

SKARSTEDT



Eric Fischl: STORIES TOLD



Eric Fischl, Broken Hallelujah, 2023, acrylic on linen. 68 x 96 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl

By JANET GOLEAS November 26th, 2025

In Eric Fischl's long ascent as a figurative painter, he has produced a masterful body of work, still evolving, that explores storytelling through intimate mythologies, the unique psychology that seems to go hand in hand, and the farce, trauma, and solemnity of the human condition.

SKARSTEDT

With a keen eye for the theatrical, Fischl's works are often operatic in scale and ambition; his achievements in painting and in the art world at large are legendary. Since the late 1960s when his family moved to Phoenix, the ties that bind him to this desert community have ripened. After all, his start in painting began in Phoenix, and the suburban sprawl that swelled across the valley would be key his visual lexicon. And so, it is fitting that the stunning retrospective, *ERIC FISCHL: STORIES TOLD*, featuring 40 large-scale paintings and numerous works on paper was organized by and is on view at the Phoenix Art Museum. Curated by Heather Sealy Lineberry, the thematic arrangement of works here generates a thriving narrative that invites visual trajectories and the sort of episodic connections that even the most extensive chronology could not accommodate.



Eric Fischl, Best Western, 1983. Oil on canvas. 108 x 78 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt Gallery, New York. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl

SKARSTEDT

The entrance gallery features large-scale paintings such as *Best Western*, 1983, dating from the period that marks Fischl's dramatic emergence onto the New York art scene. Characterized by sharp compositional angles and a darkness illuminated by pool lights, in the foreground an adolescent boy readies to pummel his small group of plastic toys with a handful of oranges. Innocent enough, except for the thorny observation that the little toys appear to be tiny indigenous people. But it is Fischl's keen interest in the way color cedes to darkness here, becoming an active part of the composition as the back green retreats into shadow. Like many artists before him, the seductions of light and shadow will continue to work in concert as defining characteristics of Fischl's oeuvre.



Eric Fischl, Study for Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man, 1985. Oil on chromecoat. 16 x 11 in. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl

SKARSTEDT

Around the corner, a brisk work on paper titled *Study for Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*, 1985, hugs the wall. The oil sketch is painted on chromecoat, a slippery substrate that functions something like anti-gravity, allowing brushstrokes to glide across the surface as if airborne. Vulnerable in his nudity yet towering over the composition like a cypress, the old man hastens to cover his privates with a newspaper. This little painting, simultaneously taut and loose comes alive in the afternoon sunlight that rakes over his backside. It will bring tears to your eyes.

Fischl's distinctive narrative paintings went a long way to bridge the divide between the Conceptual and the representational, a conundrum that dominated much of contemporary art through the 1970s and 80s. When his family decamped to Phoenix from the Long Island suburbs of his childhood, Fischl, then a young man, deferred, migrating to San Francisco during the legendary Summer of Love. Eventually, he joined them in Arizona before moving on to the California Institute of the Arts, (CalArts), where he would become a part of the first graduating class at this new hotbed of innovation and non-traditional arts. This would be Fischl's introduction to thinking beyond the canvas while developing a life-saving strategy for functioning in a world that viewed painting as dead. A formidable battle, to be sure.

In two early works from 1979, he deftly engaged representational painting by working in oils on layered sheets of glassine, a translucent paper with a sleek surface. These paintings not only allowed him to introduce the figure in romantic swaths of oily black, but to shift them forward and backward, slipping imagery between and around the gauzy sheets. As a practice, it would pave the way for a methodology that has served Fischl into his mature work and the process of collaging photographic elements in preparation for a painting.

It is fair to say that throughout his practice, Fischl's primary accomplice has been the arch of history, with mentors from all ages and dispositions. Caravaggio looms large in paintings dramatized by light and dark with cinematic compositions that conjure the American filmmakers

SKARSTEDT

Martin Scorsese and John Huston, working some four centuries later. Similarly, the voyeurism of Degas, Goya's spontaneity, Sargent's luminous brushwork, the rigor of Eakins, and Manet's pictorial economy – these and others have touched Fischl's artmaking. But he would, I think, always choose the emotive over precision, curiosity over definition, and a sort of elusive artifice over realism. Still, he is never far from the severity or incandescence of a structured image field. Part of Fischl's virtuosity is his ability to embrace agility as well as awkwardness, partners in the confounding sense of the here and now in his paintings.

His influence on younger and not so much younger artists is clear, from Lisa Yuskavage to Mickalene Thomas, and arguably Mike Kelley whose haunting reconstructions of his own vexing childhood resulted in hypnotic explorations of the plunder, rejection, and hypocrisy he experienced at the edges of the Detroit suburbs.

Moving deeper into the installation, big paintings conjure figures that are alternately dour, contemplative, or possibly in flagrante delicto, as in the large work, *Slumber Party*, 1983, in which a dreadlocked girl expedites pulling up her panties while her young friend, a boy, is bathed in the light of a portable television across the room. Also in underwear, he fiddles with the TV knobs while a malevolent shadow soars over him. Perhaps unknown to viewers, the agent casting the shadow is a sculpture of African origin balanced on top of the television and offering another layer of intrigue to this theatrical composition.

SKARSTEDT



Eric Fischl, Barbeque, 1982. Oil on canvas. 65 x 100 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl.

Dramatic flair continues – quite literally – in the 1982 painting, *Barbeque*. This is quintessential early Fischl: the composition is anchored by the pink stucco walls and floor-to-ceiling windows of a mid-century ranch in the background. As determinative as the suburban home is, it remains a subtext of this weird and wonderful painting. Mid-ground, an irregular shaped inground pool is circumscribed by thick concrete, its perimeter jutting in and out in trapezoidal wedges like a gigantic fallen star. Dad is at the barbeque while two females, one older and one younger, appear to skinny dip in the pool's shallow end. In the foreground, an adolescent boy breathes fire that seems to erupt from his mouth and, traveling upward, shoots beyond and out of the image field. A picnic table, slightly askew, holds two fresh fish in a bowl, likely headed for the grill. Here, the viewer is all but devoured by Fischl's sense of free association in the composition. His deployment of multiple perspectives that collide and collude create a pictorial nowness in which the eye darts across the image field as if watching the final set at Wimbledon. And why, you might wonder, are those girls – perhaps mother and daughter – swimming in the nude? Triumphant, mysterious, exhausting; the painting wins.

SKARSTEDT



Eric Fischl, Scenes from Late Paradise: Stupidity, 2007. Oil on linen. 84 x 108 in. Hall Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl.

Fischl's extraordinary treatment of human flesh is rich and varied, moving from smooth to turbulent and conjuring the likes of satin, muddled clay, or a doughy softness. In the bedroom, flesh is part protagonist, part performance, often taking the lead in the picture field. From sweaty highlights to a low post-coital glow, the myriad convolutions of the epidermis are then further explored through jaunty beach and boat gatherings typically surrounded by a watery paradise of cerulean blue, turquoise, and vast reflective skies. In public and private, frank nudity is variously luscious, turgid, or divine. But lest you get too cozy, the skies might grow suddenly black, the seas upturn, and the horizon may seem to tip away as it vanishes into the distance. But the

SKARSTEDT

languid beachgoer exiting the picture field in *Scenes from Late Paradise: Stupidity*, 2007, gets it both ways. Too weary to notice the furor approaching from the churning sky and smashing waves, one can't help wondering if he'll make it to the hotel before being engulfed in a natural disaster.

In 1996, Fischl embarked on a body of work called the Rome series (1996-1998), where he painted *Frailty is a Moment of Self-Reflection*. It shares the rich natural light of Italy and a formidable sense of poetic elegy. After the death of his father, Fischl spent two months at The American Academy in Rome where he worked in residence among the ancient city's majestic troves of art and architecture. The brush work and pictorial elements here seem to tiptoe across the composition, hushed and tonally calm with a smooth glow that feels reserved for the afterlife.



Eric Fischl, Frailty is a Moment of Self-Reflection, 1996. Oil on linen. 68 x 58 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist. (c) 2025 Eric Fischl

SKARSTEDT

As his expansive practice evolved, Fischl has taken us to exotic locales, urban interiors, and a stunning array of portraits. Of the latter, they may be buffeted by the politics of human interaction or populated by the buoyant, the clueless, or the downtrodden. *Broken Hallelujah*, 2023, features an older, more world-weary Fischl slouched over a studio bench, his bloodied hands wrapped in cotton as if he's been wrestling alligators. The studio is filled with the rudiments of art making, works in process and notably, the sculpture *Tumbling Woman*, 2002, created in honor of some of the lives lost on 9/11. The melancholy here is palpable on so many levels. Redoubling the sense of desolation, Fischl's downward glance suggests a man whose life is in review and, like the protagonist in Samuel Beckett's one-act play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, this indelible portrait of self-reflection offers a paean on the thirst for relevance, gravity, consequence.

Inside the exhibition, we gain passage into Fischl's synapses, memory, and internal syntax as he navigates over four decades of artmaking. Taken altogether, it's a deeply intimate experience. Works weave through the psychosexual to innocence lost, then bounce across avarice, poignancy, and pure beauty. In his 2016 autobiography, *Bad Boy: My Life On and Off the Canvas*, Fischl is quoted as saying, "Painters don't choose to be painters. They just choose to be better painters." Indeed.

ERIC FISCHL: STORIES TOLD

Phoenix Art Museum

November 7, 2025 - April 12, 2026

Organized by Phoenix Art Museum and curated by Heather Sealy Lineberry