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White Walls and White Lines

A memoir of painting and partying by a star of the 1980s New York art scene.

By *Edward Kosner*
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Eric Fischl's signature painting, "Bad Boy," shows an 11-year-old boy standing in front of a table gazing at a naked woman sprawled on a messy bed with her legs agape. He is staring at her crotch, but his hands behind his back are stealing from her purse. It could be taken as a metaphor of a career cashing in on what Mr. Fischl calls "psycho-sexual" art. But his new memoir, inevitably titled "Bad Boy," shows that Mr. Fischl, however provocative and narcissistic, is a good boy after all.

BAD BOY

By *Eric Fischl and Michael Stone*
Crown, 357 pages, \$26



A memoir of painting and partying by a star of the 1980s New York art scene.

ERIC FISCHL

At once a confessional and a manifesto, Mr. Fischl's book, written with Michael Stone, will move readers with its tales of a fraught life in art, engage them with its fluent exploration of art-making and likely annoy quite a few with its self-absorption and bombastic pronouncements. "Collage is the most important innovation in art since perspective was discovered in the fourteenth century," he proclaims at one point. And at another: "Artists are whores. They go where the money is, where they're loved and appreciated."

In the 1980s, Mr. Fischl had all that. Along with Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Ross Bleckner, Jean-Michel Basquiat and a handful of others, he was a star in the incandescent New York scene that spun art, fashion, celebrity and big money into a drug-fueled extravaganza. Unlike Mr. Schnabel's crockery-encrusted canvases or Mr. Salle's spooky riffs on alienation, Mr. Fischl's febrile work was representational, deeply personal and obsessed with naked human flesh, mostly female.

You don't have to be much of a Freudian to guess that the source of both the painter's inspiration and his torment was his mother, a brainy, artistic but thwarted suburban housewife undone by her alcoholism. Mr. Fischl tells the story in painful detail: the secret shame and anguish hidden in outwardly serene homes first on the north shore of Long Island and later in Phoenix.

"Once she fell off the wagon, she couldn't stop, or even moderate, her drinking," he writes. "And the changes that came over her scared me. . . . Her lovely blue eyes would become wider than usual and take on a look of glazed rage. . . . Her artificial expression, a Kabuki-like mask, reminded me of a terrifying drag queen. . . . She could be catatonic one day, or act out like a banshee on another. One time the cops picked her up running through our neighborhood stark naked."

Mr. Fischl's parents fought all the time, but their lovemaking, he reports, was clearly audible and "perplexingly regular." They liked to lounge naked in their bedroom watching TV while Eric and his three siblings strolled in and out or joined them on the bed.

These all-but-primal scenes of his mother unclothed and unhinged made an indelible mark on the boy. He did not have to remember much during the 1967 hippie era of indifferent education and an acid-laced detour to Haight-Ashbury during the 1967 hippie "Summer of Love." Adrift, he rejoined his family after they moved to Phoenix and enrolled in a community college art course "because no one fails art." Better courses at Arizona State University followed, leading to a scholarship at the California Institute of the Arts, Walt Disney's adventurous new academy.

Then, as if to permanently seal her hold on her tortured son, Janet Fischl committed suicide by smashing her VW bus into the only tree on a desert road near her home.

Ever since, Mr. Fischl has been trying to transmute this daunting Oedipal lode—"my raw feelings"—into figurative, narrative art. He began as an abstract painter at CalArts and evolved into representational, folkloric art about a fisherman's family during a teaching stint in Nova Scotia. Back in New York, his breakthrough came in 1979 with "Sleepwalker," a picture of a naked adolescent boy masturbating in a suburban wading pool. "Though I knew I was being provocative and sensationalistic," he writes, "I was sincerely trying to express what it felt like to be a boy at a time of momentous change." And he knew the implications of what he'd done: "I'd become the naked, recognizable subject of my work."

"Bad Boy" followed, and Mr. Fischl was launched. He was quickly taken up by the newly crowned queen of the art scene, dealer Mary Boone, who showed his work at her SoHo gallery and propelled his soaring prices. In 1982 and '83, he proudly records, he had six one-man shows and had work in three group shows. By 1985, he was making more than \$1 million a year. He feuded with Mr. Schnabel, the rival alpha-male artist, whose prices were even higher.

Rich collectors here and in Europe threw lavish parties for Mr. Fischl where the cocaine was as conspicuous as the celebrity guests. He was making more money—and spending more—than he ever imagined. He had a monthly budget for both coke and smuggled Havana cigars, and—surprise!—he felt unworthy of his success and terrified that it would evaporate.

He was right to worry. Soon enough, Mr. Fischl and his generation were flushed out of Eden by the next wave, led by Jeff Koons with his gigantic kitschy rabbit sculptures and Damien Hirst with his embalmed tiger shark floating in formaldehyde.

"The art market no longer the It-boys and -girls," he writes. "We were no longer hot." How could the work be so fickle? "A painting valued at \$2,000 in 1980 might have sold for \$500,000 five years later at auction, and for \$50,000 five years after that."

The gaudy art parade had moved on, leaving Mr. Fischl an embittered millionaire.

But not a spent artist. At the peak of his acclaim, Mr. Fischl had quit drinking and drugging after an ugly street incident. Over the next decades, he exchanged the downtown art scene for the Hamptons bohemia of Sag Harbor, where he set up studios with the landscape painter April Gornick, whom he later married. And he expanded his horizons to India, Rome, Germany and the south of France, painting compelling works that transcended his earlier suburban erotomania.

Whatever his subject matter, his method never changed. "I free-associate," he writes, "responding to the image I put on the canvas, listen as the painting begins to talk to me. Every point of mine is a search for meaning. Every painting I finish is the discovery of its meaning."

Still, it's hard to escape the feeling that Mr. Fischl couldn't help calculating his way to spontaneity. He keeps referring to his career as "a journey" and talks about his "career-strategy." Along the way, he has managed to vacation with Steve Martin on St. Bart's, the tiny Caribbean isle of glitz; trade tennis lessons for art lessons with John McEnroe; and do portraits of Mike Nichols and other celebs.

Now 65, he has never stopped crusading for the art of emotional intensity. "I felt contemporary art had failed its audience on a basic level," he concludes. "It had stopped addressing the ordinary lives of people, the rites and passages of birth, puberty, marriage and death. . . . I wasn't trying to make art that was literal or simplistic or purely illustrative. I was trying to make art that was accessible—but yet complex and expressive enough to yield emotional rewards after its first viewing."

Mr. Fischl's credo suggests a kind of aesthetic ingenuousness that can lead to unending grief. On the first anniversary of 9/11, he contributed a nude sculpture called "Tumbling Woman" that was put on display unannounced in the concourse of Rockefeller Center in New York. The sculptor thought of his work as a sensitive tribute to the victims of the terrorist attack. But to the startled office workers who encountered it on their way to work it was an unwelcome reminder of the people who had had to jump to their deaths from the burning towers. Within days, the shocked artist discovered that his gift had been banished from sight.

However pure his motives, traditional his ultimate values or exemplary his professed commitment to old-school American painting, Eric Fischl is destined to be ever cast as American art's oldest living bad boy.

—*Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, Esquire and the New York Daily News, ran New York magazine during the art frenzy of the 1980s.*

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