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Book Review: Bad Boy: My Life on and Off the Canvas, Eric Fischl and Michael Stone

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BAD BOY: MY LIFE ON AND OFF THE CANVAS, ERIC FISCHL AND MICHAEL STONE

New York: Crown Publishers (2012), 357 pp., Hardcover, ISBN: 978-0-7704-3557-8, \$31.00

Reviewed by Charles Reeve, OCAD University

Shortly into *Bad Boy*, Eric Fischl laments, 'What should have been the most memorable night of my professional life had already become a black hole' (1). Partly he means that he cannot recall – too loaded – if that alcohol-and-anger-fuelled night marked his Whitney retrospective's preview, or its opening. But he also means that despair besieged what should have been his early career's acme. The crisis stemmed from Fischl being caught in the art world's 1980s embrace of consumerism, a milieu in which dealers and collectors, having displaced critics and curators, 'organized eventlike exhibitions, bid up hand-picked artists at auction, and turned the once-discreet marketing of art into spectacle' (191).

Of course, people had bought and sold art for centuries. But art's newly speculative status changed the artist's role. Contemporary painters ignored at their peril the new pressure to brand themselves. However, Fischl says, '[T]hose who recognized the new trends – painters who conformed to the romantic vision of the traditional studio artist, dealers like Mary Boone who possessed the verve and resources to orchestrate

block-buster exhibits and red-carpet events – reaped rewards beyond what anyone had thought possible a few years before’ (191).

And there lies the rub: Boone was (and remains) Fischl’s dealer. As a beneficiary of the disproportionate payback he bemoans, he cannot help but query his success. Art, Fischl writes, ‘crossed an invisible divide between culture and commerce’ (192).

Suddenly he is having a retrospective at the Whitney at the age of 38, followed by Julian Schnabel (aged 36), who simultaneously published his memoirs with the zeitgeist-capturing title *CVJ: Nicknames of Maitre D’s & Other Excerpts From Life* (1987).

But Fischl also reached beyond Manhattan’s cliques, as when he co-wrote with art critic Jerry Saltz a volume called *Sketchbook with Voices* (2011) about the artistic process. So *Bad Boy* is not Fischl’s first book for that broader public, and his attachment to that context informs his autobiography: many of the chapters end with other people telling stories that typify their relations with Fischl (similar to Bertrand Russell’s use of letters in his 1969 autobiography, though those in Fischl’s book were purpose-written). Interestingly, these perspectives often unsettle Fischl’s tidy narrative (characteristic for autobiographies): after Fischl describes *Sleepwalker* (1979) – a famous early psychosexual image – as unmistakably depicting a boy masturbating (118), Bryan Hunt says that the boy’s peeing (148); the book plays up Fischl and Schnabel’s enmity but, surprisingly, Schnabel comes off as the more gracious (146, 166).

In terms of this book’s self-dismantling, though, its omissions matter as much as what it includes. One key aporia concerns Fischl’s disappointment regarding two post-9/11 projects, starting with his Rockefeller Center memorial, *Tumbling Woman* (2002). Believing the United States incapable of mourning, and convinced of art’s healing

power, Fischl decided that his 'life as an emotional warrior had come to this moment' (316). Instead, outcry got the piece removed, and Fischl concluded that America's relationship to its artists needed fixing. So he set out to develop and curate *America: Now and Here* (2012), a 'traveling arts fair', to 'spark a national conversation through art about the fears and longings [he] felt were dividing America' (333). But fundraising proved intractable. 'I felt more than ever like an outsider,' he says, 'and in a world where I know April [Gornik, his wife] and I are already regarded as consummate insiders' (336). The resources Fischl expended recruiting artists and administrators underscore why this collapse hurt. But Fischl is also right that his complaint of feeling like an outsider is odd, given his substantial role in creating an art world that turns on insider relations.

Odder still is the impression Fischl creates that this idea went nowhere. While it was not the two-year extravaganza Fischl hoped, its Kansas City launch did well and generated spin-offs in Chicago and Aspen, a collaborative poem called *Crossing State Lines* (Muske-Dukes and Holman, 2011), a Barbara Kruger-decorated semi-trailer, and the book *America: Now and Here* (2012) edited by Fischl.¹ Granted, failures make neater stories than ventures that limp along before petering out. But the latter have things to say, and *America: Now and Here's* inability to gain traction evinces the fuzziness of Fischl's vision. For instance, while he wants to avoid condescending, that is Alice Thorson's (2011) one criticism in her extensive *Kansas City Star* coverage. In other words, Fischl misunderstands the conversation that he wants to change, a shortcoming that also underpins his book's other major gap: near the end, having lamented the hype and speculative collecting that inundated his cohort, he blasts later

artists, especially Jeff Koons, for participating in the aftermath. Characterizing Koons as 'shockingly insincere', Fischl argues that Koons's 'meticulously cultivated boyish enthusiasm and wide-eyed wonder is more reminiscent of Eddie Haskell than Beaver Cleaver' (282).

Less shocking than Koons's insincerity, however, is Fischl's failure to admit that these same criticisms confronted his generation.² Like his reticence around the fitful successes of *America: Now and Here*, Fischl's silence regarding this paradox likely stems from his not knowing how to address it rather than not seeing it.

The difficulty springs from Fischl's belief in Romanticism. Like the autobiographies of artists historical (Benvenuto Cellini, 1956; Paul Gauguin, 1985 and 1987; Marie Bashkirtseff, 2013) and contemporary (Yayoi Kusama, 2011; Patti Smith, 2010; Tracy Emin, 2005), *Bad Boy* proposes that art tells things that would otherwise be ignored. Art is exceptional. But sustaining this idea was difficult at postmodernism's height, when who you knew interested the cultural elite more than what you did. This transformation was clearest in intoxicated, intoxicating downtown Manhattan, centred around dealers like Boone and artists like Schnabel, Fischl, David Salle and Jean-Michel Basquiat. And what upsets Fischl the most about it (hence his comment, quoted above, about the saleability of 'conforming' to romanticism) is that the hottest ticket was art cynically calibrated to look Romantic to the untrained eye – thus turning sincerity, authenticity and integrity inside-out.

The consequent conflict has bothered Fischl for decades, so it is as predictable a topic for his pictures as for his book. One key painting in this respect, prompted by a story about Fischl in *Vanity Fair*, is *Vanity* (1984), which Fischl says spoofs his 'prurient

worship at the maidenhead of celebrity' while trying 'to understand success in relation to my work' (198). Highlighting this ambivalence, its composition features a naked woman seated on grass, a hand-held mirror hiding her face. A magazine, open to a photo of Fischl, lies between her legs. Staring into the woman's crotch, Fischl becomes the protagonist in one of his trademark psychosexual dramas – the best known of which were the above-noted *Sleepwalker* and the smouldering painting *Bad Boy* (1981), which gives his autobiography its name. It depicts an adolescent boy, facing away, stealing a purse while its owner lounges on a bed, flaunting her nakedness at the young thief crotch-first; claustrophobic space pushes us into the Peyton Place-like drama. And drama it is, given its direction. That the woman enticed the boy with her open purse won't matter when her husband enters (which he will; it is daylight) and anger – hers feigned, her husband's real – fills the room. Less than describing the kid, the painting's title anticipates how he will be labelled, though he is hardly to blame.

Since this work helped launch Fischl in the 1980s alongside other so-called neo-Expressionists like Salle and Schnabel, its prominence in his autobiography makes sense (Fischl calls it his 'most famous and notorious painting', 152). But naming the book after the painting suggests more: this autobiography discusses *Bad Boy* and *Sleepwalker* more than any of Fischl's other works, wondering why they 'lassoed people's attention' (155). As Fischl says, 'I'd already mined that territory in my previous work, and many of my peers at the time employed a similar strategy, charging their canvases with a kind of prurient energy' (155). Grasp why these images stood out from similar contemporaneous works, and you have deciphered the relationship that

prevailed between artist and audience in the 1980s, with its market speculation, feverish socializing and dealer influence.

Bad Boy – book or painting – cannot resolve these issues. The book revolves around a crisis of faith – Fischl’s ambition dampened by despair that any success will be the wrong kind – deep enough to last a lifetime. And the painting, along with depicting the darkness that Fischl believes curses every family, allegorizes this anxiety, which still typifies Fischl’s relations with the art world. Like the kid in his picture, Fischl is not a bad boy. He is just having trouble finding peace in what – with its cynicism, crassness and insincerity – strikes him as a bad boy’s world.

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¹ See Lyon (2011) and Thorson (2011) on Kansas City, *Chicago Art Magazine* (2011) on Chicago, Oksenhorn (2011) on Aspen, and Kruger (2012) on her trailer.

² Benjamin Buchloh (1981, 1982) and Robert Hughes (1985) were among the most vociferous critics in this regard.