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## Charged Images

By Laura Kipnis

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When a supposed friend and collector tells the painter-art star Eric Fischl: “You’ve got to face it, man. You didn’t make the cut” — meaning that after rocketing to the top in the art boom of the 1980s, his prices aren’t holding in the ’90s, he’s no longer one of the artists who matter — I felt sucker-punched myself. Fischl says the collector was just being matter-of-fact, but really? One of the many reasons to read “Bad Boy” (written with Michael Stone) is how vividly it recreates the precariousness and ambivalences of life in the upper tiers of the international art world. But the collector’s jab also alerts us that it’s a rise-and-fall story we’ve been reading, not just a jolly succession of triumphs.

Midway through “Bad Boy,” I found myself recalling the musty but still provocative theories of the art historian and psychoanalyst Ernst Kris about the genre of artist biographies. After surveying the recorded history of artists’ lives throughout the centuries, Kris was struck by the recurrence of certain incidents and traits, or what he called “biographical formulae.” We’re not just reading the details of individual lives in these accounts, he concluded. The repetitions condense a society’s collective fantasies about the image of the artist, freezing them into prototypes, some of whose origins Kris traces back to mythological sagas of heroes and rebels. Though

these formulas can also evolve: in antiquity the artist's youth was of little interest and rarely recorded, whereas come the Renaissance it's vital information, the key to his newly important "inner voice."

By now the artist's youth as fertile wellspring is such a powerful motif we're barely aware of it, especially the formulas of youthful damage or trauma as a creative source. Freud went this route in his study of Leonardo: his illegitimacy, the need to solve the mystery of his paternity, was what propelled his artistic and intellectual genius. Edmund Wilson elaborated on it in "The Wound and the Bow," taking the myth of Philoctetes, whose suppurating wound was inextricable from his talent, as the template for literary inspiration. By this account, writers with miserable childhoods like Dickens would have been talentless hacks if spared their injuries.

Kris's premise was that artists themselves internalize this cultural inheritance, and come to understand their lives accordingly. So my question reading "Bad Boy" was whether, when artists become their own biographers — and in this case, our author is also a quintessentially autobiographical artist — the old formulas still shape the story.

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For Fischl, the suppurating wound was his mother. Depressed, alcoholic, beautiful, creatively thwarted, subject to fits of epic rage for which she blamed her children and husband, she should have had her own chapter in "The Feminine Mystique." Betty Friedan reported mordantly on suburban women who suddenly go berserk and run shrieking through the streets naked; Fischl's mother actually *was* picked up by the police running through the streets of suburban Long Island naked. She walked around the house naked too, throwing her adolescent son off kilter. After threatening for years to kill herself, she finally succeeded, driving her car into a tree.



Eric Fischl's "Self-Portrait: An Unfinished Work," 2011. Eric Fischl

His family's secrecy and shame about these ordeals migrated into the anxious, discomfiting iconography of Fischl's paintings. At first he wasn't aware of it, embarking on a series of crude images about an imaginary near-onymous family he called "the Fishers," whose story grew increasingly miserable. As his process became more free-associational,

what eventually emerged were the “psychosexual suburban paintings” he became famous for. “Bad Boy” doubles as the title of a potent early example, a vaguely incestuous scene of a young boy stealing something from the pocketbook of an inattentive naked woman, who lies spread-eagle on a bed. Mother and son? The return of the (not-so) repressed? Psychologically speaking, it condenses the subtext of the memoir into one powerfully perverse image — that in a complicated act of creative alchemy and betrayal, Fischl managed to snatch success and riches from his mother’s poisonous provocations.

As a narrative painter Fischl was pitting himself against the modernist tradition, countering what he saw as its hopeless sterility. Along with painters like Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Ross Bleckner, he was labeled a “neo-Expressionist,” though aside from the size and swagger of their canvases, there wasn’t much commonality. The bombastic, pajama-wearing Schnabel was the alpha dog of the group, and there was deep antipathy between the two from the start. Fischl dismisses Schnabel as self-promoting and derivative, but his broken-plate canvases were putting painting back on the radar just as infusions of stock market cash were inflating prices, transforming impoverished artists, Fischl included, into millionaires and high rollers. Life became a succession of openings, private jets and foreign fetes: at one such bacchanal guests were offered Champagne, cocaine and heroin on silver trays. All the era’s excesses are frankly (sometimes fondly) recounted — booze, brawls, drugs, wild parties. The one omission is art groupies, around whom there’s an uncharacteristic cone of silence.

Of course, success comes with a price: you have to socialize with commodity traders. Getting wrecked so frequently leads to heart palpitations. There were inevitable tensions in Fischl’s marriage to the landscape painter April Gornik, whose work never got the same recognition. There was self-estrangement, the nagging feeling of being a fraud. Then comes the 1987 stock market crash: investors flee, fashions change, and Fischl finds himself sidelined by newly minted art stars whose slick work he detests — the vapid ex-stockbroker Jeff Koons, the posturing Damien Hirst. Though barely 40, he’s now the older generation. He feels irrelevant and depressed. Capitulating to the market, he starts making smaller paintings, which are at least easier to sell.

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So is all this simply a tale of art-world caprice — someone's always in, someone's always out — or part of a larger story: namely, that the trope of the wound and the culture it generated (the “metaphysics of depth,” in philosophical lingo) has come to the end of the line? The end of the line in high art, that is — it lives on in affliction memoirs and talk shows where ordinary people now bare their wounds, taking over where suffering artists left off. To be sure, the belief in some profound link between an artist's authentic self and his or her work has been under assault for a while now, though that trajectory — call it the Duchamp wing — was never one that interested Fischl, a self-proclaimed humanist. Confronting his own psychical depths on canvas is his ethos. (“The point of painting is to try to find the hidden truth.”) In fact, so deeply does he believe that art is fundamentally psychological, he once got into a screaming fight and years-long falling-out with his friend David Salle by insisting Salle's work too was autobiographical, an interpretation Salle — who claimed his work had no personal meaning — vehemently rejected.

From his pointed assessments of other artists to his diktats on brush strokes, Fischl is entertaining company. The same observational frankness that imbues his paintings makes this a brave and candid book. It's also, in many ways, a painful book: he's such a deft portraitist that he captures himself at his most unknowing, wounded, prideful and self-contradictory (on the art market, on his sometimes controversial forays into public art). Occasionally vain, occasionally score-settling, it's as unsparing as the aging Rembrandt's blunt self-portraits.

Will the biographies and memoirs of his successors be as compelling? The emotional flatness of their work bodes badly for the genre. Who wants to read about happy childhoods, unambivalent success, depthless surfaces? Perhaps “Bad Boy” gratifies because it does hew so closely to the venerable paradigm, that art emanates from inner life. Fischl worried, even at the height of his success, that taking himself as his subject made him a retrograde figure. In terms of art-world trends, maybe so: the last humanist standing.

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