foot, a different footing I should say. I think that's incredible, but I can't use that.

What I can use is the abbreviated form that gives you the secure feeling of reality observed in the same way that a photograph makes you feel like this is a real thing that really happened, you know, even though when you investigate it you see it's a mechanization of, you know, of totally abstract language to create it. You know, that's what Manet did in painting. And so I use him as an inspiration to make paintings that convince people. Before they start thinking about it, they're already inside the painting looking at it as though it were really, it really happened. I'm really looking at an event, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And once they're there, you've got them.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, then you've got them. Then their thing about distracting themselves is where they begin to find their meaning. And my meaning is totally different than what Manet was after. I'm not as elegant and as detached as he was about the things that he painted, you know. I don't think I am, anyway. I want—so I feel actually like I'm a closure on something that has gone full circle but now I'm doing something that would drive him insane, which is I'm actually putting content back into something that, you know, he was desperately trying to take out.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And another of your favorite painters, Bonnard. What is it you take from Bonnard that you can use but that you don't want to replicate?

ERIC FISCHL: Right. Yeah, Bonnard is somebody who, you know, is deeply psychological/emotional. His, what I love about him is how deceptive his paintings are in that their first appearance is one of beauty and a kind of light-filled splendor and a sensuosity of, you know, sort of the objects of bourgeois life, the, you know, the beautifully set table or the, you know, beautiful porcelains on it or the gorgeous flowers or the sun-filled tea room or the, you know, whatever. That, you know, they have a kind of gorgeous domesticity to them that invites you in, only to find that the people that inhabit that space are terrifying. They're angry, bitter, narcissistic, unreachable. You know, in some way there's no harmony in the relationship you have with them and they're a constant source of frustration and whatnot. So you have this powerful, you know, conflict that takes place within a painted language that is pulling you in two different directions. You know, so that's a reality I understand pretty well.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And in some ways have used yourself. I mean, there's lots of ways in which the seduction into the surface of your paintings, when you get there you find out that there can also be some fair degree of—what's the word I'm looking for—unhappiness there.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Or trauma as well.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, it's not a—you know, it's not an overt expression. In Bonnard it's not an overt expressionism either. It's not like you're being immediately made aware of the turbulence and the vibration and the heat and the passion and the, you know, the existentialism of being expressed through gesture and whatnot. No, it's definitely something where you're brought into an observed world that is full of detail and it's full of observed detail of things that are material. Their thingness, you know, they ground you in the place and the day and the moment in a physical way. At the same time you're observing that, there's this erosion happening with your feelings of harmony and beauty and pleasure and stuff because there's the unfulfilled part of your life, the unfulfilled thing that, you know, isn't satisfying the need, isn't, you know, allowing access or whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: For all the presences in those canvases it's the enormous absence that is the thing that you begin to see.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah, exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And that becomes the only thing you see.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, well said. It's true.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The final painter. What is it that Hopper tells you? You have this wonderful relationship with Hopper, it seems to me, an American painter. We've been talking about European painters.

ERIC FISCHL: Yeah. Yeah, well, you know, first of all, Hopper and Bonnard have a lot in common and Hopper and Manet also. But the commonality is again that both Hopper and Bonnard seek to place things within the ordinary. The environment of their, you know, content and their interaction and stuff is domestic. It's essentially interior. It's familial. You know, it's relationships between man and woman. It's really, I mean, both Hopper and Bonnard, you know, there are no children in their world. You know, they don't do children. They do men and women and it centers on, you know, desire and lack of fulfillment. You know, again, things I can relate to and, you know. You know, which is an essential experience in life, that one's needs are never satisfied by whatever they believe in the other. You know, no one can get from another what they really need and so you're constantly in a kind of direct, you know, relationship/confrontation with your own existence and your own isolation.

And, you know, the way Hopper goes about it and the same way that Bonnard goes about it is to paint, one, a kind of reductive environment which is an abstracted one, fully aware compositionally of the abstraction of it, which is an elevated form. And to paint, you know, these exquisite textures of light and material and stuff in a way that makes it very physical, very there, puts you right into that kind of reality without overdoing it, without being obsessed with the real observed detail of it, but finding essential detail that makes there there and then, you know, and then sets the drama in that environment.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's a nice kind of rough economy in Hopper in a way. I mean, it seems cruder. It seems more direct, obviously. He doesn't have the finesse.

ERIC FISCHL: Well, the abrasion comes with the figure. The other forms are, you know, simple and intelligent and straightforward and whatnot. But once he gets into the figure there's a, you know, a kind of tightness to it, a kind of—he is ambivalent about the body in a way that he can't hide, you know, so they become stiff, they become overrepresented in a way. It's a word I've never used before but I like it. They become overrepresented, you know. And then he does these kind of goofy things because he can't help himself, like he has a woman standing parallel, naked woman standing parallel to the surface plane who is in a ray a light, a plank, like a, you know, walking the plank of light, smoking a cigarette. But he wasn't satisfied with only showing one nipple, you know, so he kind of bends her breast, the other breast that you wouldn't see from the way she was standing unless she was horribly distorted, just so he could see both of them. [Laughs.] You know, it's like it's so sort of boyishly silly that you've got to admire the guy, you know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs] I think that's a great story. He torques that poor woman's body.

ERIC FISCHL: You can see. I know she's got two of them. I want to see both of them. I'll choose which one I'm going to use but I want to see both of them. You know, whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Thanks, Eric.

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