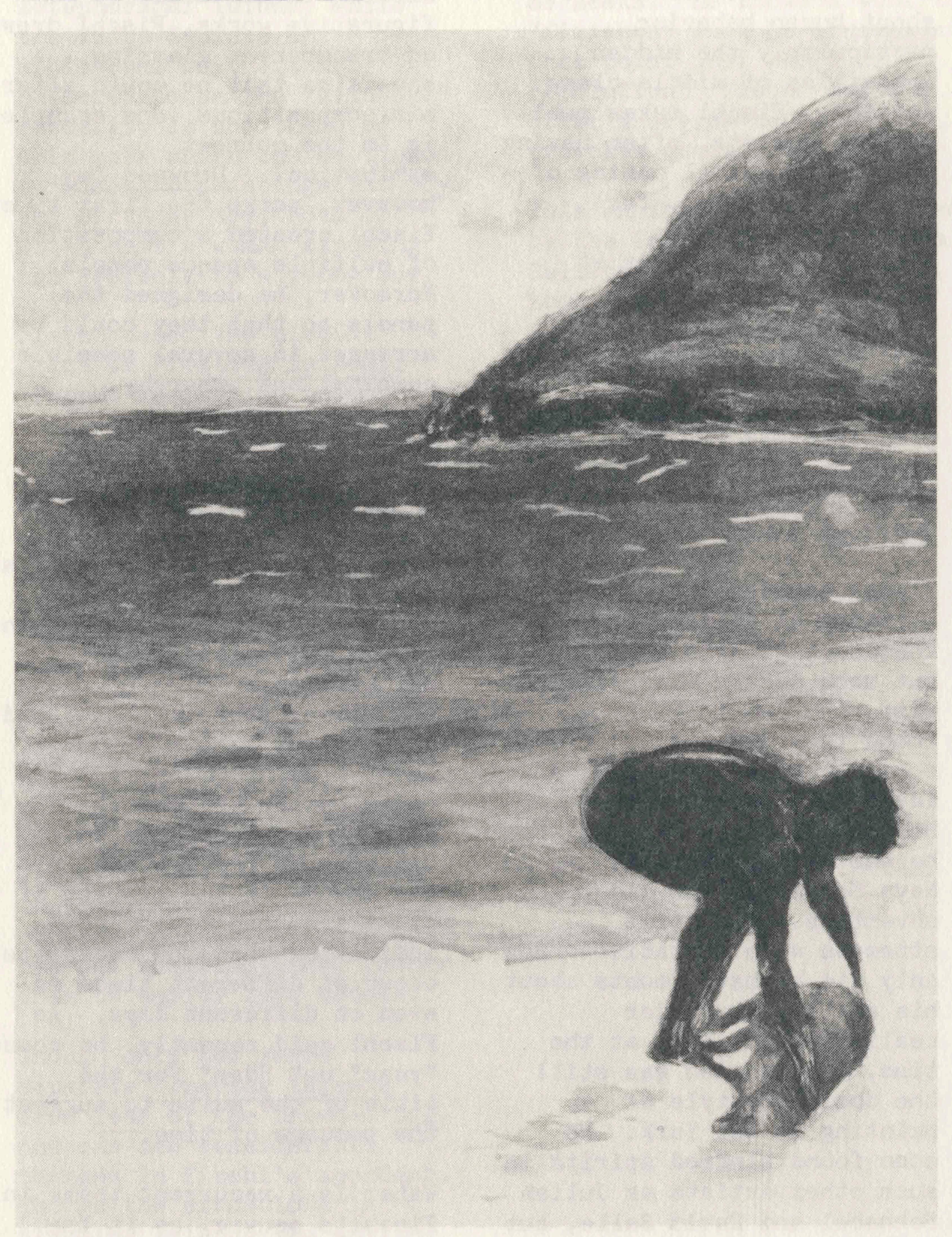
Eric Fischl
MATRIX/BERKELEY 103

University Art Museum mid-December - early February 1987

Year of the Drowned Dog, 1983 (detail)



Eric Fischl took the art world by surprise in 1979 with Sleepwalker, his first figurative work, which he completed soon after settling in New York City. It wasn't the style of painting that caused the stir. In fact, Fischl's realistic style is reminiscent of such late 19th century painters as Edouard Manet. Unlike Manet, however, who took storytelling out of his art, Fischl creates narratives about human behavior, particularly the hidden activities of middle-class America. Fischl makes public private moments, often having to do with sexual coming of age. Sleepwalker, for example, depicts an adolescent boy, alone at night in his backyard, masturbating in a child's wading pool. Incest, another societal taboo, is the subject of subsequent paintings Bad Boy and Birthday Boy, while sexual abuse is hinted at in Master Bedroom.

Fischl studied abstract painting at California Institute of Arts in Valencia but soon became dissatisfied with these works when he found they did not communicate the feelings and ideas he hoped to express. He began to draw figures when he was living and teaching in Nova Scotia in the midseventies. His first attempts were tentative. Not only did he have doubts about his ability to render realistically, but, at the time, abstraction was still the dominant style of painting in New York. He soon found kindred spirits in such other artists as Julian Schnabel and David Salle, but still had to grapple with the problem of how, in this era of image overload, to

communicate meaning in a fresh, effective, and nonmoralistic way.

When invited in 1983 by print publisher Peter Blum to create a suite of etchings, Fischl tried a new method of composing a story in order to add the element of time. He developed the narrative in Year of the Drowned Dog through a series of five overlapping pages of various sizes. In his early figurative works, Fischl drew on transparent glassine sheets so that he could alter his compositions (one example is in the current exhibition). Drowned Dog, however, marks the first time Fischl created a composition of multiple opaque panels. Moreover, he designed the panels so that they could be arranged in several possible combinations, thereby inviting various interpretations.

The story revolves around an etching of a native boy on a tropical beach leaning over a dead dog. Other prints depict a partially clad woman with a nude girl; a darkskinned man walking up from the water; three sailors; and a man removing his swimsuit under a beach umbrella. The relationship between the various events is unclear. One clue to the mystery is the change in the quality of light from panel to panel, indicating that the incidents occur at different times or even on different days. As Fischl said recently, he chose "year" not "day" for the title of the suite to suggest the passage of time.

Water is a recurrent theme in Fischl's oeuvre, be it the ocean as a symbol of the primordial source of life, or the swimming pool, its

domestic manifestation. The shore represents the edge between life and death, a fact made manifest in the central event of Drowned Dog. Floating Islands, a series of five separate color etchings published by Peter Blum in 1985, however, does not have to do with water, as its title might suggest. Instead, four of the pages depict a reclining nude woman (the bed as the metaphorical island) while the fifth depicts an adolescent boy, often referred to as the "witness." Sexuality is the theme of this work which can be linked to Fischl's paintings Bad Boy and Birthday Boy, both of which show a woman exposing her genitals to a young boy.

Fischl based the pivotal print of Floating Islands, "Puppet Tears," on a puppet vendor he often saw on the beaches of St. Tropez. In Floating Islands, Fischl transforms the vendor into an adolescent boy who entertains a nude female, her back to the viewer, with hand puppets. Fischl took the woman's pose from Diego Velázquez's Toilet of Venus (1649-51), and based the standing figure of the young boy in the fifth panel on a photograph of an adolescent girl by George Platt Lynes. Fischl prefers to work from photographs--his own or others--in combination with his own recollections, rather than to employ live models.

Though only two years
separate Floating Islands
from Year of the Drowned Dog,
one can see considerable
changes in Fischl's approach.
Though the situations in
Floating Islands are still
sexually-charged, Fischl's
style of painting is
sketchier and the scenes

themselves lack the specificity of those in Drowned Dog. Preparatory studies and proofs are included in the exhibition, as well as other related works on paper, giving the viewer an opportunity to observe the process by which Fischl creates his work. In his paintings as well as in the etchings, each story goes through many versions before Fischl achieves the tension he seeks. He knows a work is "finished" when he arrives at that point just short of resolution. Fischl doesn't offer answers--he only provokes questions.

This exhibition was organized by the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach. A catalogue is available in the Museum bookstore.

Constance Lewallen Associate Curator

- Works in MATRIX (please note all dimensions given are for image size):
- Year of the Drowned Dog. All works 1983, color etchings.
  Lent by Peter Blum Edition,
  NY, unless otherwise noted.
- 1. Year of the Drowned Dog, 6 color etchings in aquatint, soft ground drypoint and scraping, 22-1/2 x 34-3/4; 22 x 16-3/4; 17-1/2 x 11-1/4; 22-3/4 x 11-1/4; 12-1/2 x 9-3/4; 23 x 19-1/4 in., ed. 35.
- 2. Year of the Drowned Dog, assembled in alternative order.
- 3. Untitled studies, oil on paper, 23-1/8 x 35; 23-1/8 x 17-1/8; 17-7/8 x 11-1/2; 23-1/8 x 11-1/2; 11-1/2 x 14-9/16; 23-9/16 x 12-1/16 in. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NY.
- 4. Untitled study, oil on paper, 27-1/4 x 23-7/8 in. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NY.
- 5. Untitled study (men and women), oil on paper, 52-1/8 x 40. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NY.
- 6. Undressing, 1982, oil on paper, 35 x 23-1/8 in. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NY.
- 7. Untitled working proof, 22-7/16 x 34-11/16 in. Lent by Jasper Johns.
- 8. Untitled working proof, 22-3/8 x 34-1/2. Lent by Jasper Johns.
- 9. Untitled working proof, b/w etching, 21-13/16 x 16-1/2 in.
- 10. Untitled working proof,  $8-3/4 \times 8-1/2$  in.

- 11. Untitled working proof,  $9-1/2 \times 12-1/2$  in.
- 12. Untitled working proof,  $10-7/8 \times 8-1/2$  in.
- 13. Untitled, 1984, b/w etching in aquatint, soft ground, and scraping, 12-1/2 x 9-3/4 in.
- 14. Untitled working proof, b/w etching, 22-1/2 x 11-1/8 in. Lent by Jasper Johns.
- 15. Untitled working proof, 12-1/2 x 9-11/16 in. Lent by Joshua P. Smith.
- 16. Untitled working proof, 12-5/8 x 9-11/16 in. Lent by Joshua P. Smith.
- 17. Untitled working proof, color etching with hand coloring, 12-5/8 x 19-1/4 in. Lent by Joshua P. Smith.
- 18. Untitled working proof, color etching, 23-3/4 x 19-1/4 in. Lent by Jasper Johns.
- 19. Untitled working proof, color etching, 22-15/16 x 19-3/8 in. Lent by Jasper Johns.
- 20. Untitled working proof, color etching, 22-3/4 x 19-1/2 in. Lent by Jasper Johns.

- Floating Islands. All works
  1985, color etchings, private
  collection, courtesy Mary
  Boone Gallery, NY, unless
  otherwise noted.
- 1. Floating Islands, 1985, 5 color etchings in aquatint, sugar-lift, drypoint, and scraping, 4 etchings 11-3/4 x 31-3/4; 1 etching 22-3/4 x 16-3/4 in. Lent by University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach.
- 2. Untitled study, oil on paper, 11-15/16 x 32-1/8 in.
- 3. Untitled working proof, b/w etching, 11-1/2 x 31-9/16 in.
- 4. Untitled study, oil on paper, 12 x 32-1/8 in.
- 5. Untitled study, monotype,  $16-7/8 \times 22-15/16$  in.
- 6. Untitled study, oil on paper, 12 x 32-1/16 in.
- 7. Untitled study, monotype,  $11-1/2 \times 31-1/2$  in.
- 8. Untitled study, oil on paper,  $12-1/16 \times 21-1/8$  in.
- 9. Puppet Tears, color etching in aquatint, sugar-lift, drypoint and scraping, 6-3/8 x 9-13/16 in. Lent by University Art Museum, Calif. State Univ. Long Beach.
- 10. Untitled study, oil on paper, 23-1/2 x 27 in.
- 11. Untitled working proof, b/w etching, 22-13/16 x 16-13/16 in.
- 12. Untitled study, graphite on paper, 24 x 16 in.
- 13. Untitled study, oil on Chromecoat, 35-1/8 x 46-1/8

- 14. Untitled study for Bayonne, oil on Chromecoat, 26-9/16 x 35-1/8 in.
  - 15. Untitled study for Bayonne, oil on Chromecoat, 35-1/8 x 46-1/16 in.
  - 16. Digging Kids, 1982, color etching in soft ground, aquatint, sugar-lift, spit bite, scraping and sanding, 37-3/4 x 35-1/2 in. Lent by Helen Getler Fine Art, NY.
  - 17. Bathroom Scene, 1980, oil on glassine, 72 x 96 in. Collection Greenwald/Wein, courtesy Peter N. Greenwald, NY.
  - 18. Eleven untitled working proofs, ca. 12 x 32 in.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Edward Thorp Gallery, NY,
'80, '81, '82; Larry Gagosian
Gallery, L.A., '83, '86; Mary
Boone/Michael Werner Gallery,
NY, '84 (catalogue), '86;
Mendel Art Gallery,
Saskatoon, Canada, Eric
Fischl Paintings, '85
(traveled to museums in
Canada, The Netherlands,
Switzerland, Great Britain,
and the U.S.; catalogue);
Daniel Weinberg Gallery,
L.A., '86.

Selected group exhibitions:

Kunsthalle Basel,
Switzerland, Neun Kanadisch
Kunstler, '78 (catalogue);
Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid,
Tendencias en Nueva York
(traveled; catalogue);
Whitney Museum of American
Art, NY, Biennials, '83, '85
(catalogues); The Museum of
Modern Art, NY, An
International Survey of
Recent Painting and Sculpture
(catalogue); Venice, Italy,
Biennale, '84 (catalogue).