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Frontispiece: Fischl St. Tropez 1982

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

NAKED IN PUBLIC:
INTIMATE REVELATION, VOYEURISTIC PROBING

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Fig. 1 Hart-Benton The Bootleggers 1927

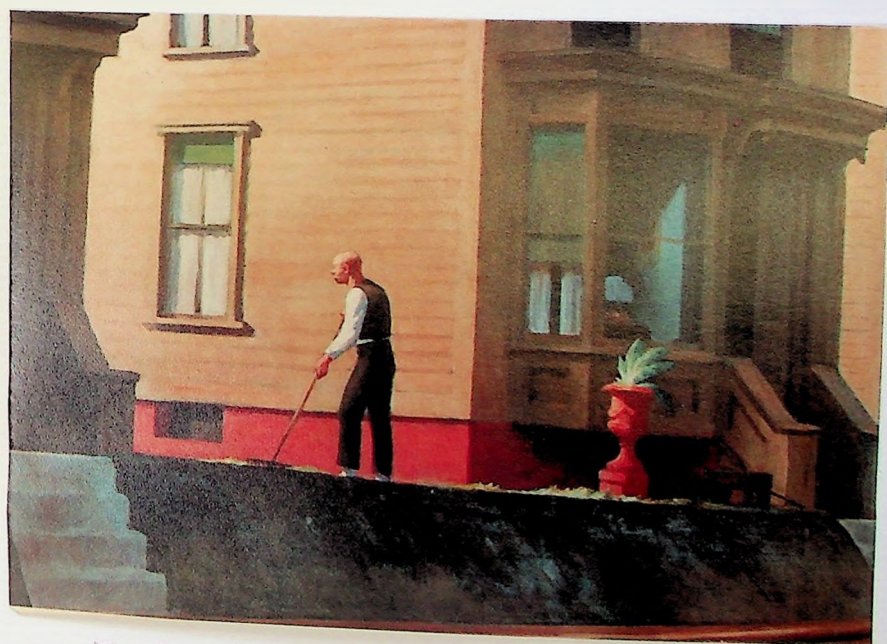


Fig. 2 Hopper Pennsylvania Coal Town 1947

Introduction

"America's not Disneyland and we can't deny it any longer. Things smell, things have edges, people can get hurt".

"No mood has been so mean as to seem unworthy of interpretation ... all the swelling tawdry life of the American small town, and behind all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape."

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 was a tremendous blow to the burgeoning wealth and confidence of American society: prominent businessmen hurled themselves from their recently erected skyscrapers to a dramatic demise, thousands took to the road in search of employment, and politics withdrew from increasing European involvement to return to self-protecting, isolationist policies. Modern art, introduced to New York by way of the Armory Show of 1913, had steadily grown in impact and popularity and had been visably enshrined with the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929 - public testimony to modernism's rise in stature and prominence. But with the nation's introspection and debilitating poverty of the '30's, came an increasing dissatisfaction with this predominantly European and elitist art. The growth of socialist sympathies and legislation with Roosevelt's "New Deal" developed a need for a more nationalistic, "native" art, and a re-evaluation of the artists' position in American society. Influenced by Robert Henri's Ash Can school of the turn of the century, Thomas Hart-Benton (Fig.1) became a central protagonist and spokesperson for the new Regionalists - an energetic, mannerist style celebrating the common man in the context of the rural midwest. Hence, a dichotomy was articulated between the formal experimentation of the Parisian-dominated modernists and the proponents of a socially relevant, American realism.³ Art historians have traditionally described aesthetic developments through diametrically opposed movements, but the articulated gulf between abstraction and realism grew

increasingly wide so that by the end of the second world war, realism was relegated to an art "retardaire" and all serious art practice was credited to the New York dominated school of Abstract Expressionism. Artists continued to paint in a large variety of representational modes, but progressive American art was allied to the abstractionists, whose concerns with experimentation, individuality, freedom, and liberty were seen to extoll the true American virtues within the continuing cold war with Eastern Europe.⁴

Growing recognition of pluralism within contemporary art practice, and most especially the enthusiastic return to figuration with the New Image/Expressionists since the 1970's, has reawakened interest in the numerous forgotten painters herded within the realist tradition. Attention has again been drawn to the importance of subject and content as opposed to more obvious stylistic differentiation in an effort to put some order on the amorphous group catagorized as "realists", a term more appropriate for what its not (i.e. abstract, form-over content, art-as-such, etc.) than a clearly definable school.

Although labeled with being a true, native painter, and a major exponent of a new American art in the '30's, Edward Hopper (Fig. 2) divorced himself from obvious social commentary and kept his attention consistently on "The most exact transcription possible of [his] most intimate impressions of nature".⁵ His solipsism, echoed in a self-imposed seclusion from contemporary artists as well as movements, pictured with the strong formalist construction and pure colour admired by the abstract artists he so adamantly rejected, today portrays our clearest and most succinct image of the America of the '30's and '40's. This solipistic philosophy, giving rise to a



Fig. 3 Fischl The Sheer Weight
of History 1982

Fig. 4 Salle Very Few Cars 1985

concise image of the tawdry underbelly of American society is also investigated, not by any of Hopper's peers, but the contemporary painter Eric Fischl. Although Fischl (Fig. 3) is often lumped together with the New Expressionists, (Fig. 4) his concern for accurate anatomy, clear legibility, and formal craftsmanship to deal with the underlying anxieties of current American culture, more closely allies his painting to that of Edward Hopper than his contemporaries. Both men have chosen the most banal of situation: hotel rooms, suburban lawns, bedrooms and bathrooms, to probe into the most intimate and personal of fears and anxieties, yet with restraint and ambiguity, rather than an overt, angst-ridden expressionism, that increases the awkward tension and explores "the anxiety we feel when we discover ourselves naked in public."⁶ It is this alienation then, not that of the exclusively artistic but that which is peculiarly American, and its intense observation that parallels these two painters. Their work is a mutual exploration of the private/public person, clothed in images easily recognized as indigenous to their respective lifetimes, and although separated by a generation, allies them more closely to each other than to their immediate peers, Regionalists and New Expressionists, respectively.

Both artists, influenced by the 19th c. French realism of Degas and Manet, succinctly picture their own contemporary society in a manner that is particularly, recognizably American. But more importantly, they exploit the aesthetic liberties of the painter (imaginative reconstructions that maintain the logic of "reality") in order to explore the most private and personal anxieties of the individual within that society. By directly addressing the individual's and, hence, the society's frustrations they expose their position as more than intimates, which implies sympathy. They are rather the cold, curious eyes of

the voyeur. And by an expansion of compositional forces, the implied continuousness of Hopper's horizontals, and the dynamic diagonals of Fischl, they force the viewer into a participatory voyeurism, a detached, probing fascination which reveals a narcissistic extension of not only the artist's preoccupations, but the viewer's as well.

1. Fischl, Eric. Ferguson, Bruce W. "Corrupting Realism: Four Probes into a Body of Work". Eric Fischl catalogue, Mendel Art Gallery p. 18.
2. Hopper, Edward. Goodrich, Loyd Edward Hopper Abrams, Inc. N.Y. p. 66.
3. Yet unlike the European avant-garde's alliance to the political left, with social realism enthusiastically embraced by Fascism, the reverse was true in the United States. Hart-Benton and the other Regionalists were politically active within the socialist movement, while modernism, although are-historically "progressive", was seen to be reactionary in its continued reliance on European culture.
4. As far as the major galleries, museums, art magazines, and critics were concerned, realism was beneath serious consideration, except for its possible or undeniable formal (abstract) strengths, it is on these grounds that Hopper gains recognition in histories of American painting.
5. Hopper, Edward. Goodrich Ibid p. 150.
6. Fischl, Eric. Kuspit, Donald B. "Voyeurism American Style". Eric Fischl Catalogue p. 9.

CHAPTER 2: PERSONAL HISTORIES

Since the rise of modernism, painting which claims a humanist stance; an attempt at social relevancy and a direct link to the figurative, realistic tradition, has been regarded as constructive, backward, and insignificant and outside the linear progression that is modernism's. If mentioned at all, movements such as Regionalism, Social Realism, and Figurative Expressionism are briefly acknowledged and quickly dismissed as unimportant. Were it not for Hopper's strong formalist qualities, he too would have become lost amongst the "also-ran"s.

With the rise of feminist history and the dissolution of modernism's hegemony in the '70's, a re-examination of a large variety of artistic styles coralled together as realistic has shown a continuous concern among a surprisingly large number of American painters for meaningful, humanistic painting. Rather than a conservative backlash against the variety of painting's lack of significance after minimalism, with the dislodging of modernism's hegemony, New Image painting has heralded a challenge to the supremacy of the New York School and renewed interest in "traditional" figuration. By not viewing this new expressionism as international, the validity of nationalism whether German neo-expressionists, or Italian trans-avant-garde or American New Image has recreated an introspective perspective and an appropriation of national artistic heritages. A search for a traditional validity more personal than the continuation of the avant-garde for its own sake. The recent financial recessions, growing unemployment, and lack of confidence in American imperialism, the re-examination and appropriation of post historical styles, the renewed debate on the role of the artist in contemporary society, both political and social,



Fig. 5 Hopper illustration
for L'Année Terrible
1906-7

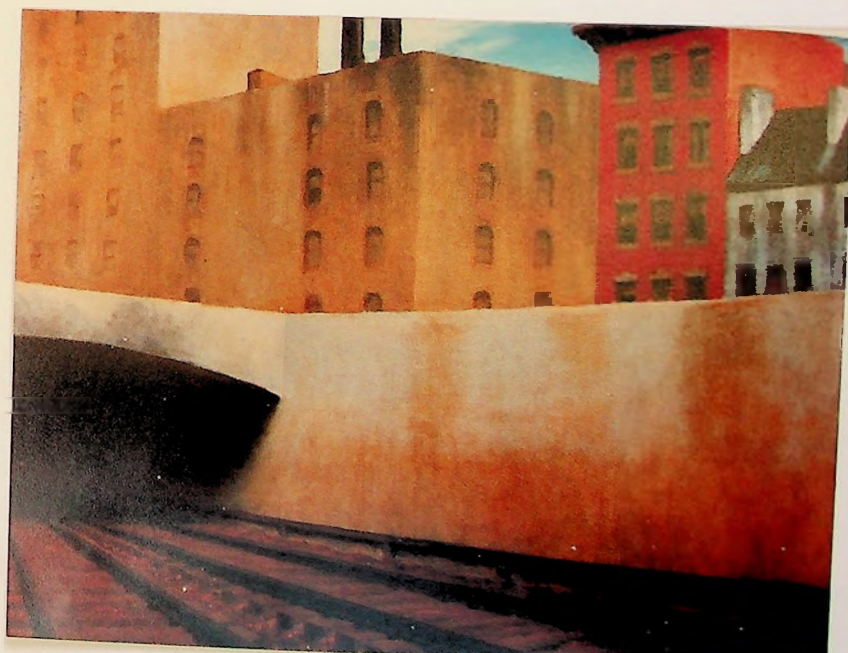


Fig. 6 Hopper Approaching a City 1946

point to the numerous parallels between the cultural atmosphere of the 30's/40's and the 70's/80's. During both eras, there are marked pluralistic aesthetic directions with varying contingencies stressing direct political engagement, or formal progressivism, or subjective expressionism. Emerging from this confusion, both Edward Hopper and Eric Fischl start out as artists who have found painting as the most communicative medium to express their individuality and personal response to a culture which has directly shaped their thinking. By employing paint's sensuous visualization of an artist's handwriting, its equal importance placed on the agility of the hand, eye and brain, their work conveys the individuality of their considered response, the knowing intimacy of their compositions contrived through the amalgamation of observation, experience and memory. But, more particularly, they address the position of the artist as voyeur-peering unemotionally and straightforwardly into the most intimate of situations and moments. They probe the anxieties of the individual, an extension of not only their own preoccupations but those which are particular and endemic to American society. Without resorting to expressionist, angst-ridden imagery, they reveal an alienation which is peculiarly American. Hopper's paintings image the forties, Fischl, the eighties, and although the eras appear surfacely unsimilar, they both unearth a quiet, yet desperate alienation which remains a constant feature of American society.

Edwqrd Hopper, born in upstate New York in 1882, was urged by his small town family to direct his artistic ambitions toward commercial illustration rather than suffer the insecurities of the life of a painter. And so he studied and became an illustrator (Fig.5) but



Fig. 7 Hopper Soiree Blue 1914



Fig. 8 Manet Au Café 1878

also enrolled at the Studio School in New York to study with Robert Henri. Hopper was to support himself and his wife by freelance illustration, giving him time to stubbornly pursue his "serious work", until 1924, and although he resented his dependence on it, the financial security it afforded him, allowed Hopper to develop his painterly concerns outside the vagaries of aesthetic fashion, contemporary markets and ideals. It also had a direct effect on his paintings, encouraging a straightforward simplicity and clarity, both in purpose and construction, which is the hallmark of his style. This commercial freelancing also allowed him to indulge in the deliberate seclusion and solitude that was so important to him, even in childhood.¹ Which is not to suggest a hermetic withdrawal from life in Hopper as he travelled extensively: first to Paris in 1906-7, again to France in 1909-10, and after his marriage, throughout the U.S. and Mexico on various forays with his wife. Certainly, his self-imposed isolation and the bursts of intimate revelation exposed to the passing stranger while travelling, gave rise to a fascination with the emotional ambiguities of privacy. Many of his landscape and architectural paintings make direct references to travel, with their strong horizontality and frequent inclusions of railroad tracks. But all of his work is constructed and painted from the perspective of the traveller, striving to express the emotions one has on a train zooming into a strange city "interest, curiosity, fear". (Fig. 6). As a young man, Paris and the realism of the late 19th century, French paintings were to have a major influence on Hopper's stylistic developments. This is clearly demonstrated in Soir Blue (Fig. 7) painted shortly after his return, in 1914 and his first exhibited painting since his school days. The lively cafe setting is reminiscent of the social scenarios of a Manet (Fig. 8) or Toulouse-Latrec, but the predominantly



Fig. 9 Sloan Sixth Avenue Elevated at
Third Street 1928



Fig. 10 Hopper Early Sunday Morning 1930

horizontal composition and stilted figures gives an air of awkward seclusion in the midst of supposed celebration. The inclusion and central position of the clown, while making reference to a public joviality increases the sense of tension and unease in this gathering of strangers. Hopper studied with Robert Henri in New York and was influenced by his advocacy of a realism that dealt directly with the growing urban culture of New York. Henri's paintings, like the others in the Ash Can School, (Fig. 9) John Sloan, George Bellows, and William Glackens were characterized by fast, loose, brushwork and celebratory of the energy of the city's teeming masses. And while Hopper has stated unequivocally his debt to Henry as a great teacher and based himself in New York, he sought in his own work "The most exact transition possible of [his] most intimate impressions of nature".² Travels throughout the country, as well as frequent summers on New England's coasts, gave his city and small town subjects the look of the local neighbourhood, familiar, yet remote. Rather than the streets of overflowing humanity of the Ash Can painters, Hopper's environments are marked for their solitary figures, or locales with inhabitants conspicuous by their absence, creating a pervading atmosphere of the loneliness and alienation of living in a crowded city. Early Sunday Morning 1930, (Fig. 10) with its strong horizontality created by the frontally presented street and long shadows gives the sense of the endless extension and repetition of such streets, within the vastness of American cities, and yet is portrayed with a simple, direct familiarity. The very absence of any human activity and the clean, early light give this common street the look of an empty monument to American industrial progress. Many of Hopper's paintings follow this theme: simply structured scenes and solitary houses of typical American architecture, invaded only by a



Fig. 11 Hopper House By a Railroad
1925



Fig. 12 Hopper The Lighthouse at Two Lights
1929



Fig. 13 Hopper Corn Hill 1930

harsh, revealing light, conveying a puritanical austerity in even the most elaborate of structures or romantic of scenery. (House by a Railroad 1925, (Fig. 11) The Lighthouse at Two Lights 1929, (Fig. 12) Corn Hill, 1930) (Fig. 13). However, for the purposes of this paper, I will be concentrating on those paintings which through their inclusion of solitary or grouped figures, Hopper's intimate impressions of nature are specifically geared to human intimacy and privacy. He was a man who closely guarded his own privacy and yet his most powerful, memorable paintings are those which peer unblinkingly into the private places of the individual, paintings which become both autobiographical⁸ and archetypal of his contemporary fellow Americans. This theme was pervasive throughout his career and the development of his mature style in the '20's remained consistent through to his last paintings in the early '60's.

Unlike the majority of his celebrated peers, who's faces and lives are well known through major American magazines as well as art journals, Eric Fischl has kept his private life very much to himself. Not unlike Hopper's inclusion into the Regionalist School.⁴ Fischl has come into the public eye through his association with new-image (or neo-expressionist, whichever label you prefer) painters. And while there is easy access to reproductions of his work and copious quotes as to his artistic concerns, very little is known of his background. Born in New York in 1948, Fischl studied painting in the fairly recently established (late '60's), avant-garde California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California. While studying, Fischl's paintings were constructed through a minimalized abstraction; slowly he began incorporating text, and did installations involving drawings, short verbal narratives and objects reproduced in photography. Finding

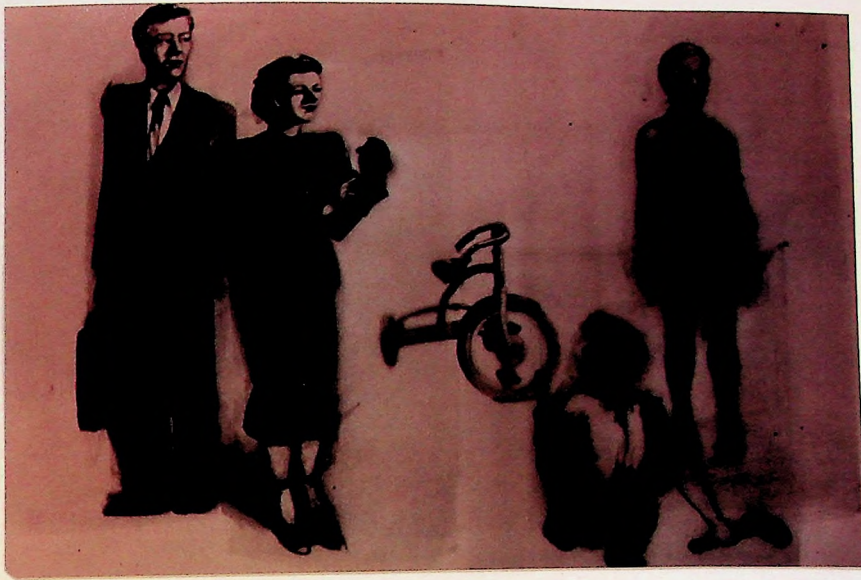


Fig. 14 Fieschl Critics 1976

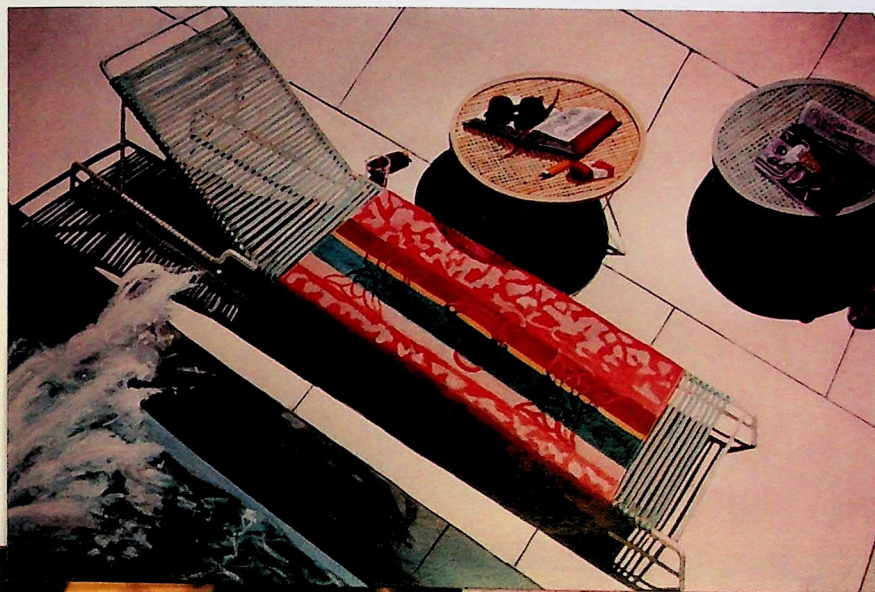


Fig. 15 Beckman Departure 1932-33

abstract forms "insufficiently ambiguous", by the late 70's, he was working in glassine, (Fig. 14) doing drawings of domestic props (tables, chairs, sofas) and figures, each drawn on a separate glassine sheet and overlaid to present an ambiguity of relationships between the various subjects incorporated within the final layered image. In an increasing concern with legibility and a desire to produce subjects potent with meaning, he became influenced by Max Beckman's painting The Departure. (Fig. 15). Beckman's use of allegory, which was both personal and socially referential rather than purely aesthetic references, determined Fischl to turn to painting in a style that would incorporate:

"Things that at least everyone could see so they wouldn't say 'I like the weight of this or that' or 'the way one colour pushes off another' preferring that his audience would question why is this person doing that to that person?, or what's happening here?"⁵

Fischl's desire for psychologically potent painting, incorporating "personal matters ... broad implications" has determined him to do work that "deals with the crises of American identity, the failure of the American dream ... we have watched the way America has grown and acted and it doesn't match the ideal."⁶ Due to increased overcrowding and crime in American megapolises, the middle class has retreated to the suburbs to discover themselves in the '80's version of the isolation present in Hopper's depopulated city streets of the '40's. In Christian Retreat 1980, (Fig. 16) while surfacely a travelogue image of sundrenched leisure, the stability is unhinged by the strongly diagonal composition and bird's eye view. The sudden escape, so recent as to leave a tell-tale splash of the subject from an identity detailed by the open bible, sunglasses, cigarettes, and half-drunk coca-cola, accoutrements of the moral majority, makes the viewer unwittingly guilty for the emptiness of the scene. This emptiness



is just as prevalent when the paintings are peopled, whether on their own or in larger groups, but always in such awkwardness and self-absorption that the viewer becomes implicated in a voyeuristic probing into their privacy. Like the images of popular media, (T.V., film, billboard advertising) Fischl's paintings are monumental and brash, reflecting the "look" of the America of the '80's. Yet the sense of a frozen moment of a narration in which the action has just happened or is about to happen, places the viewer as an interloper in the awkward dramas alluded to, yet never explained. Hence, by their very structure the paintings create an ambiguity through the overstatement of such large, brashly depicted protagonists within implications of relationships and situations which are never clearly determined.

Like the modesty of the '40's, inherent in an era of austerity created by the depression and then involvement in a consuming war effort, the look of the America of the '40's is succinctly imaged in Hopper's moderately sized, precise and simplified paintings. The cold, harsh light and pure, clean colour surrounding the awkward, stiff figures creates a melancholy tension in an atmosphere of sterility due to lost opportunity in such clearly defined and held separations - separations of figures, one to the other, and the figures to their immediate environment. As with the irony of Fischl's monumental intimacy, Hopper, too, with his air of detachment, peers obliquely but intensely into his figures most solitary, private moments. The image their paintings portray ally themselves to an easily recognizable look of their own eras and yet underneath the alienation and sense of perpetually lost intimacy is consistent to both painters. They emphatically address an emotional vacuum that is not only personal but endemic to American society, not just in the '40's, not just in the '80's but as part and parcel of American culture.

1. Although Hopper sold his first painting in 1906, he showed seldom and wasn't to sell again until his first one man show in 1920.
2. Hopper, Edward. Goodrich Ibid p. 150.
3. Even to the extent that his wife, Jo, modelled for all the female figures throughout his career, and hence worked as a feminine extension of his own psyche.
4. or, depending on the source, inclusion with the social realists, precisionists or romantic realists; proof of the spurious assertion of Hopper as part of any defined school.
5. Fischl, Eric. Bohm-Duchen, Monica "Eric Fischl at the I.C.A. London". Flash Art No. 124 Oct/Nov '85, p. 132.
6. Fischl, Eric. Ferguson Ibid p, 18.



Fig. 17 Dahn Double Self 1962

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Fig. 18 Clemente
Self-Portrait with
Bird 1980





Fig. 19 Hopper
Self-Portrait
1925-30



Fig. 20 photograph
of Edward Hopper
1938

CHAPTER 2: SOLITARY COMPANY

One of the threads grouping the stylistic variety of new expressionists is a pervading concentration on alienation, specifically that of the artist as an ineffectual individual in a global society. This has been presented through an emphasis on personal mythology and a fascination with self-portraiture. (As in the work of Clemente, Dahn, Borofsky, and McLean). (Figs. 17, 18). Neither Hopper or Fischl have utilized self-portraiture as a motif for a new 20th century iconography, but the self-examination inherent in self-as-subject gives a good indication of the attitude of them both to their audience, as well as themselves. In other words, their self-portraits are as much an image of how they present themselves as it is how they see themselves. These paintings, like their work in general, tell more by what is hidden than what is revealed.

Hopper (Fig. 19) places himself within the bare flat planes of an anonymous (unimportant) interior, the bright walls keeping attention focussed on the essentially dark image. Yet the three-quarter view and the eyes staring just over one's left shoulder avoids any direct confrontation. In fact, this slight turning away from the viewer and ostensibly toward the door just behind, as well as being attired in hat and coat, gives the impression of fleeting attention before moving out of sight altogether. The likeness is quite accurate (Fig. 20), as can be verified by photographs of the same period, but the simplicity of the painted features and lack of expression, with the deepest intensity to be found in the rich cobalt of his shirt, serve to tease the viewer seeking deeper psychological insight. Even with the compositional stability and implied immediacy of the centrally placed figure, one witnesses the artist retreating beneath

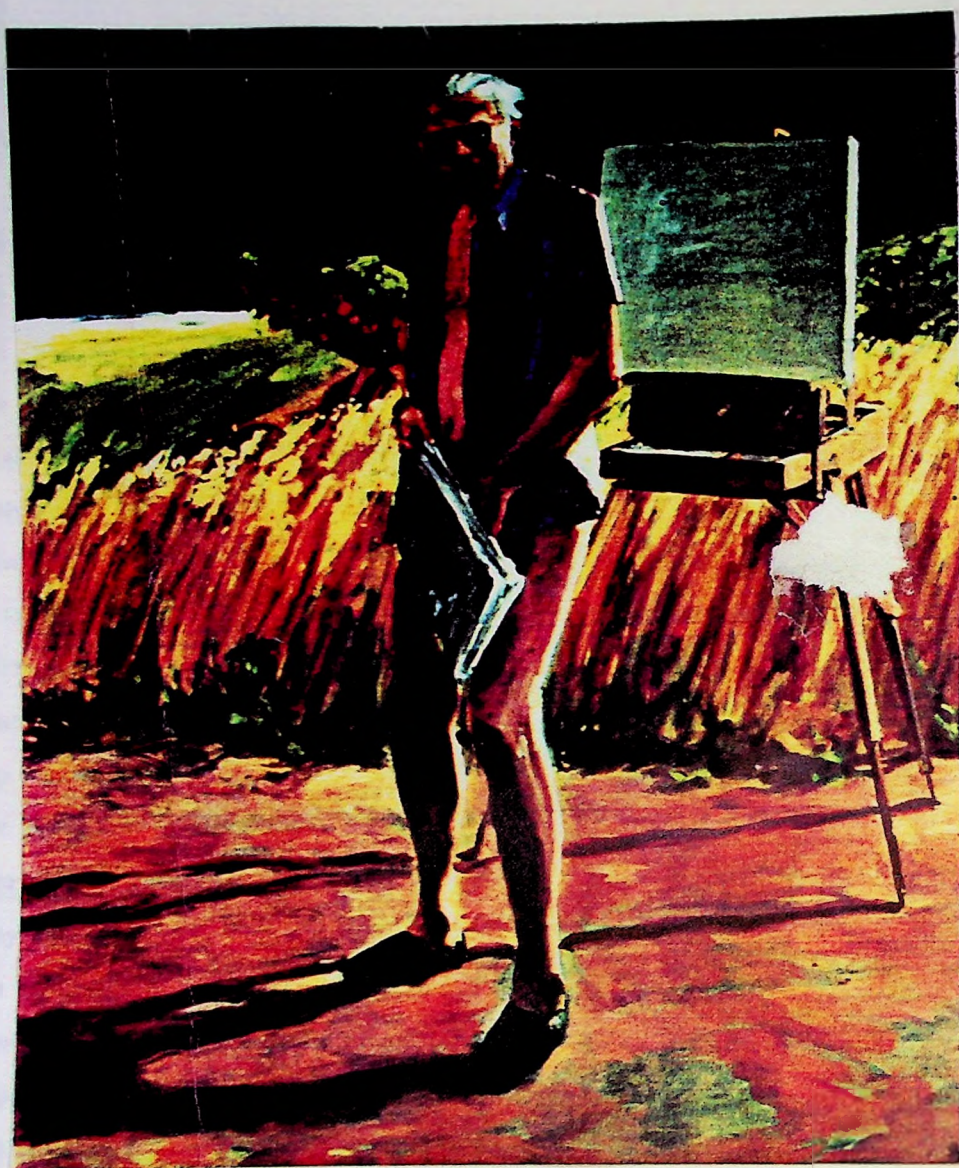


Fig. 21 Fischl Portrait of the Artist as an Old
Man 1984



Fig. 22 Van Gogh Wheatfield under Threat-
ening Skies with Crows 1890



Fig. 23 Fischl Master Bedroom 1883

his social persona, regardless of the enclosed setting. The employment of such simplification, withdrawal and understatement reveal Hopper within his self-imposed seclusion, simultaneously inviting and avoiding, probing eyes.

Meanwhile Fischl, as with his other subjects, paints himself larger than life and caught unawares, a startled turn toward rather than a considered turning away. In front of a blank canvas which is positioned at the edge of a large field, he is caught nearly naked, except for his open shirt, shorts and slippers, and a newspaper partially concealing his hand, lingering at his groin. The setting evokes the final, autumnal field painted by Van Gogh (Fig. 22) before his suicide with its intensely brilliant colour and brooding sky, and with the tongue firmly in cheek, Fischl portrays himself at the twilight of day and his career, with the impotence of old age: sexually, by reference to masturbation and artistically, before the inspiration of Van Gogh. Even the title attests to the intended humour. Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man, 1984 (Fig. 21) alludes to James Joyce's well-known novel and yet reverses it so that we see the artist in the autumn rather than the spring of his career. He has revealed himself naked and exposed, yet masked by the dark glasses and newspaper hiding those parts of himself (his thoughts and genitals) which are most private. In both Hopper's and Fischl's self-portraits, rather than self-revelation, the viewer is found guilty of voyeuristically searching out the man behind his painted image.

This ambiguity between exposure and voyeurism (Fig. 23) runs throughout Fischl's work, as in Master Bedroom, 1983. Although the cuddled pet and curlers allude to a domestic setting, the cold blues and clinical



Fig. 24 Hopper Morning in a City 1944

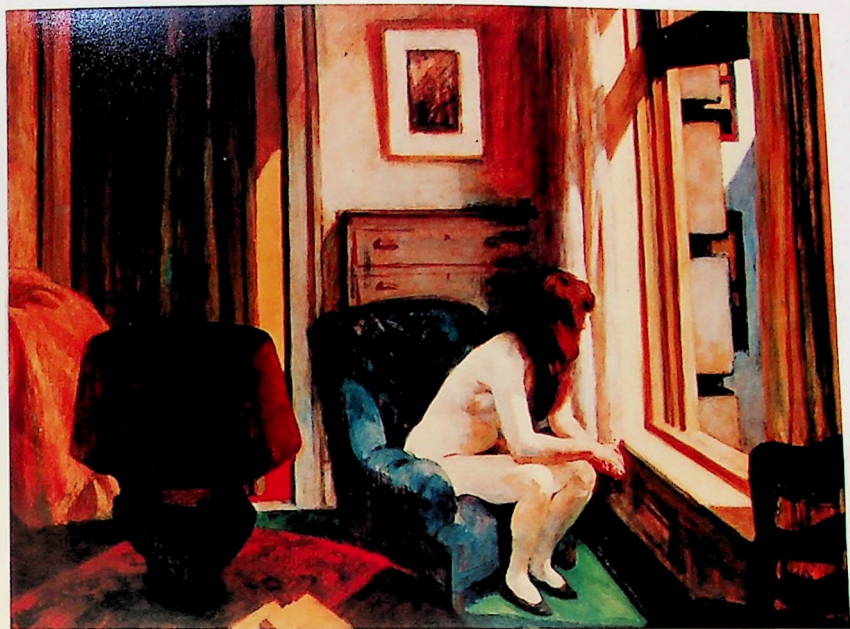


Fig. 25 Hopper Eleven A.M. 1926



Fig. 26 Hopper Morning Sun 1952

sparsity of the bedroom could as easily be located in a hotel as a home. Either way, the room retains a distant anonymity, while the extending diagonals of the bed locate the viewer looking at its edge, down to the nearly naked young woman. Does she cling to the dog in affection or for protection? Fischl deliberately encourages such unanswerable questions ("What's happening here?") In speaking of the variety of ways this painting can be interpreted, he reports:

"There are two specific distances away from the painting that you can read it, and at either ... you get the opposite readings. From about fifteen feet away, the look on the girl's face is a smile, and its anticipatory in a kind of pleasant way ... Then you move a foot away and you see its a frozen grimace, its a smile that has become horrid and anxious, and terrified".

What becomes important, then, is a complicity between spectator and subject, the act of watching on both the part of the girl and the viewer rather than the passive state of being observed. Consequently, a strange tension is created, is she encouraging or frightened? The interpretation is dependent on the spectator's point of view, literally.

In Hopper's Morning in a City, 1944 (Fig. 24) a nude woman is, also, centrally placed within an anonymous bedroom. There is none of the confrontation implicit in Master Bedroom and yet the woman is that much more exposed, being oblivious to anything but her own thoughts. Though the city of the title is just beyond her window, it only reinforces her aloneness, her stiff, naked body being starkly exposed by the open window's morning light, rather than warmed by it. The unnaturalness and self-consciousness of her nudity is emphasized by the towel held before her, yet concealing nothing from our invading observation. While there is no direct reference to the viewer, as with Fischl, none the less, one is still privileged into an obviously intensely private circumstance.

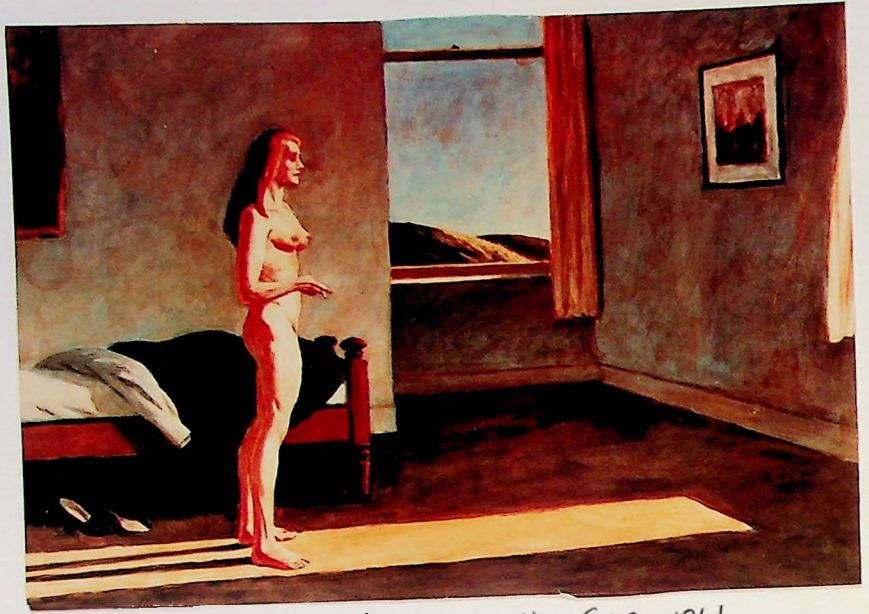


Fig. 27 Hopper Woman in the Sun 1961

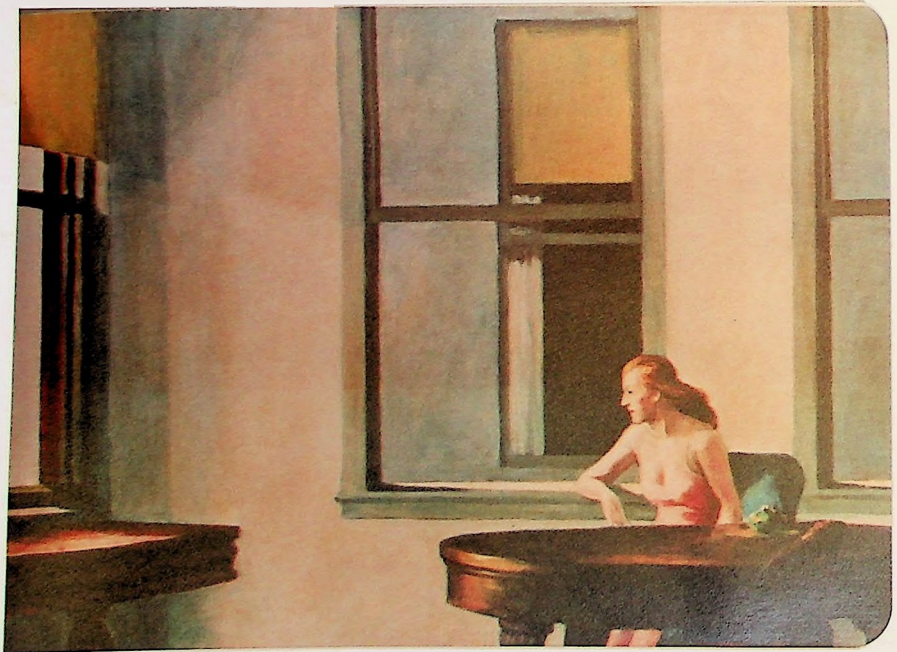


Fig. 28 Hopper City Sunlight 1954

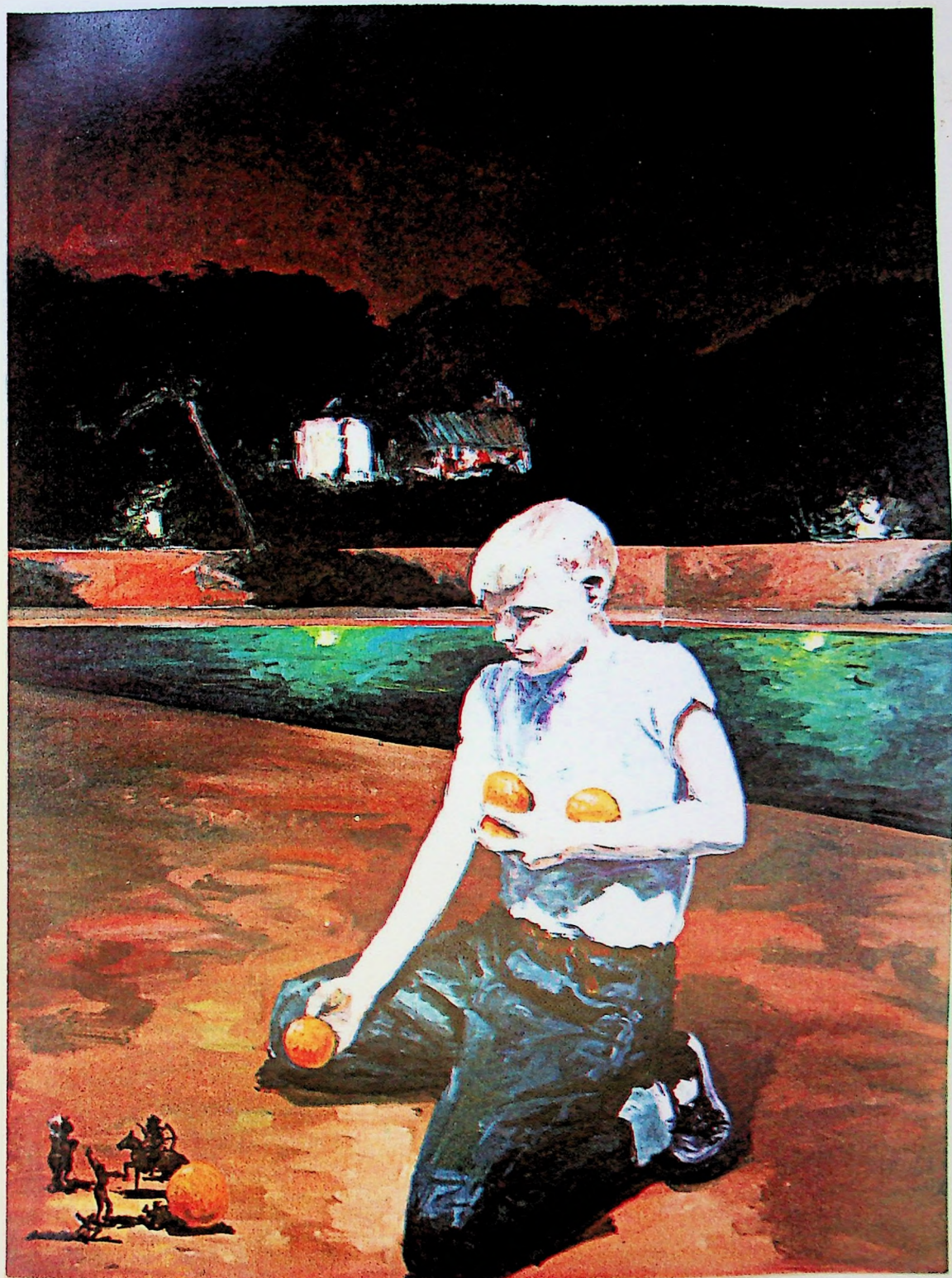


Fig. 29 Fisch Best Western 1983

The solitary woman, nearly or completely naked within hotel rooms is a recurrent and potent image in Hopper's work. (Eleven A.M. 1926 Fig. 25) Morning Sun 1952 (Fig. 26) Woman in the Sun 1961 (Fig. 27) City Sunlight 1934 (Fig. 28). They inevitably face the window and yet are unconcerned for the view. The intensity and strong diagonals of the shaft of light invades and disturbs the nearly empty, stable interiors. The penetrating gaze of the strange city, just beyond, is analogous to the cold observation of the paintings viewer. Without directly addressing the voyeurism implicit in painting women so vulnerably alone, Hopper nevertheless refers to it by the persistent allusion to the outside world in the cities pressed against the open windows. As with Morning in a City, the cold light exposes and separates, reinforcing the woman's uncomfortable seclusion. Nor is it an accidental coincidence that the narrow bed, just left, and morning light attest to her painful singularity. But her introspection appears to bear no fruitful self-awareness, but only to give testimony to her being naked, vulnerable, exposed, sexual and yet aloof. They reveal the discomfort and superficiality of the freedom of the perpetual traveller; the outsider searching for brighter horizons yet unable to become part of them. The artificial warmth of the city, the outside world, reinforces rather than dissolving the isolation.

This same exposed alienation is vital to Fischl's work but through the transitory, self-conscious state of adolescence, rather than the wandering strangers of Hopper. Often totally absorbed in their own world, there is that same tension of being neither here nor there, but, with Fischl, inbetween the state of childhood and adulthood. In Best Western 1983 (Fig. 29) the boy is absorbed in childish play,



Fig. 30 Fischl The Power of Rock and Roll 1984

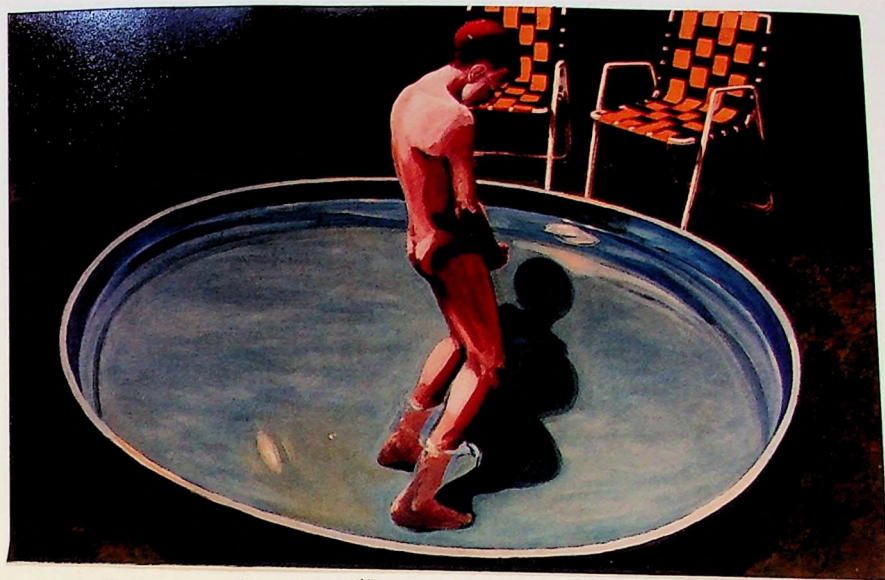


Fig. 31 Fischl Sleepwalker 1979



Fig. 32 Fischl New House 1982

but there is nothing playful in the setting. The atmosphere is dark and heavy with the eerie glow of adult domesticity in the distance. Separating the boy from his home (his adult self?) is the glaucous green of an emptied pool, creating an air of potential danger and the boy's pre-occupation with play, a sense of outlawed activity, despite its supposed innocence. A more humorous view of adolescent reverie is shown in The Power of Rock and Roll 1984 (Fig. 30). This prepubescent boy, completely nude, dances energetically within the privacy of his sony walkman. Very clearly confined within the luxurious trappings of a fashionable, middle class suburban home, complete with its Andy Warhol, his trance-like state emerges him within a private ritual amongst the material sumptuousness but emotional sterility of his contemporary culture. As with Hopper, the viewer has embarrassingly intruded into a situation particular for its supposed privacy.

Another inference into adolescent private ritual is Sleep Walker 1977 (Fig. 31) with a young boy masturbating in the middle of a child's pool in the depth of night. Again the contradiction between the individual's private reverie in the midst of an adult controlled world. Reference to adult life is not so subtle as in the last two paintings, with his parents, represented by the two luridly bright deck chairs, facing him as ringside observers. Even the encircling blue of the pool creates an isolating spotlight, and two strange shadows below him so that any possible satisfaction in such a private pleasure is interrupted by the numerous allusions to its observation. This adolescent self-absorption is a narcissistic fascination with trying to find a niche for oneself within contemporary society. With the loss of societal ritual which regulates the passage of one state

of being into another, a narcissistic watching becomes necessary to try and find roles and meaning in a culture determined to be "cool". It is significant that Fischl sets his paintings within the clean, sanitized, material comfort and predictability of middle class suburbia seen as a refuge from the noise, pollution and omnipresent crime of late 20th century American cities. The separation of families into self-contained, convenient, leisure centres has encouraged a sense of meaninglessness and alienation in the midst of such pervading material comfort. The uncertainty and personal isolation felt in adolescence, being no longer a protected child or part of the "real" world of adults, provides Fischl's work with a protagonist fascinated with the banalities of his everyday environment and yet still outside it. A view that is at once intimate and yet amoral. He centres his vision on a state of being suddenly and sporadically aware of the animistic, primal forces of sexuality in a society so frank and open about sex as to have stripped it of personal meaning and potency. The suburban lifestyle as testimony to a fulfillment of the American dream: comfort, safety, privacy, has produced not a utopia but a meaningless repetition of individualized self-absorption and alienation. New House 1982 (Fig. 32) visually echoes Hopper's abandoned, solitary women; the cold anonymity of a hotel room replaced by the equally cold space of a new kitchen, complete with evidence of having just arrived (the open cardboard boxes). The woman stands awkwardly toward, but unaware of, the strange intruder (the viewer), distracted by the television, a modern technological equivalent, to Hopper's empty city windows, equally passive and unreachably beyond. Here again, although supposedly within the security of a new home, she stands isolated, vulnerable, apprehensive of her new found alienation and clinging to the cold mechanics of technology, the telephone for support.

In the 30's/40's, Americans weren't yet retreating to the suburbs, but rather aimlessly wandering, looking for work or opportunity to escape the malaise of poverty and hardship incurred by the depression and involvement in the World War. Hence, Hopper's hotels, cafes, empty city streets and railroad tracks bear witness to the rootless anonymity of urban life; rented rooms which offer temporary respite but no solace. The individual's vulnerability, insecurity, and especially aloneness is imaged with solitary women, partially or completely naked, awkwardly caught by a bright yet harsh and cold light, which bears witness to their alienation. With both Hopper and Fischl there is nothing comforting or necessary in the privacy of their subjects, rather it is the alienation of the outsider, clumsily, uncomfortably alone. Alone that is, except for the persistent probing of the artist, and hence the viewer; a probing into society's private places.

1. Fischl, Eric. Nairne, Sandy State of the Art Chatto and Windus, London, 1987. pp. 145-6.

CHAPTER 3: INTIMATE, OR VOYEUR

Whenever female and male figures are painted in intimate or close proximity there is an implication of sexual complicity, and no doubt at all should either or both of the figures be nude or partially dressed. In fact a single naked figure, as long as it is female, will also create a variety of sexual innuendo, although such is not the case with the male solitary nude. That Fischl's work implies a variety of sexual attitudes and possible scenarios is an obvious interpretation with his odd groupings of adolescent boys/older women, or semi-attired young boys and girls, or naked adults. Always placed in settings that give reason for a natural cause to their nudity: bedrooms, bathrooms, poolside and seaside, the figures never are natural, larger than life, brashly described and in uncomfortable positions. An air of tension breaks through the banality of the settings, alluding to more than meets the eye. Since the advent of the sexual revolution of the '60's, references and depictions of sex are available at every turning, whether in the scantily-clad, manufactured beauties of television, advertising, magazines, endless manuals and novels prescribing various remedies for perfect sexual performance, or the fetishistic underworld of dirty magazines. Sex, no longer an activity to be performed behind closed doors, is blatantly displayed and available for passive consumption by the consumer society, all of which has made it "natural" to the point of losing its psychological potency. Because of its ubiquitous visibility, sex has become a state of being to be experienced not through direct participation but by the passive noninvolvement of the watcher. The society at large takes on the curious but inactive position of the adolescent, fascinated but not psychologically, emotionally involved; a narcissistic projection

of the self into the activity displayed, without incurring any personal repercussions, such as emotional commitment or deadly diseases. One can therefore be titillated, while remaining removed, cool, and in control. Fischl's paintings reflect the squeaky clean, liberated sex of the suburbs - unembarrassed nudity, unerotically, dispassionately described - within situations that allude to without revealing middle class taboos (incest and paedophilia). This allusion to narrative with a potential for action, or its aftermath, but nothing actually shown, restrains the colourful, sensual intensity of Fischl's pain in such monumental proportions from becoming the melodramatic, instant-angst of much neo-expressionist work. Rather, despite its overwhelming proliferation of naked flesh, the paintings retain the ironic viewpoint of the fascinated non-participant. The activity of the perception and personal interpretation, the view of the artist, and hence, the painting's viewer, becomes the issue, instigated by the references to possible narrative within the painting itself.

Like Fischl, the most intimate of possible situations in Hopper's paintings are portrayed with the cool ironic eye of the nonparticipant, keeping the potentially highly charged emotions of scenes from reaching melodramatic proportions. In fact, with his persistent use of understatement, juxtaposed with lush, highly sensuous paint, Hopper creates a sexual tension of unfocused desire and repression analogous to the sexual mores of American society before the McKinsey Reports in the 1950's.¹ After the roaring twenties, financial austerity had brought a return to the importance of the family and the puritan values of stability and perseverance. Gone were the flash and glitter of the speakeasy, the femme fatale, and the few small strides made by suffragettes ignored. But there was a growing fascination and

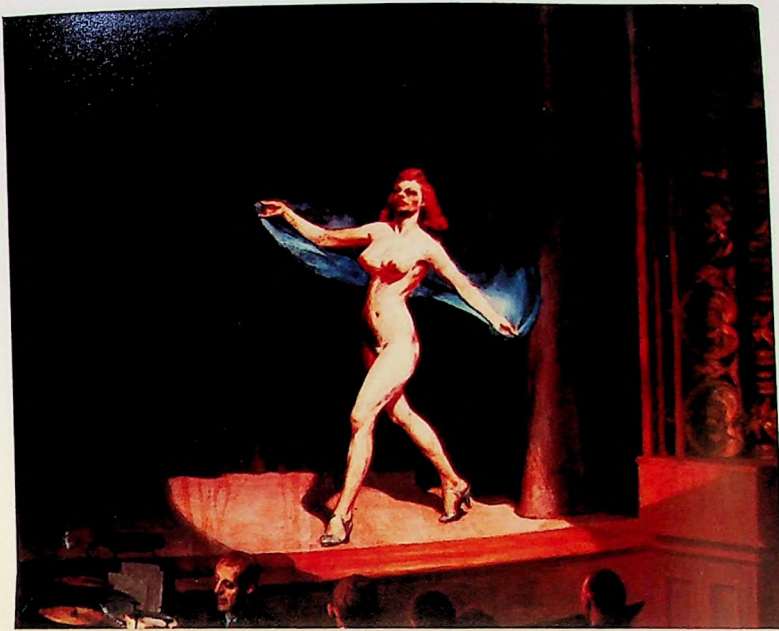


Fig. 33 Hopper Girlie Show 1941



Fig. 34 Degas The Tub 1886

sympathy for the outlaw, the independent loner, outside the mores that governed normal lives. Rootless and lawless, outlaws such as Bonnie and Clyde and Pretty Boy Floyd caught the popular imagination, as did the later gangster films of Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney. By remaining beyond societal mores they created virile icons of a barely contained sexuality, so that sex that was never directly displayed or spoken of, became an integrated element of the mass appeal of such unrestrained folk and cinematic heroes. Because sex was never shown, it took on the fascination of a dangerous, unbridled underworld, and it became an era of double entendre, with the emphasis on seduction rather than copulation. Sex was cloaked in mystery and created an undercurrent which many still claim had more potency than today's boringly explicit displays. While, by modern standards, Hopper's paintings seem far removed from the exposed genitalia of Fischl's work, the undercurrent of sexual tension, as in the solitary women of Figs. 24 to 28, or that tension created by sexual loss consistently recurs in Hopper's work. In fact, it is the loss or lack of intimacy and emotional security that sexual communion is supposed to create that gives such power to the sense of alienation and loneliness in Hopper's people. Girlie Show 1941 (Fig. 33) would appear to be in contradiction to his general attitude of understatement with the blatant display of this hard, painted lady's body, blindly strutting across the dark stage. The business of sexual titillation dramatizes the alienation and futility of such public display, rather than creating any sensual pleasure. Her physical isolation, paralleled by the isolation of the audience (at which the viewer is clearly a part of) and bored disinterest of the musician points to the performance and the demand for such entertainment as a pathetic exercise, and indicative of society's growing cynicism toward sex,



Fig. 35 Hopper Western Motel 1957

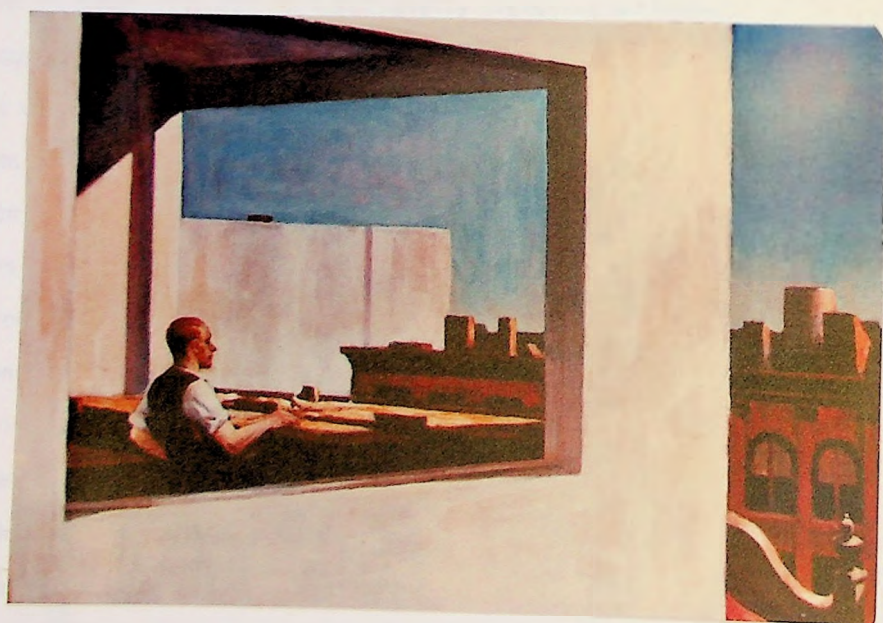


Fig. 36 Hopper New York Office 1962



Fig. 37 Room in New York 1932



Fig. 38 Hopper Night Windows 1938

as testimony to intimacy and love. In fact the only sensuality to be found in this brittle woman is in the fluttering, blue scarf she waves behind her.

It is significant that so much of Hopper's figures are within hotels. Never presented as a refuge, but coldly distant, impersonal and temporary, hotels have traditionally been home to illicit and passionate sexual encounters, with no past or future to shape one's behaviour or expectations. With the solitary woman there is always the sense of invading their private disillusions while remaining emotionally removed, as if peering unobserved through a keyhole. This keyhole invasion of privacy has historical precedence in the bathing scenes of Edgar Degas (Fig. 34) in the late 19th century. But with Degas the close cropping of the scene, visually paralleling it to a keyhole's vision, concentrates on woman involved in functionally cleansing activity, both sensuous, exhilarating and self-controlled. The horizontality of Hopper's compositions and the women's sightless staring toward empty cities creates a depressing sense of fatality, an endless continuation of their emotionally starved conditions. Even when the woman stares toward the viewer, as in Western Motel 1957 (Fig. 35) there is no confrontation or acknowledgement of our prying eyes, but rather the self-consciousness of watching her own reflection. This then turns the viewer into a reflection of her own psychological state and hence of the society at large. The emphasis placed on her large breasts within the low-cut dress remarks on her untapped sexuality, but the severity of her pose and expression within the empty room and the phallically shaped car (echoed in the shape of the chair and mountains beyond) behind her and out of reach, gives lie to any possible sexual fulfillment. She becomes just another drifting, repressed loner. In many of the paintings we are quite blatantly forced into



Fig. 39 Office in a Small City 1953

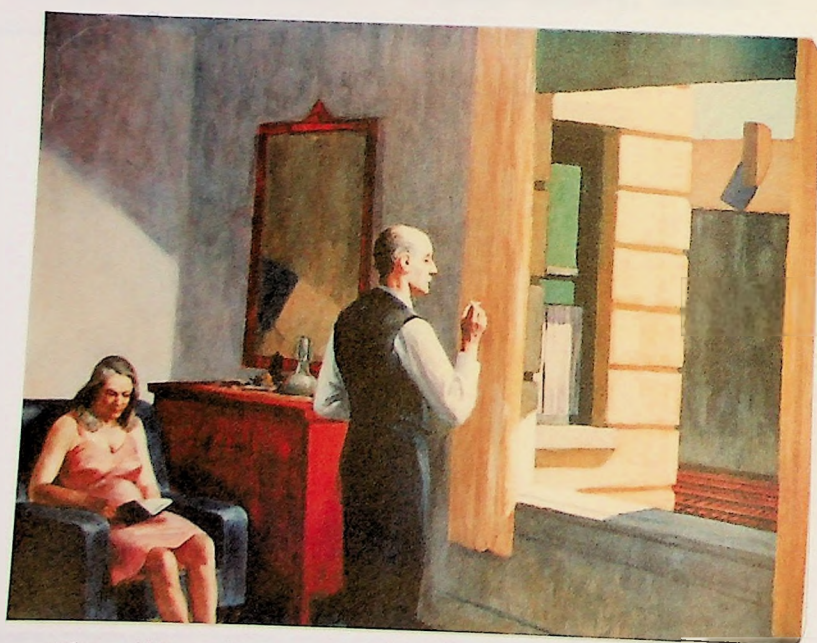


Fig. 40 Hopper Hotel by a Railroad
1952



Fig. 41 Hopper Office at Night 1940



Fig. 42 Hopper Summer in the City 1949

being peeping toms, staring in through windows from unlikely perspectives. (New York Office 1962 (Fig. 36) Room in New York 1932 (Fig. 37), Night Windows 1928 (Fig. 38), Office in a Small City 1953 (Fig. 39). And whether private rooms or more public offices, the lack of acknowledgement of our staring eyes with the cold emptiness of the interior spaces makes our visual penetration an invasion. The awkward tension in the paintings of couples within isolated, enclosed, but impersonal rooms is not lessened for they're not being alone (so that one is no longer peering into personal privacy) but increased by now becoming witness to the dissatisfaction of lost intimacy, an embarrassment that would normally be hidden from the public's eye. In Hotel by a Railroad 1952 (Fig. 40) rather than the hotel as a scene of anonymous intimacy encouraging a reawakened affection between the elderly couple, the gloomily dark room and dingy light emphasises the ennui and dissatisfaction that separates this couple. Although casually, informally dressed in only a slip, she sits stiffly, pretending to be absorbed in a book, but looking beyond and lost in unpleasant thoughts. Her companion, turning his back to her, faces the window but again, not for the view for he too is lost in his own thoughts, physically defying any communication. Their loneliness and dissatisfaction is not alleviated but rather exaggerated by being within each other's company. The title of this painting, and in fact all of Hopper's titles, give no elucidation as to the circumstances or relationship of this couple. Hence, like Fischl, he has set the scene, one not meant (by the protagonists) to be seen by any "public", plonking the viewer uncomfortably within the middle yet intrigued by the narrative possibilities. In Office at Night 1940 (Fig. 41), there is the same sense of intimacy lost, the couple's seclusion in the romantic dead of night intensifying their lack of communication. As with Hotel by a Railroad, one is

well aware of the woman's sexuality, here not by her lack of clothes but by the twisted pose and tight dress which emphasises her breasts and hips. As in the other painting, although supposedly engaged in her work, she has turned aside and towards the man. He, meanwhile, remains totally contained, self-absorbed, and tightly held within the structures of his employment, the desk and chair. The office, like the hotel room, is a space which is neither private or public and both private and public: rooms which are impersonal, outside the control of the occupants and yet occupied (rented) for private purposes, whether business or pleasure. In Room in New York 1932 (Fig. 37) the couple are again removed, though alone, physically separated by their very domesticity, the table and imposing door. And although the couple appear very presentable, the edges of window and external pillar of the building quite clearly points to one's view as that of a peeping tom. Summer in the City 1949 (Fig. 42) shows the same disconsolation as Hotel by a Railroad, only the younger age of the couple, the depressing starkness of the room and their physical proximity, makes their mutual lack of communication and warmth, even more dismal. With all these paintings the viewer becomes privileged to a knowledge of the private anxieties, and the failure of physical intimacy to produce psychological well being.

"Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world."²

Hopper has not only expressed his own feelings of seclusion, but by creating a variety of situations in the most private of spaces, he has projected the anxieties and alienation of the loner onto the inner life of an entire society. And although his work is autobiographically based there is no sense of confession or confrontation, for the sense of emotive separation is heightened by an obliviousness of the painting's

subjects to being observed, and an air of detached curiosity toward these scenes of depressing personal abandonment. The viewer as peeping tom, the intense peering of the passing stranger, seeks to ally his/her own loneliness and unease by intruding into the private fears of strangers.

There is a level of voyeurism implicit in all narration, an entertainment gained through an indirect experience of others' foibles and disillusionments. But when the paintings create an atmosphere of such uncomfortable intimacy, the invasion of that privacy by the artist, and consequently the viewer, becomes an issue.

Donald Kispit, American critic and enthusiastic proponent of New Image painting, argues that perception, in especial the searching, probing perception of the artist by its very definition, is voyeuristic. By creating paintings which invade private illusions, visualizing human vulnerability and psychic nakedness, and exposing it to the unsympathetic eye of the unknown viewer, the artist simultaneously isolates the painting's protagonists as "other", open to perusal, and creates a narcissistic extension of the artist's (and, hence, his society's) own anxieties. The voyeurism is, therefore, not purely visual titillation, a Walter Mitty-ish libidinal fantasy, but an examination of the artist's own preoccupations.

Fischl, when confronted with his own brand of voyeurism, doesn't deny or shy away from the accusation.

"I'm not afraid of the label 'voyeurism'. The thing I like about France is that the French are incredibly voyeuristic in the sense that they look, they stare, and they are very unselfconscious about staring. They simply watch. It's inevitable."



Fig. 43 Fischl Bad Boy 1981



Fig. 44 Fischl Pizza Eater 1982



Fig. 45 Rembrandt Susannah and the Elders 1647

Back to the French and the Degasian keyhole. Like Hopper, Fischl's environments are simple, anonymous rooms, with diagonally thrust walls and furniture that expand the rooms to dynamic proportions and firmly place the viewer within the dramatic context. In Bad Boy 1981 (Fig. 43) the older woman (mother?) is anxiously asleep on the bed, with her legs spread, which gives full view of her vagina to the staring boy facing her. He has stealthily invaded her purse, creating a simultaneity and parallel between the watching and stealing, a visual and literal violation of her vagine/purse. Even the strategic placement of a bowl of fruit attests to the passive sexual inferences without depicting any actual physical intimacy. The dramatic gloominess and harsh light are Hopperesque, but here the Freudian allusions create a far from understated merger of repression and desire. In Pizza Eater 1982 (Fig.44) the adult characters are two men, most likely sailors, from the ship on the horizon, leering at a nude pubescent girl. She, again, is oblivious to being watched as she carefully walks toward us, clutching a phallic bottle of coke and triangular slice of pizza. Again the food-sex allusions, and a double set of voyeurism with the viewer watching the men watching the girl. It recalls the classic theme of Susannah and the Elders (Fig. 45) where the painting directly confronts the position of the viewer as a visual invader (another of the voyeuristic elders).

With Dog Days 1983 (Fig. 46) the watchers become two young dogs who stare eagerly up at a naked woman, walking toward us from a balcony. The setting is again both private and public, being within the private domain of home/hotel and yet outdoors within public view. The sleekness and colour of the pair of dogs is echoed in the right hand panel by a young boy and girl - she naked, he partially dressed and

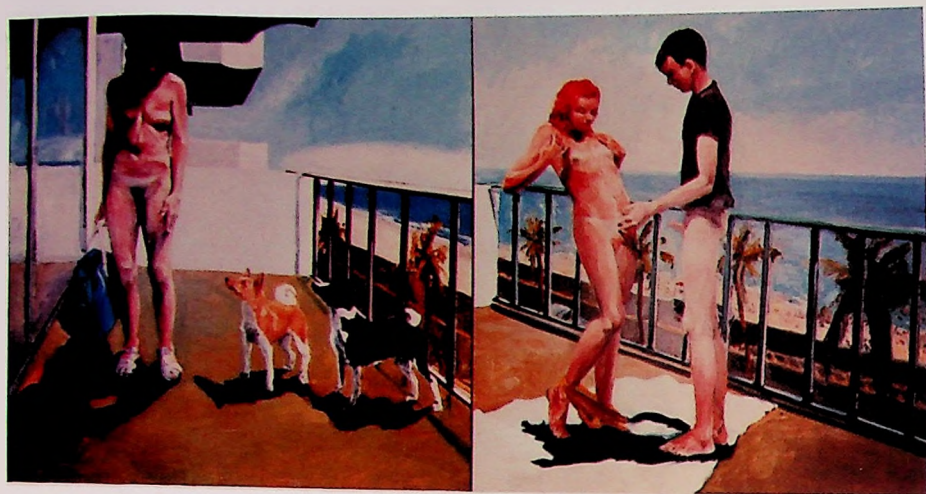


Fig. 46 Fischl Dog Days 1983



Fig. 47 Fischl Noon Watch 1983

aroused. Here she offers herself to his cautious touch, but they make no eye contact nor imply things will go much further. The physical proximity and availability only emphasize the unimpassioned curiosity and emotional uninvolvedness.

Fischl as well as Hopper locates his scenarios in privately occupied rooms, stretching out to include the viewer within it, but the hotels, and apartment and office windows of Hopper's cities, have been transferred to the balconies, patios and pools, and yet are still located within private territory, but exposed to public scrutiny, so that the private is public. Fischl's bright sunshine and proximity of large bodies of water gives a superficial reason for the ubiquitous nudity. On the beach, in Noon Watch 1983 (Fig. 47) public property is turned into a private space by the territory claimed by the blue blankets, and the dark glasses and hat, which obscure and shut off the features and allow a surreptitious watching. Each person maintains their separation to mask their exposure, and vulnerability and simultaneously invades the "others" passively through watching. And again the viewer who watches them watching each other and yet uninvolved becomes another of the exposed bathers. In the midst of their leisure, the comfort and pleasure which is meant to be its purpose, is undermined by the indifference, self-absorption and surreptitious watching. This pleasure seeking is too transparent to mask the dissatisfaction, ennui and alienation of suburban lives where nothing is naughty or mysterious or unexpected.

Sisters 1984 (Fig. 48), again with reference to Degas' bathers, invades the bathroom to stare at the most intimate of activities. The open window is reminiscent of Hopper's city windows but without the dramatic

Fig. 48 Fischl
Sisters 1984



Fig. 49 Fischl
Father and Son
Sleeping 1980





Fig. 50 Fischl Daddy's Girl 1984



Fig. 51 Fischl Birthday Boy 1983

light. The invader is, once again, the viewer looking frankly up at the women who ignore, or more likely, remain too caught up with themselves to notice the interruption. Another situation fraught with possible intimacies but starkly aloof. The familial relationship alluded to in the title is a common theme in Fischl's work, whether blatantly as in Father and Son Sleeping 1980 (Fig. 49), and Daddy's Girl 1984 (Fig. 50), or implied as in Bad Boy 1981 (Fig. 43), Birthday Boy, 1983 (Fig. 51), and Savior Mother, Save Your Lover 1984 (Fig. 52). But what remains consistent with them all is the sense of being privy to the family skeletons, uncovering the boredom, lack of feeling and meaninglessness of even the most tabooed circumstances (the constant references to possible incest), which would normally be the result of the most unbridled of passions. The visual and emotional restraint in the midst of such naked exposure, undermines any understanding, intimacy or desire. The overwhelming atmosphere is the same cold isolation that pervades Hopper's figurative paintings. With the same sensuousness in the simple yet lushly painted figures and richly hued environs, the painter's facility doesn't contradict but only further emphasizes its absence in the lives which it describes. Whether through the harshly delineating light of Hopper or the evenly revealing light of Fischl, the people are self-enclosed, separated from both their environments and their society; too self-absorbed to be conscious of the artists' and hence the viewer's surveillance. They are sensually explicit and yet puritanically untouched; recognizably individuals and yet narcissistic extensions of the artist/viewer. The voyeurism of the invasion of their privacy breaks down the thin boundaries between public awareness and private angst and gives witness to the emotional vacuity behind the American dream.

America, as the land of milk and honey, by emulating industrial and robber barons as the new aristocracy has cultivated a belief in monetary gain as the only worthwhile and valid measurement of success. The rootlessness caused by the depression and the pleasure seeking of the eighties has revealed the emotional emptiness of lives whose morality and happiness are based on the accumulation of wealth. The rags to riches dream, on which American culture is proudly based, has produced a society with no sense of attachment to either place, background or family, and the supposed pleasures of travel and leisure only serve to reveal the vacuity and alienation beneath the American dream.

1. McKinsey, and later disciples Masters and Johnson conducted intensive experiments on human sexual response which helped to open discussion and consequently attitudes to sexuality that previously had never been dealt with or recognised. (1950's).
2. Hopper, Edward. Goodrich, Ibid p. 153.
3. Fischl, Eric. Nairne, Sandy. Ibid p. 145.

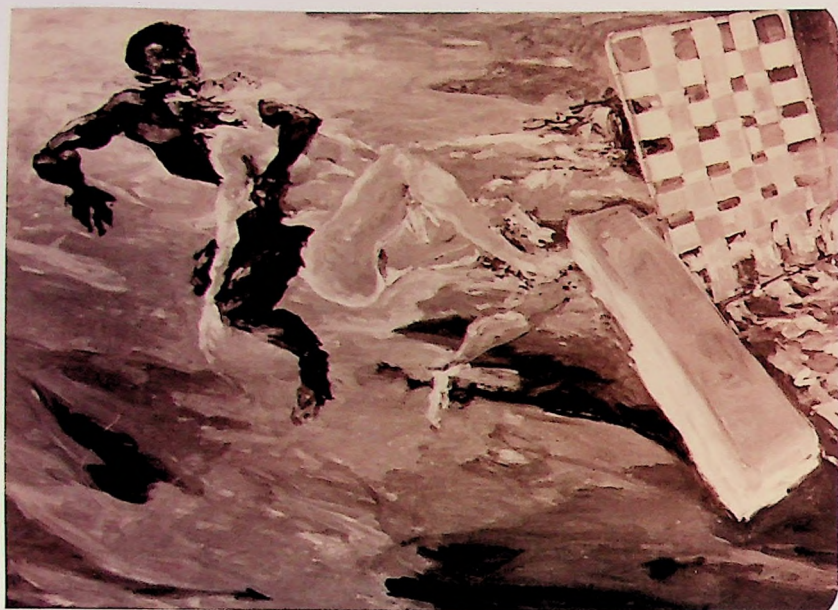


Fig. 52 Fischl savior Mother, Save Your
LOVER 1984



Fig. 53 Fischl Grief 1981



Fig. 54 Year of the Drowned Dog 1983
Fischl

Conclusion

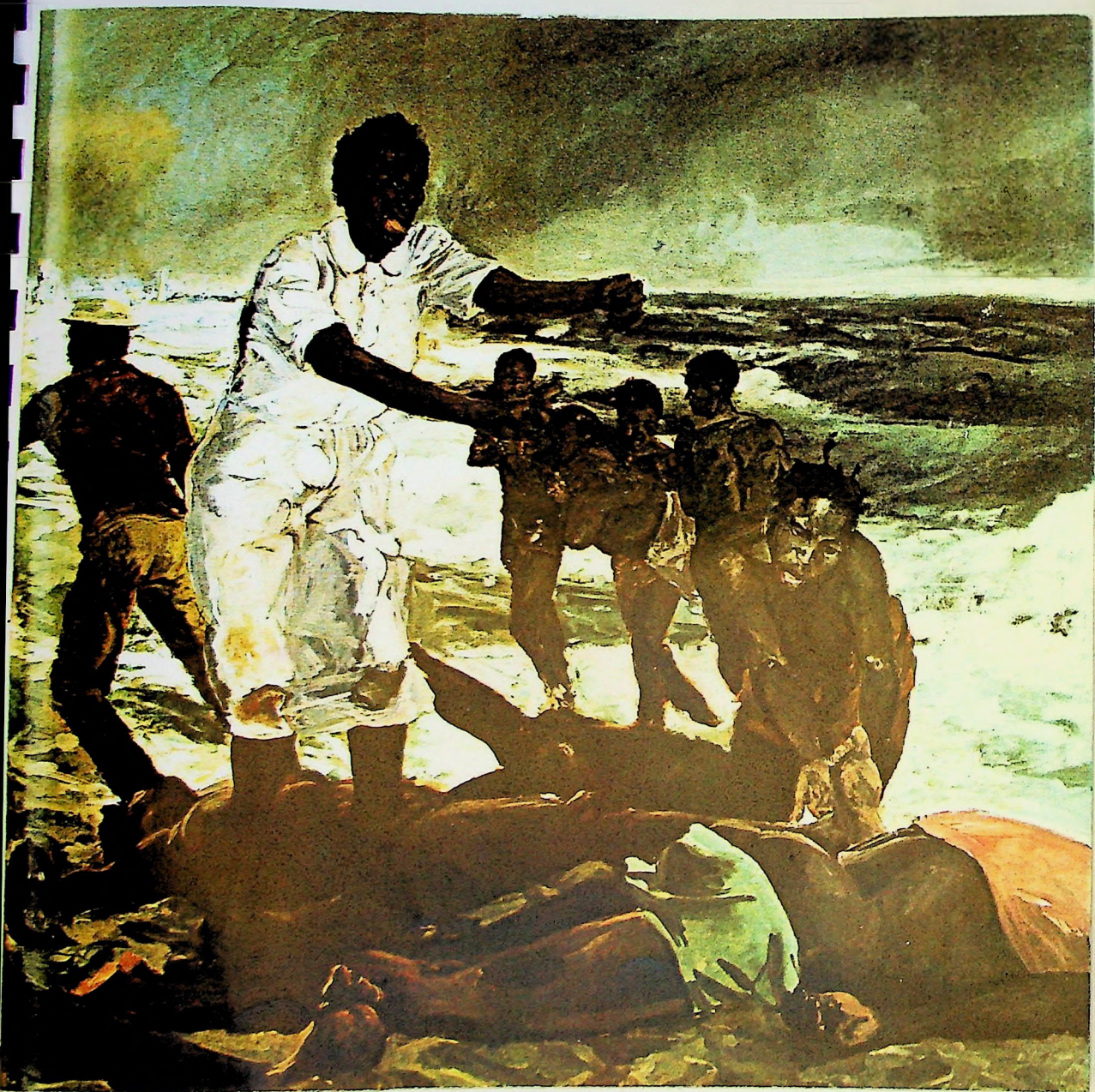
Fischl clearly states his artistic intentions as being an imaging of:

"The feelings of awkwardness and self-consciousness that one experiences in the face of profound emotional events in one's life. These experiences, such as death or loss or sexuality cannot be supported by a lifestyle that has sought so ardously to deny their meaningfulness, and a culture whose fabric is so worn out that its public rituals and attendant symbols do not make for adequate clothing ... Each new event is a crisis, and each crisis ... fills us with much the same anxiety we feel when, in a dream we discover ourselves naked in public".

With the adolescent viewpoint and narcissism inherent in the psychological/physical state of the generational outsider (neither child nor adult; neither sexually innocent nor sexually assured), Fischl confronts the loneliness and alienation of the "me generation", a society caught up in its narcissistic fears of worthlessness, helplessness and moral uncertainty. As well as the sexual anxieties of puberty, he questions the lack of community, suppositions and morality of the comfortable white middle class. By situating his protagonists within private, privileged centres of leisure, he points to the meaninglessness and emotional anxiety of so much pleasure seeking. The presence of large bodies of water, whether pools, beaches or the sea gives reason to the prevalence of nudity and inactivity, and hence vulnerability, which is simultaneously a source of possible menace. The allusive undercurrent of sexual complicity in Hopper is replaced by the mysteries of death in Fischl. While Grief 1981 (Fig. 53), Year of the Drowned Dog 1983 (Fig. 54) and Savior Mother, Save your Lover 1982 (Fig. 52) deal with aquatic trauma directly, it is the paintings of threatening menace that are the most anxious and disturbing. In The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog 1982 (Fig. 55) the reclining, naked of course, men, women and young boy remain oblivious to the growing storm behind. Although in close proximity, there is no communication between them, except between the woman on the left and the dog. She is less exposed, more closely guarded in her pose and



Fig. 56 A Visit to and A Visit From the



Islands

1983

Fischl

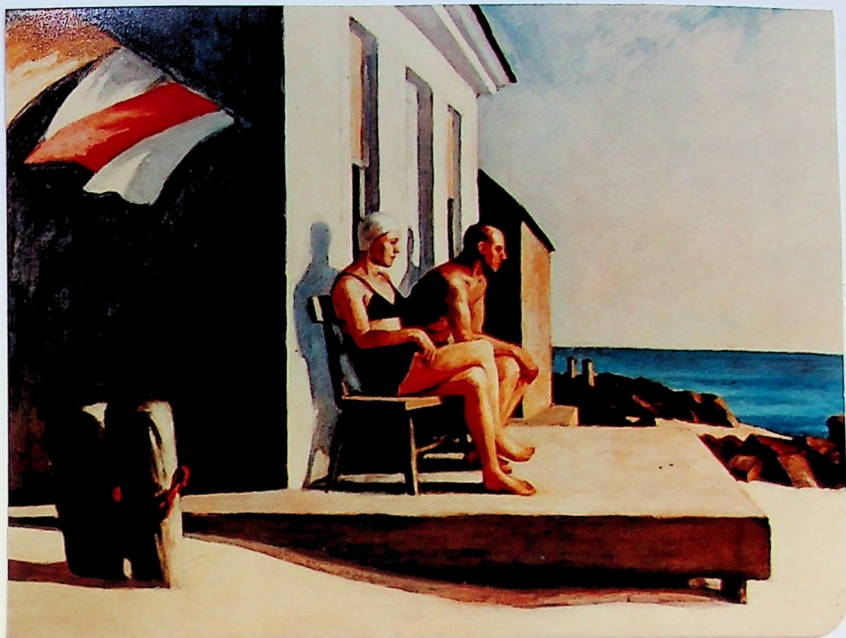


Fig. 57 Hopper Seawatchers 1952



Fig. 58 Hopper Cape Cod Morning 1950

bright orange life jacket, which sets her apart from the blue blanket around which the others are gathered. But the dog, who initially appears to be the playful pet, on closer inspection looks menacingly predatory. The participants in seeking mind numbing leisure, remain introspectively isolated, cool, detached, even with the tension of potential disaster on the horizon. And with the confrontational scale and proximity, one is precariously enclosed within an awkward familiarity that offers no comfort. As with the dog, the outing, while outwardly pleasurable, is threatened by the predatory and uncontrollable menace of nature (gloomy skies and rough seas) blithely ignored. The participants oblivion to the weather and each other increases the precariousness of their position, and the meaninglessness of such avoidable catastrophe. The painting becomes an allegory for the unpredictable and uncontrollable menace of nature, mindlessly tampered with and its unpredictable power ignored, in the pursuit of meaningless pleasure, and the tragedy of society's alienation from itself and its environs.

In A Visit to and from the Islands 1984 (Fig. 56), the left panel again relates the sea as pleasurable commodity; the discarded pleasure craft visually separate, the tourists who ignore each other as well as their environment. Fischl comes as close to political statement as he is to make in any of his paintings, by placing the disaster scene on the right, so that one is witness not to potential but actual danger. The significance of the disaster as happening to blacks, the actual residents of the islands, intensifies the alienation and separation of the white, middle-class "vacationers". Oblivious to, and believed protected and outside of their own potential danger, they are totally removed and uninvolved in any hardship or trauma suffered by fellow human beings, who are so closely outside, "other", because of their different colour and culture to be used for their own pleasure but with no responsibility. The emptiness of the concept of such a holiday paradise, removed and consciously ignorant from the physical reality seen in the right hand panel, gives lie to the ultimate American goal of the pursuit of happiness/pleasure.

The increased alienation created by the seeking of pleasure, the sensuousness associated with leisure activity undermined by its repressive boredom and banality arises in Hopper's Cape Cod paintings. In Sea Watchers 1952 (Fig. 57), Cape Cod Morning 1950 (Fig. 58), High

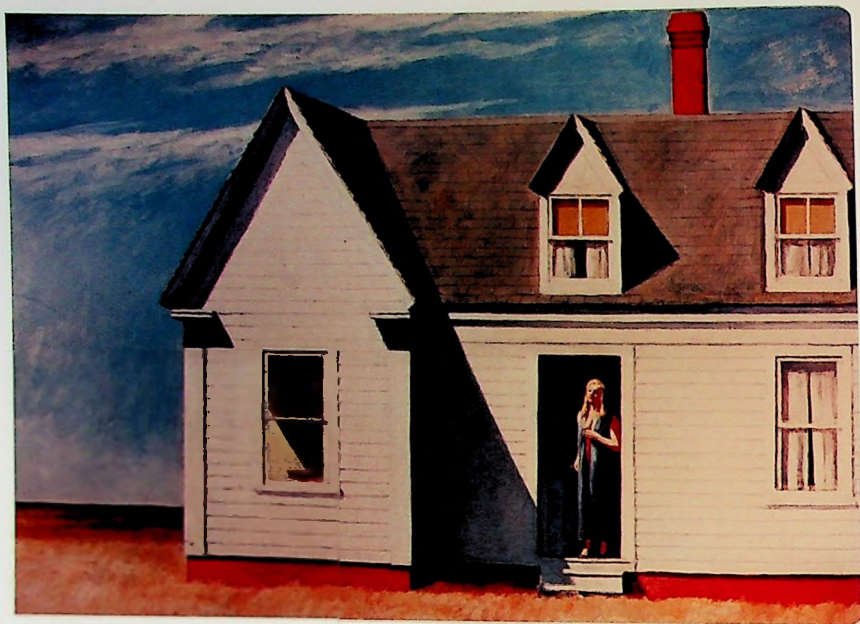


Fig. 59 Hopper High Noon 1949



Fig. 60 Second Story Sunlight 1960



Fig. 61 Hopper Rooms by the Sea 1951

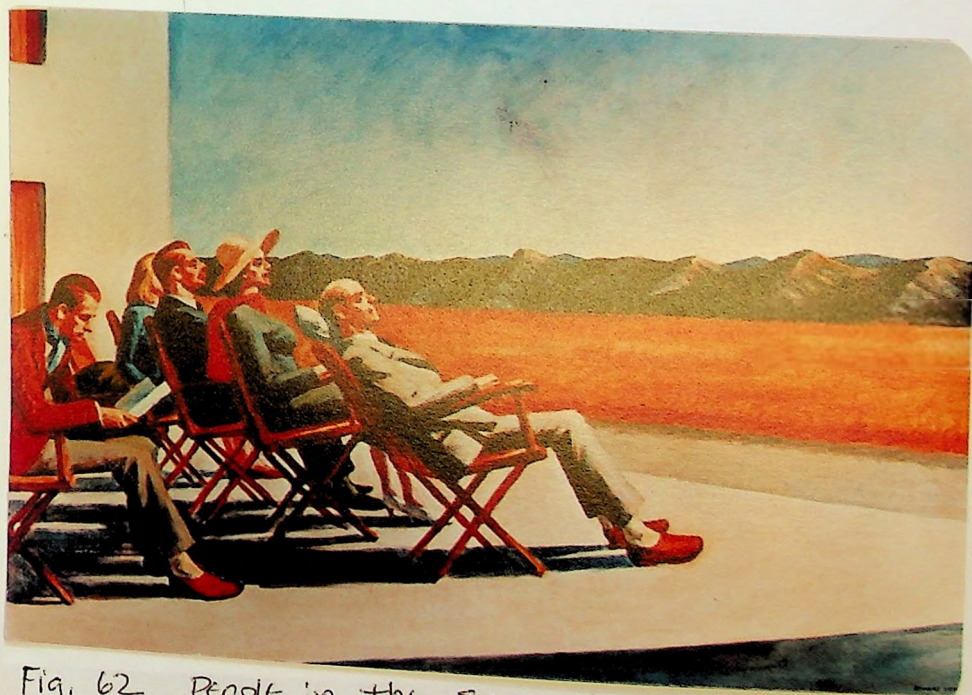


Fig. 62 People in the Sun Hopper 1960

Noon 1949 (Fig. 59), and Second Story Sunlight 1969 (Fig. 60) whether standing protectively inside or just outside the building, the people inevitably move toward the sea or light. While leaning toward adventure, seeking the unknown and unpredictable, they remain firmly within, restrained by the familiarity of "home". And the buildings, as with the hotels, have the same cold austerity of anonymity, institutions and imposed boundaries rather than warm protection. Even in Rooms by the Sea 1951 (Fig. 61), where the intense shaft of light becomes the only occupant, the sea, just outside the door, undermines the building's stability by surrealistically disturbing what is initially a pleasant interior. In People in the Sun 1960 (Fig. 62), as with Fischl, there is a group of middle class whites basking in the sun, assumedly for pleasure, yet in the middle of nowhere, in military precision, facing the same direction... Yet there is nothing pleasurable or relaxed about their tense bodies, with their carefully dressed self-composure exaggerating their mutual alienation.

Both Hopper and Fischl create paintings of seductive legibility. The clarity of their imagery and intensely hued paint encourages a trusting acceptance by the viewer only to find oneself confused by the enigmatic narrative. With both artists, careful imaginative construction and purposeful placement of both figures and objects, breaks through the natural inclusiveness and acceptance of what is there, in "realist" paintings. They construct purposefully artificial environments to heighten the emotional impact while remaining visually logical. Their stylistically straightforward rendering and emphasis on accurate draughtsmanship could easily lend itself to painterly didacticism. But they avoid overstatement through the suspension and lack of resolution of the narrative elements within their scenes. Consequently, the paintings open themselves to a variety of potent narrative possibilities and contain the same dichotomy of clarity and enigma as stills from a film. In fact, Hopper has so come to represent the "image" of the American of the forties that recent films of the same time period have reconstructed the landscape so that the films photography recreates the colour and look of an Edward Hopper painting. The remake of the Postman Always Rings Twice (a reworking of a film originally made in the 20's) directly stole the construction of two scenes from Gas 1940 (Fig. 63) and Four Lane Road 1956 (Fig. 64). Not only were the views directed so as to linger and encourage the



Fig. 63 Hopper Gas 1940



Fig. 64 Hopper Four Lane Road 1956

the visual analogies but the colour of the film was adjusted to create the unnatural intensity and separation that gives Hopper's work such poignancy. Even when the cinematic analogies are not so self-consciously constructed, as with the film noir production of Hopper's own time, there is the same compositional austerity, harsh light and accompanying strong shadow, and narrative dramatized through understatement. Hopper is bounded by the static confines of painting's parameters (as opposed to the sequential narration in films) and yet freed by the limitless possibilities in the marriage of observation and imagination. (Whereas film is restricted by its photographic limitations, i.e. one must construct or discover physical actualities in order to create the photography). He sought "to envisage a wider field than the mere limits of the picture surround".² Even with the modesty of his scale, his paintings have a penetrating particularness which manages to capture the look and feelings of an entire era.

Fischl's paintings, as well, are cinematic in their scope and visual construction.

"I was exposed to T.V. and movies long before I was to paintings. When I was exposed to art, modern art had left 'narrative' behind, and became more formalistic. I was very attracted to T.V. and film because they had taken that role over. I tried to make paintings in that vein. A photograph gives you that frozen moment but its such a thin slice" (my emphasis)

The sheer monumentality of Fischl's canvases relates them to the cinematic screen, but the insistent domesticity and anxiety underlying the most common of circumstances, creates a tension of potential drama very closely allied to soap opera. With the same flashy appearance (the opulence of the homes and wardrobes or in the paintings, lack of wardrobe) and sensational references (unsociable sexual complicity which is never actually shown but constantly referred to) both Fischl and soap opera address the emotional traumas and uncertainties within the most banal of existences.

This "building to a frozen moment" or "envisaging a wider field" is a

search for transcendence, painting which addresses the everydayness of American reality and seeks for a meaningfulness ignored by modern, technological, formalistic art production. By concentrating on transitional states, both physical and psychological, with no apparent history or future, in settings evocative, yet unspecific, with characters recognizably individuals yet archetypally situated, Hopper and Fischl construct an imaginative, heightened realism which addresses the "American" personality: the cultural restlessness, and lack of tradition and its attendant emotional sense of abandonment, helplessness, and alienation. Both embrace a solipsistic examination into the most private and personal of misgivings and anxieties in order to reveal and perceive their inherent cultural values. The paintings are then both autobiographical in their explorations of their own anxieties of boredom, alienation, and meaninglessness, and yet presented with the cold, unemotional objectivity of the outsider. By addressing the voyeurism of such intense examination, the artists have associated their own concerns and omnipresent alienation with that of the viewer, making their public as involved in their fictional realities as they are themselves. By avoiding melodramatic expressionistic stylization, the embarrassing intimacy and exposure of the protagonists are not so personally particular as to be easily dismissed as entertaining "other". Rather they complicit us with their voyeuristic narcissism. And the exposure is not solely of themselves but of a particularly American psychic nakedness.

Due to a lack of an homogeneous cultural tradition, Americans have been consistently fascinated by what it means to be American. Hence, it is a society which continually examines and then re-examines its own features. This is not only evident in the blatant commercial fabrication and promotion of "Americana" (such as the hot dog, mother

and apple pie, anything with the colour combination of red, white and blue, etc.). The subtle pressure for a conformity that will confirm the "melting pot" theory, and the fascination with psychoanalysis: a constant questioning and examination of the motivations, desires, and needs of the individual. The enormity and mobility of an historically displaced (immigrant) people has created a demand for instantaneous acceptance and love, and total severance of any past. It has become a nation of people unique in so desperately and openly discussing themselves, while simultaneously protecting their individuality by remaining cool, detached, and ultimately, inexorably alone. It is this inherent contradiction which Fischl and Hopper have imaged, clothed in the visual fashion of their respective eras, creating paintings which reflect and pursue what it means to be naked in public.

1. Fischl, Eric. Kuspit, Donald B. "voyeurism in American Society: Eric Fischl's Vision of the Perverse" Eric Fischl catalogue p. 16.
2. Hopper, Edward. Goodrich Ibid p. 150.
3. Fischl, Eric. Nairne, Sandy. Ibid p. 146.

G L O S S A R Y

1. Modernism - since the 1860's and with the new term "avant-garde" first used by critic St. Simeon around the same time, the development of artistic styles leading from impressionism to post-impressionism, cubism, symbolism, constructivism, futurism, to a variety of forms of abstraction is seen in a logical progression which has been referred to as modernism. All these styles have in common a concern for formal aesthetic developments (such as the emotive, spiritual properties of colour, the importance of the autobiographical, gestural properties of the brush mark, the reality of the flat surface) that concentrate on individuality and innovation and the "new" and away from social relevance, figuration, and regional cultural influences.
2. Regionalism - a small school of American painters popular in the 1930's - 40's, located in the midwest, extolling the virtues of rural, midwestern communities. These artists were somewhat influenced by the fanatical patriotism of critic Thomas Craven, and in direct opposition to Paris-orientated modernism, involved in populist, socialist politics. (Thomas Hart-Benton, John Curry).
3. Social Realism - movement in American painting associated with the 1930's Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.). Influenced by the Mexican muralists (Sequeiros, Riviera) this work reflected such depression oriented problems as labour management, law makers and breakers, poverty and unemployment. (Jack Levine, Philip Evergood, William Gropper).

4. Subjective Expressionism - painting of the 1940's and 50's which was not based so much on the early 20th c. German expressionists, but in reaction to the New York based abstract expressionists of the 1940's - 50's. Still holding on to the high emotionalism and dynamism, and importance of autobiographically-based rendering of intense emotional states that marked their abstract cohorts, these artists (Leonard Baskin, early Leon Golub) used the same wild, free brush, but held within recognizable figurative imagery.

5. Transavantgarde - a term coined in Italy to categorize current art practice (particularly painting) starting up in the 1970's which, in reaction against modernism, was based on reappropriation of art historical styles and recognizable figuration within narrative contexts. (Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Sandro Chia).

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