

Thomas West

# Figure Painting in an Ambivalent Decade

In his book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, the French art historian Serge Guilbaut added a new chapter to the history of the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s by showing how the rise of American art was linked to the rise of American political and economic influence during and after World War Two.<sup>(1)</sup> The promotion of the New York School, in his account, reflected the disillusionment of many critics and artists with left-wing causes in the wake of Stalinism. Part of a vision of the free individual, of a dynamic and innovative society, the new painting seemed to mirror a life style and an aesthetic which Europe, in a time of apocalypse, was incapable of challenging. As art is intimately linked to a market dependent on rich people and institutions, the rise of a school tends to follow closely the rise of a locality or a nation. For this reason the entry of American painting into world history is directly related to America's rise to economic and political pre-eminence and to Europe's decline. The hero of this transfer of power and prestige was the individual, his preferred system of government was American democracy and his Mecca was New York. The question has been asked, sometimes indignantly, if Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko really painted so much better than Nicholas de Staël or other leading Europeans. Whatever the answer, one has to note that the focus of History was moving from the Left Bank to Manhattan, from the citadel of good taste to the capital of energy and know-how, and that perceptions of modern art and of the avant-garde were changing apace.

This outline of recent art history puts America in a commanding position from the 1940s, from the time, in fact, that European models became secondary in the work of De Kooning (who had painted like Picasso in the 1930s), Arshile Gorky (who admired Kandinsky), Jackson Pollock (who was close to Masson and Surrealism) and Mark Rothko (a figurative painter in the thirties). This perceived pre-eminence continued in an unbroken chain through the sixties and seventies, through Pop art, Minimalism and Conceptual art. Europe seemed to trail behind America, as New York

once trailed behind France. New York dictated fashions and accounted for a large percentage of sales.

To look, for instance, at the German art scene in the late fifties and early sixties is to see, with few exceptions, pale imitations of New York and, to a lesser extent, of Paris. As the critic Max Wolfgang Faust told American readers, "After the Second World War... Germany had almost no vanguard art, and turned to one international stream after another for nourishment. France, then the United States and the revival of past phases of the international prewar avant-gardes became the fixed points around which West German art revolved... The art that rapidly re-established itself in West Germany after the war reflected the power structures of resurgent capitalism."<sup>(2)</sup> And however important other national movements became—"Gutai" in Japan, "Nouveau Réalisme" in France, "Fluxus" in Germany, "Arte Povera" in Italy—New York was perceived as being the ultimate arbiter.

## Soul-Searching in New York

About ten years ago this pre-eminence seemed to wane. In 1980, the sudden appearance of a large number of European painters in important New York galleries caused observers to remark that, if not turning back to European models, American art was reflecting concerns the New York avant-garde had traditionally snubbed, such as figuration, (art) historical and national subject matter, "local" and private themes.

The initiative came from two groups of Europeans. The first, a half-dozen Italian painters fêted as the "trans-avant-garde" at the "Open" section of the 1980 Venice Biennale and relatively unknown before this event, were artists whose interests supposedly went beyond the avant-garde principle. "The trans-avant-garde," wrote the movement's progenitor, the critic Achille Bonito Oliva, "operates outside the confines [of a Darwinistic evolution of artistic languages], following a nomadic attitude which advocates the reversibility of all languages of the past. The dematerialization of the work and the

impersonality of execution which characterized the art of the seventies, along strictly Duchampian lines, are being overcome by the re-establishment of manual skill through a pleasure of execution which brings the tradition of painting back into art. The trans-avant-garde overturns the idea of progress in art, which was entirely geared toward conceptual abstraction."<sup>(3)</sup>

The second, a larger and more loosely-defined group of Germans from Berlin and the Rhineland, many of whom had in fact been painting throughout the seventies, viewed personal expression and national subject matter as being just as important as art theory and self-consciousness. Like most German artists of the period, many of whom worked in utterly different styles, these newly-celebrated figurative painters had been galvanized by the chief regenerator of the German art scene, Joseph Beuys.

The European invasion of New York led to a great deal of speculation and even to some soul-searching. "The significance of the 1982 Biennale was really quite staggering," said the gallery owner Mary Boone in response to the sudden development of a trend announced only two years earlier. "After Venice, it was clear that something was going on in Europe," added another gallery director, Holly Solomon.<sup>(4)</sup> With over fifty new European painters appearing in New York galleries in the 1981-82 season, it seemed that art history was in need of revision: "That such painting plays a central role, in both America and Europe, in the formulation of some of today's most pressing aesthetic issues, represents a significant departure from recent art history. For nearly forty years, European artists... have had to take a back seat to their American counterparts."<sup>(5)</sup> The question of nationalism became important, too. It was due, the American writer Jane Bell surmised, to "a resentment at the hegemony that

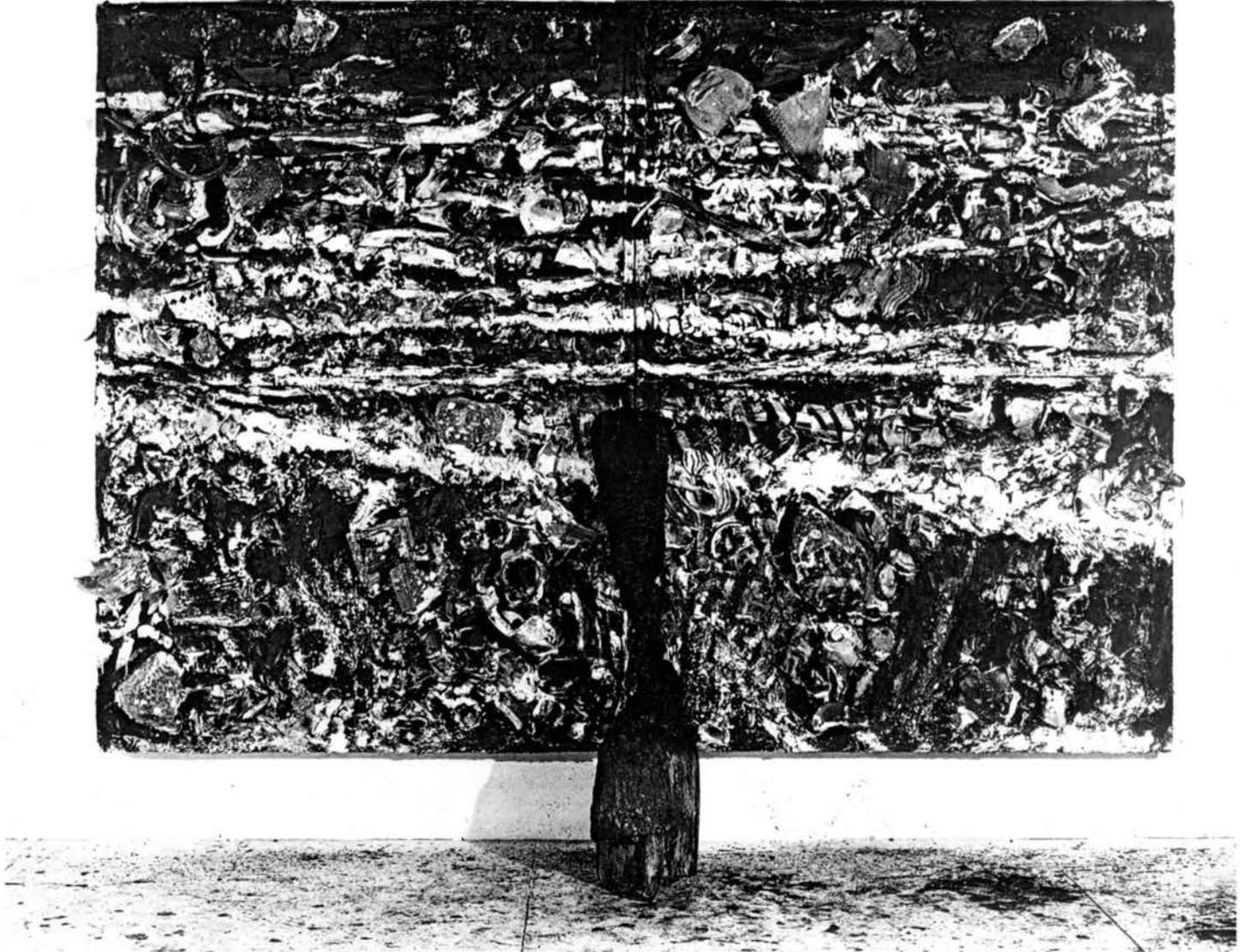
Sandro Chia:  
*If You're Born to be Hanged Then  
 You Will Never be Drowned*, 1988,  
 oil on canvas,  
 73 x 61 in / 183 x 152.5 cm.  
 Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris

Francesco Clemente:  
*Folding Screen*, 1982,  
 73 ¼ x 93 ¼ in / 183 x 233 cm,  
 Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris

Enzo Cucchi:  
*Caccia Mediterranea*, 1979,  
 oil on canvas,  
 40 x 40 in / 100 x 100 cm,  
 Galerie Bischofberger, Zürich



Julian Schnabel:  
*The Sea*, 1981.  
oil and crockery on wood,  
108 × 156 in / 270 × 390 cm.  
Saatchi Collection, London



American art has enjoyed in the European market for the last fifteen years or to the larger threat of 'cultural imperialism' by the United States since the heady days of Abstract Expressionism."<sup>(6)</sup>

Meanwhile, a number of group shows, including *Italian Art Now: An American Perspective* (1982) and *Expressions: New Art from Germany* (1983), toured the USA and confirmed the Europeans' place in American art, even though scepticism remained. Angela Westwater, partner in an important New York gallery, seemed to be pleased that "unlike Conceptual art [most new European work] can be shipped, acquired and installed." A SoHo dealer, who at the time asked not

to be identified, remarked that "the majority of the [new figurative art] being exhibited is really very academic. It's 1950s art that just validates the past. The work is not very challenging, but it's easy to sell." A New York museum curator added, "A lot of it is just a pastiche of past styles. With a few exceptions, we're not seeing particularly searching work." Yet most observers agreed that the new art, if not new in a traditional sense, featured "recognizable... quirky and deliberately regional imagery... It overturns the cool, universal abstractions of Modernist art that looked basically the same whether it originated in Paris, New York or Rome."<sup>(7)</sup>



Robert Longo:  
*Culture, Culture*, 1982-83,  
 mixed media,  
 91 ½ × 147 ¾ in / 228.8 × 369 cm,  
 Metro Pictures, New York

Robert Longo:  
*Pressure*, 1982-83,  
 lacquer on wood, graphite, charcoal and  
 ink on paper,  
 101 ½ × 90 × 37 ¾ in / 253.75 × 225 × 94 cm,  
 Metro Pictures, New York



Though two American figurative painters, Jedd Garet (born 1955) and Susan Rothenberg (born 1945), were presented at the 1980 Venice Biennale that launched the Italians Enzo Cucchi, Roberto Clemente and Sandro Chia (see illustrations on page 23) and created a furore around the “nationalist” work of Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz, the figurative artists most discussed in the eighties have been Julian Schnabel (born 1951), Robert Longo (born 1953), David Salle (born 1952) and Eric Fischl (born 1948).

Julian Schnabel worked in anonymity until an aggressive new gallery owner, Mary Boone, propelled him to stardom between 1979 and 1981. By the latter date the éminence grise of New York’s gallery world, Leo Castelli, had given Schnabel a show—a fact that helped seal the young man’s fate and send his pictures through the \$100,000 level a few years later. Schnabel’s success drew up critical battle lines more clearly than that of other contemporary painters, because it was he who seemed first to have posed the question, “Is figurative art possible in the light of Modernist tradition?”

Some critics saw only mediocrity and sloppiness, unredeemed by high-toned (art) historical references and the use of a gimmick (broken plates glued with Bondex to canvas). Others praised the way Schnabel had apostatized the “make it new” creed and introduced art history, theology, anthropology and mythology into his work, thus bringing to art a range of experience hitherto excluded. The artist’s most eloquent defender, Thomas McEvelley, developed a subtle theory to explain Schnabel’s importance. He represented, according to McEvelley, the Modernist artist in a Post-Modern period, that is, an artist who, whilst embodying Modernism’s creator-hero model, nonetheless used second-hand images and artefacts while plundering a variety of traditions.<sup>(8)</sup> The broken crockery and the primitive images that seem to hover over it suggested to the artist’s kinder critics a history of civilization as ground (shards on the bottom of the sea, for example) and shadow-like Platonic ideas as figure. Schnabel’s borrowings from Caravaggio, Rodin, Pollaiuolo, Goya, Beckmann and Joseph Beuys were said to be part of a fruitful and largely sympathetic dialogue with history—quite different from Modernism’s abusive monologue. “The artist’s fans credit him with single-handedly reviving American painting,” the critic Ken Sofer wrote in 1983, “while his detractors see him as the creation of media manipulators feeding an investment-hungry, neo-conservative market.”<sup>(9)</sup>

Robert Longo and David Salle come from a tradition that begins with Dadaism’s juxtaposition of unrelated images and passes through the Surrealists and the

collages of John Baldessari. In a number of works Longo has taken images from films and placed them in a strange setting. One feels a simultaneous tenseness and vacuousness. The critic Carter Ratcliff has likened Longo's images to the statue of Simon Bolivar on New York's Central Park West: "Standing midway along a short street in a part of town where it is difficult to get lost, he offers little in the way of vital help to navigation."<sup>(10)</sup> Longo makes monuments of ambiguous significance that have an uncertain relationship with surrounding space. For example, in *Culture, Culture* (1982-83) an equestrian statue is set next to a picture of a man talking on the phone. In *Pressure* (1982) the statue is replaced by a pensive young man, half made-up as Pierrot, who is dwarfed by a massive Modernist building above him. One doesn't know whether to sympathize with the sad figure or to view him as a self-conscious impostor: indeed, one asks, what role should Pierrot, the artist, play? In *Now Everybody (for R.W. Fassbinder)*, 1982-83, the bronze statue of a man who has apparently just been shot in the back is placed in front of a four-panel drawing of a city in ruins. What has happened? What does this arbitrary death mean? What is the relation between the urban destruction and the murder? More than presenting paradoxes, Longo's work focuses on the nature of connectedness and on the relationships within both art and experience.

Asked how his interest in painting developed in the 1970s, David Salle said, "I came to understand that because painting is so charged, so weighted down by history, so lumbering, so bourgeois, so spiritual—all these things that had made [it] so 'incorrect'—I came to see this is what gave painting such potential."<sup>(11)</sup> The viewer is struck not only by the painting itself but also by the mysterious propinquity of images and abstract patterns (see illustrations on pages 27 and 39). What are the connections between a geometrical pattern of coloured rectangles and a naked woman wearing paper cones on her head and breasts? Between a nude woman lying face down on a sandy beach, a stripe of paint, a painted ear and the inscription TENNYSON? Despite one's desire to make connections between the images, the only feature they share for certain is that they belong to the same work. "A strangely dry coitus of visual clichés," is Donald B. Kuspit's memorable analysis.<sup>(12)</sup>

Salle's promotion of choice over invention is significant. "Put simply," he said in 1984, "the originality is in what you choose. What you choose and how you choose to present it... I do think that there are things that exist in the world that relate to one another. And then there are things in my paintings that relate to one another. And I think what matters is

that these are not the same." But, as though to warn one against seeing his work as an aberration from Modernism, Salle adds that "originality is still the only thing that matters. My point is that originality had to come from some other place, had to be located outside this question of personal 'style.'" According to his friend Eric Fischl, Salle is concerned with showing the "meaningfulness of meaninglessness... He puts the images out there as if he were talking only in nouns. The nouns call up things, but they don't connect... Salle makes you question not the painting, or even 'painting' as some would have it, but your pact with the world, your way of relating to what you encounter, your 'self.'"<sup>(13)</sup> Salle walks "a precarious line between Neo-Expressionism and an updated Conceptualism," a critic summed up.<sup>(14)</sup>

## Acquiring a Narrative Sense

Of these four painters Eric Fischl undoubtedly draws the most sustenance from traditional subject matter, whose locus classicus for him lies with Manet, Degas and Winslow Homer. Fischl is, moreover, the most engaging spokesman for this generation of figurative artists and perhaps its most important painter.

Fischl entered the California Institute of Arts in 1970, the year that the school opened. With teachers like John Baldessari, Allan Hackman and Paul Brach, Cal Arts was "very New York-oriented," according to Fischl. While there he met Longo, Salle and the painter Jack Goldstein. If a filiation between Longo, Salle and the Conceptual artist John Baldessari is easy enough to detect, in Fischl's case the school's general emphasis on a do-your-own-thing, end-of-art aesthetic seems to have led to an impasse. It was the "peak of crazed liberal ideas about education and self-development," he recalls. The painter who would later be known for his semi-nude dramatis personae only had one life class at Cal Arts. In it, not only was the model naked but so were the students.

Fischl painted abstract "Constructivist-type, formalist-field" works until leaving for Chicago where he began to play around with images. "Then [in the early 1970s] I retreated back to abstraction, but I had acquired a narrative sense. I started reading about architecture and mythology."<sup>(15)</sup> By 1975, after arriving at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where he taught painting (which was not on the curriculum at the time), Fischl was working with images and narrative. As at Cal Arts, the focus in Halifax was very "New York," the most-admired artists being Carl Andre, Lawrence Wiener, Joseph Beuys and A.R. Penck (the latter two having been assimilated by the New

York avant-garde tradition). But soon Fischl noticed that other artists were talking about painting again. Jonathan Borofsky, Elizabeth Murray, Susan Rothenberg and Joel Shapiro came to prominence around this time, and Fischl remembers them as being important in bringing about the “post-minimalist psychological image.” But his own transition to figurative art was already under way, and, in so far as it reflects a shift of mood that was taking place both in Europe and America, is worth examining in some detail.

Fischl had been painting sombre, abstract works with triangles and squares but was unhappy because he couldn't connect the narrative in an emotional way to his own experiences. “Nothing was particularly direct,” he remembers, “everything was being coded.”<sup>(16)</sup> He initially dropped abstract painting because each painting began to seem like the last one. But then, shortly after taking up figurative painting, he began to feel the same thing about that. “So I thought a good strategy would be to find a way of generating a lot of work by working off a core narrative. Each thing that I did would illustrate and extend the basic narrative... I started with a family matrix, exploring the relationships between father and mother, brother and sister, husband and wife... I was very afraid of academic realism. I wanted to come out of Modernism, but I was using transparent overlays related to it. I was showing how the picture was constructed, and I started structuring my pictures so I could represent everything.”

Self-consciousness did not vanish altogether from

his art with the disappearance of glassine around 1982, since the paintings' “unfinished” quality continued to remind one of who was in charge of the illusion. One of the first works to show the direction for which Fischl would become known was *Sleepwalker*, an oil on canvas painted three years earlier (see illustration on the following page). This shows an adolescent boy masturbating in a paddling pool. In trying to paint a fully-fledged figure, Fischl came to realize that the heart of figurative art was in fact drama, and that to paint the human figure was to follow a narrative based on human relationships. The two empty chairs next to the pool in *Sleepwalker* symbolized for him the absence of parental power and thus set up a confrontation which made the act fundamentally rebellious and self-assertive. “In a sense, [the chairs'] ambiguous meaning is itself the narrative. The kiddie pool is important because it implies the boy is too old—yet emotionally not too old—to be there. Why is he there? Raising such questions is the narrative. Painting is most potent when nothing has been nailed down. You bring to it associations that lead you forward from and backward into the moment of the picture.”

*Sleepwalker* sparked off other works in which sexuality, awareness and ritual coexist—but where illusionism is used only up to a point. “I want to pull back and not do the whole surface the way a Géricault would. I want it, but I'm reluctant to do it. I want to be indulgent but I'm afraid to be. It's about being puritan and sensually abandoned at once. It's anti-stylistic and anti-flashy while being stylish and flashy. The realism of Manet and Winslow Homer, both of whom I admire, has something of the same powerful ambivalence.”

But rather than figurative art per se, Fischl emphasizes a “personal figuration,” an art that is essentially private. “There is a new privatism, which is inseparable from the new nationalism. There is a social and historical awareness of art. It seems very particular to a place and history. It's as though the domestic has become an instrument of artistic advance. The dramatic turmoil in domestic life is for me a metaphor for today's internationalism, as well as for the larger predicament of the meaning of the human in today's world.” One could hardly wish for a better encapsulation of the new spirit in figurative painting. There is no mention of art's perennial concerns. Art meets the needs of a specific moment and time. Fischl says that he set out to reconstitute his “debilitated person,” the emotionally handicapped, humanly underdeveloped middle-class American, much in the way German artists attempted to reconstruct their debilitated postwar culture.

David Salle:  
*Low Cost Colour Numbers*, 1985,  
oil on canvas,  
two panels, each 102 × 84 in / 259 × 213 cm.  
Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris





If Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel, Robert Longo and David Salle are all quite independent artists, the presence of the figure in their work nonetheless sets up similar expectations and expresses shared concerns. Schnabel's historical figures point to a common culture rich in memory, even if his oeuvre yields more a history of images than a philosophy of history. By the same token, although Longo's and Salle's use of images appears to draw on neo-Dadaist, end-of-art tradition, it does raise certain "big questions" which art mainly concerned with its own processes has hitherto approached with scepticism.

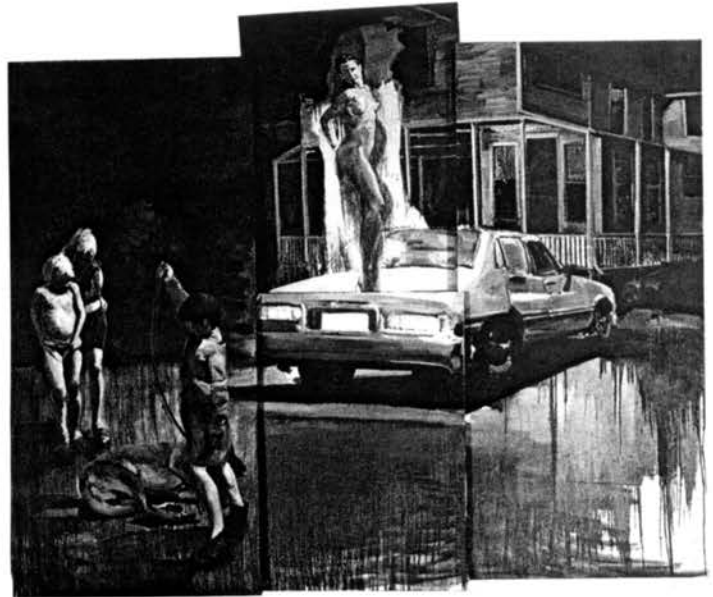
One is used to thinking of the figure as Roland Barthes did, as that which interrupts a narrative flow, as a memorable image that suspends time and draws a flood of acts and events into a distinct shape. Paradoxically, abstract art as it developed in New York was assimilated into a clearly defined figure, though a figure outside the canvas—the figure of the active artist who did things and who advanced into new, avant-garde territory with the rest of a young culture.

### Guided by Modernist Ghosts

From their incessant talk about Modernism, the figurative painters of the eighties seem to have grown up with the avatars of its ideals fully present if not entirely intact. One is struck by two things. The first is the way in which the abstract, avant-garde formula ceased to be satisfying for these figurative artists, mostly for personal reasons. As Fischl puts it, "Modernism asked 'What is art?' in order to make subtle new art. Today, artists seriously ask 'What is art?' not abstractly and provocatively, but because they have a need for art, and they want to know what it is they have a need for, and why. It is like having a need for a self, when it would be easier to get along without one." The second is the paradoxical way in which Modernist assumptions continued to orient debate, like an Ibsen ghost. These are uttered *sotto voce* even by Fischl, who speaks both of the drama of his scenes and the "drama of the paint." Indeed, although an invitation is made to piece together the fragments, Longo's monument, Schnabel's heteroclitic historical allusions and Salle's abrupt juxtapositions yield figures that resist narrative, that are in fact more ambiguous than memorable or timeless.

If the figures of today's painters do not solicit belief, as did those of earlier painters, the epithets *private*, *historical* and *national*, which have been used throughout the decade, suggest that old emotions have returned to art. But what do these emotions signify? If, on a personal level, they are comprehensible enough, what does their appearance signal in a broader

Eric Fischl:  
*Birth of Love* (second version), 1987,  
oil on canvas,  
119 × 142 ½ in / 302 × 362 cm,  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne



Eric Fischl:  
*Sleepwalker*, 1979,  
oil on canvas,  
72 × 108 in / 180 × 270 cm,  
Mary Boone Gallery, New York

historical and social context? They not only reflect the ambiguous status of the Modernist ideal and its abstract, perennial concerns, but they also register the impersonal coming together, the massive cultural consolidation, that gives the eighties such a different feel from the sixties or early seventies.

This all-embracing unity, with its extraordinary ability to appropriate and recycle, conditions (the reactions of) both the figurative and the "simulation" artists of the eighties. Both kinds of artists are uncommonly concerned with the fragment, that is, with the un-united part. Their fragment is distinct from a Dadaist fragment, which was part of an exuberant anarchy, or from Pop art's isolated media image. It is rather the virtual part of a unity you are not supposed completely to believe in. It expresses a need for unity and a suspicion about this unity, a cynicism coloured with regret. Eric Fischl summed up this ambivalence when he spoke of wanting to create "a seamless whole out of fragments." Twenty-five years ago the word fragment conjured up images of entropy, of a world coming unstuck, and felt like an adequate metaphor because of the social revolution that was under way. In the eighties, the same word evokes a post-revolutionary bulimia and a nausea of saturation. The Modernist ideal of liberation having, in virtually every conceivable way, been achieved, the avant-garde model has been superseded by a powerful, if two-dimensional, consensus, variously called pluralism, consumerism and late capitalism. This unity is not repressive in the old way or even anti-art. In fact, art has been assimilated effortlessly under its aegis—in the name of leisure, self-improvement and even capital expenditure. Most eighties' artists find this insidious. And yet if they do something provocative, like taking off their clothes in life class, most people applaud... or yawn.

The nostalgic feel of a recent exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, *Refigured Painting 1960-1988*, made one ask what the lasting importance of the new figuration might be. To the director of the museum, Thomas Krens, the way in which this painting challenges received critical and art historical frameworks implies "a profound epistemological shift."<sup>(17)</sup> Many observers anticipated just this in 1981, but, at the end of 1989, if the new figuration appears to be essentially a movement of the early eighties it also seems more closely related to other eighties' phenomena than might be expected.

Ambivalence is the mood of the period, and since ambivalence always draws its strength from a repressed and one-time fanatical passion, it is logical to assume that this would be the fanatical and now unserviceable belief in Modernism itself. In this sublimated form,

Modernism is part not of the poetics of our period but of its debilitating, sometimes subtle, rarely satisfying psychology. Although the best artists of the decade, on both sides of the Atlantic, have made a virtue of this psychology, the decline of the New York School model has left most of them shadow-boxing with superannuated heroes. Suddenly, it seems that there are no real, no easily identifiable, father figures around. Seen in this light, the rise of figuration or the rise of the European model reflects above all a social evolution away from the conditions that in the first instance fostered avant-garde art and its heroes, the dandy and the innovative American. The irony is that, far from sending artists back to art's fundamental triangulation of experience, imagination and idea, this ultimate liberation has left most feeling undecided or cynical, either transfixed by a love-hate desire for unity or overdosed on eternal recurrence.

#### Notes

- (1) Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- (2) Wolfgang Max Faust, "'Du hast keine Chance. Nutze sie!' With It and Against It: Tendencies in Recent German Art," *Art Forum*, September 1981, p. 33.
- (3) Achille Bonito Oliva, *The International Trans-avant-garde*. Milan: Politi Editore, 1982, p. 6. Oliva had already put these views across at the 1980 Biennale (cf. his interview with Wolfgang Max Faust, *Kunstforum International*, 40, 1980, vol. 4).
- (4) Both quotes are from Deborah C. Phillips, "No Island Is an Island: New York Discovers the Europeans," *Art News*, October 1982, p. 69.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- (6) Jane Bell, "Biennial Directions," *Art News*, Summer 1983, pp. 76-77.
- (7) Deborah C. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- (8) Essay from the catalogue of the exhibition *Julian Schnabel, Works 1975-1986*, shown in London, Düsseldorf and Paris (1986-87).
- (9) Ken Sofer, *Art News*, Summer 1983, p. 193.
- (10) Carter Ratcliff, *Robert Longo*, New York: Rizzoli, 1985, p. 20.
- (11) Quoted in Gerald Marzorati, "The Artful Dodger," *Art News*, Summer 1984, p. 55.
- (12) Donald B. Kuspit, "David Salle at Boone and Castelli," *Art Forum*, Summer 1982, p. 142.
- (13) Gerald Marzorati, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- (14) Nancy Princenthal, *Art News*, May 1983, p. 152.
- (15) Donald B. Kuspit, *An Interview with Eric Fischl*, New York: Vintage Books, 1987, p. 28. Unless otherwise indicated all quotes by Eric Fischl are taken from this book.
- (16) Nancy Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truths," *Art News*, September 1986, p. 75.
- (17) "German Painting: Paradox and Paradigm in Late Twentieth-Century Art," in *Refigured Painting*, Munich, 1989, p. 14.