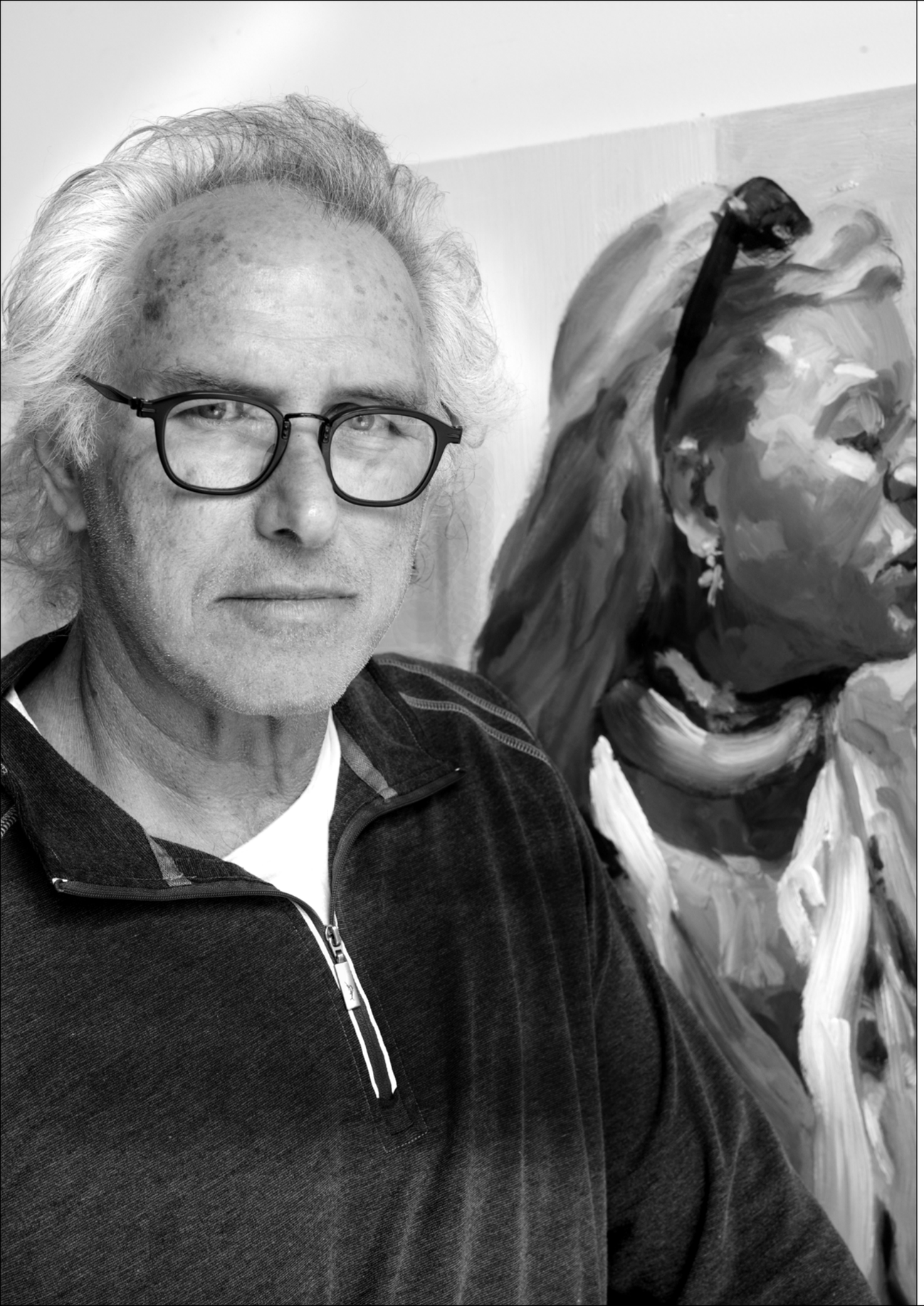

ERIC FISCHL *I spy*

STEVE MILLER: ***So this is you, prowling with your camera?***

ERIC FISCHL: This is me prowling…

STEVE: ***Do people know you're doing it when you're doing it?***

ERIC: By now they do.

STEVE: ***When we saw you at Frieze (2014) did you feel anonymous or did you think, "Everyone knows Eric's doing this," and—not that it's an issue, I was just curious.***

ERIC: I think by, the Frieze, New York, the one you're talking about? I think I was still relatively anonymous in there.

STEVE: ***Cause nobody seems like they're noticing you.***

ERIC: No, and I'm pretty quick with the camera.

STEVE: ***Are you just snapping as quickly as you can snap, as much as possible, or are you composing?***

ERIC: No, I'm just snapping. I've got no interest in the photograph whatsoever. All I'm looking at in this photo is this purplypink banquette with her sitting on it.

STEVE: ***Looking at her cell phone.***

ERIC: Yeah, looking at her cell phone. And I don't even see the rest of it. In this one, I'm looking at these two people, and his hand on her shoulder, and I'm not seeing anything else around it. It's ironic.

STEVE: ***Yeah well irony abounds in these works for sure. So your approach is pretty much…***

ERIC: Pretty straightforward.

STEVE: ***Grab what you can.***

ERIC: It's got nothing to do with photography other than the simplicity of it capturing a moment. But I'm interested in the body language of people. I'm interested in their outfits, I'm interested in the black....

STEVE: ***When did you say, "Oh, I can use photography, it's a great tool." How did that happen?***

ERIC: I was sitting with a friend in Venice on the Lido, and I saw some topless women a little ways away. So I grabbed my sketchbook and tried to draw them. Meanwhile, my friend grabs a Super 8 camera and goes *dudududududududu*. And I'm sitting there trying to draw, and they're moving and I'm getting nothing. He looks at me and he says: "Why don't you just get a camera for God's sakes?" I thought to myself, "Oh no. I have to get this the old fashioned way". But watching him capture what I was looking at so quickly, I thought, "Shit, I gotta get a camera." I even resisted Photoshop at first, even though there were years between me taking pictures and when Photoshop was introduced. When Photoshop came out, April (Gornik) gravitated to it immediately. I was thinking, "No, I think it's going to screw up my painting." The same thing happened when I started to use it and I realized, "Wow, this makes my life a whole lot easier." I can go through so many different ideas so quickly using this tool. Now this photo, this guy ends up as an important character in the painting entitled "Rift Raft." As you can see in the final image he's been flipped around, no longer leaning against the desk. Now he's leaning on what appears to be a sculpture of a naked woman. It is in fact a John DeAndrea sculpture.

STEVE: ***Okay and then from this, just structurally, I wanted to ask you a question about "Rift Raft." From the raw photo you go to a series of collages—do you make it in Photoshop?***

Portrait by Ralph Gibson. Courtesy Eric Fischl Studio.

ERIC: Yes. The next thing for me would be to cut and paste figures and objects onto a background in Photoshop. [Looking at the left and right panels of "Rift Raft."]

STEVE: S*o you flipped him?*

ERIC: I flipped him into the position you see him in now, leaning against the nude sculpture. I struggled more with finding the artwork that hangs on the walls behind all the people in the scene. I was constantly swapping images of artworks in and out trying to see if I could slip in…

STEVE: ***Slip in something else.***

Eric Fischl. Top: *Art Fair: Rift/Raft*, 2016; Below: *Untitled (Pink Circular Couch).*

Eric Fischl. Above: Left: *Untitled. (collage).* 2015; Right: *Untitled (Man Leaning on Desk).*

ERIC: Something that made more sense. Was more relevant.

STEVE: ***Why are the women naked?***

ERIC: These are John DeAndrea sculptures.

STEVE: ***All of these?***

ERIC: All of them. And I just put them all together. But they all are his work.

STEVE: ***When you made "Rift Raft," were you deliberately thinking about your painting, "A Visit To/ A Visit From/ The Island," which employed a similar strategy of juxtaposing two polar opposite images that were both happening simultaneously.***

ERIC: Yes, I was very consciously revisiting that theme and that structure of presentation.

STEVE: ***Obviously you were just thinking, like, nothing's changed, right? The world condition is the same. Are you thinking about political statements when you're doing this?***

ERIC: I'm thinking more about conditions, I guess. I don't think it's as judgmental as people at first think it is. What I'm thinking is that these are two realities that are present at the same time. They are profoundly conflicting emotionally. Neither one is a place you can tolerate living in for any length of time, yet both are present at this moment in time. The panel on the left reflects the ennui and inertia brought about by the privilege of disengagement. Choosing not to care. The objects that surround the people in this picture reflect the emptying out of what should have great meaning for us.

STEVE: ***And the panel on the right?***

ERIC: This is a scene of grave danger and desperation. People are trying to survive a life-threatening situation. They are refugees who have fled the Syrian conflict and their boat has capsized. They are trying to save their children from drowning and trying to save themselves from drowning as well. It is at moments like this where caring is the most urgent and meaningful.

STEVE: ***So I guess the question is the art fair. It's like the new phenomenon, right? It's just changed everything, and it's changed the way people do business. I don't want to answer your question, so tell me--why did you go this way? What drew you to it?***

ERIC: Well I think what drew me to it was first coming to terms with the transformation in the art world over the time that I've been in it. And from the 70s to now where it did move from an "art world" to an "art market." And it is something I hate, and tried to reject, fight against, and ignore. But while I was writing my memoir, the publisher insisted that I focus as much on what happened in the art world from the 90s forward as I had focused on my life and career up to the 90's.

STEVE: ***By memoir you mean*** **Bad Boy: My Life On and Off the Canvas.**

ERIC: Yeah, **Bad Boy**. So once I finished the book I felt now I should go and make paintings that really took a hard look at this new iteration of the art world. What better place to start than the Art Fair? And so I started to go to the art fairs to gather material. It was a lot of fun. I was a spy. No one knew what I was taking photos of, or how I would be using them. No one knew what I was seeing. I had a lot of freedom and took my time finding my way into the visual cacophony of these places. Besides the subject matter, the Art Fair provided me with compelling painting problems. The temporality and artificiality of the Art Fair came with the problems of how to organize the overwhelming visual stimulation. How to paint the colors, the flimsy walls, the incongruous overlapping of art work that should by all rights cancel each other out, the glitz, the amusement, and the poor galleries trying as hard as they could to not make what is crass appear crass? These became really interesting painting problems. And surprisingly, to me, these problems took me back to my early work when I was an abstract painter.

STEVE: ***Let's talk about your abstract paintings. I remember reading your book and thinking, like, "Oh yeah, you were an abstract painter." When I was looking at your recent exhibition at Skarstedt, it seemed to me that with the Chris Wool paintings you referred to in*** **Rift Raft,** ***it gave you license to be an abstract painter again.***

ERIC: Well, in a literal way, I suppose yes. But I meant that the problems of organizing so much information as you experience at an Art Fair hinges on compositional structures and decisions that can only be realized through an understanding of abstract painting.

STEVE: ***The way you told me you did the Chris Wool with an aerosol spray can….***

ERIC: I'd never used one of those before. I must say that I get great pleasure from painting other artist's work.

STEVE: ***I was thinking that for an artist going to an art***

Eric Fischl. Opposite: *Art Fair: Her*, 2016; Following Spread: Eric Fischl. *Art Fair: The Cat's Meow,* 2015.

fair, it's always so weird. Did you go to art fairs before this or does the camera give you the excuse to be there?

ERIC: No. I never went to the art fair until I decided to go to research it, to watch, to be a spy….

STEVE: *But wasn't that fun to do that?*

ERIC: It was great. But it is for entirely different reasons than why younger artists go there today. For them it is business. They bring all their promotional materials to hand out to galleries and collectors. They're unabashed about pushing their work, promoting themselves, etc. All the things that were repugnant to my generation.

STEVE: *In your earlier stuff, the suburban paintings, like "Sleepwalker" (1979), in which an adolescent boy is depicted masturbating into a children's pool, was any of that stuff photobased? The early work?*

ERIC: Those works were not. "Sleepwalker," "Bad Boy," those were not photobased. They were memoryderived. I'm trying to remember when I started using the photo. By 1984, the early beach scenes were all based on photos.

STEVE: *It feels like, for me, in this body of work, which I guess was the reason why I wanted to do this in the first place, was—and this is for you to disagree with me—everything has come together now in your work. It's fully modern now. I don't know what that word modern means, but let's say it's fully of-the-moment and up-to-date. You've got the sociological thing of the changing commerce. I really enjoyed the notion that abstraction came back into your work with all the backgrounds and nonfigurative aspects even though they're representational. You have everybody looking at their cell phone and nobody looking at the art—which I think is also another kind of phenomena. From the photograph to the assemblage of the compositional capabilities of Photoshop, then you can get to the painting that's like Jasper Johns. I just want to do the painting, you know the flag just made it really easy. Once you get that Photoshop composition, how much of a struggle is the painting part of it? It seems you really loosened up on this last body of work.*

ERIC: Well, the thing is that I make my Photoshop collage, which has its own format, its own size, rectangle, etc. I preorder stretchers in various sizes I like to paint in, and

Eric Fischl. *Art Fair: The Disconnect,* 2015.

none of them conform to the actual dimensions of the Photoshop image. So when I go to the painting I'm already adjusting to fit it in, I'm already beginning to edit, to crop, to change things, etc. It just makes it a lot easier to know where certain masking takes place and certain kind of issues about color and light sources and stuff like that are. So it's still very much a kind of a drawing tool.

STEVE: *Right. I thought about it differently. I was thinking like, "Okay, now it's automatic." But you're telling me that the painting process has actually been the same all the way through your practice.*

ERIC: Yeah, and the difference is that I think there's a level of relaxation because I have something that's much more concrete already figured out. In earlier work, where I didn't have the Photoshop collages, what I had was a lot of small snapshot photographs in which I was visually taking out one figure, putting it here or taking out another chair from another, putting it there, taking out a dog form, etc. Making scenes and then going, "Oh shit, I need to turn that person around, they need to be looking the other way," and then having to scrape off, erase, paint over, flip it, all of those things I can do in Photoshop like *snap* that. And so that's taken away that anxiety about discovery. Now it's just down to painting and making it fit into the shape that I have in front of me and it becomes more fun to do and easier in that way. So I think that's reflected in the painting in that there's a kind of directness to it.

STEVE: *Do you collect photography?*

ERIC: I have some, yeah.

STEVE: *Did you acquire it because it's friends' work, trades, or you saw stuff that you said "I've gotta have that photograph"?*

ERIC: It's a combination. I have some photographs, like I have a Diane Arbus photograph because she's somebody I greatly admire, and represents feelings that I share with her and her worldview. So it's an example of that kind of thing. I have photographs like…a Bill Brandt photo that I used a figure from in a few of my paintings. I have many friends who are photographers and have bought or traded with them. I have a lot of

Eric Fischl. *Art Fair: False Gods,* 2015.

Eric Fischl. *Art Fair: Watch*, 2015.

Ralph Gibson photographs, Sally Gall, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Peter Paul Rubens, Erica Lennard, Jock Sturges, to name some. And I have some of Pierre Bonnard's photographs, which I was thrilled to get. I didn't even know he did photography.

STEVE: I ***didn't either.***

ERIC: He did it for a few years, and they are really strange.

STEVE: ***Are they like the paintings, compositional?***

ERIC: Well they're more like snapshots of figures that show up later in his paintings. The revelation for me was that when you strip the color away from Bonnard, you get to a deeply anxious, maybe misanthropic vision of the world. His characters are so awkward and in some cases sort of sinister. And it's like all these things that I never thought about with Bonnard when you just look at his paintings, 'cause his color, his light, is just so celebratory and beautiful you don't notice how uncomfortable he is in his flesh, and how angry he is in the world. I did a program about Bonnard for the BBC. They took me to his house in southern France, to a big show in Lausanne, and to Paris to meet his nephew. In the course of our conversation he offered me some of Bonnard's photographs.

STEVE: ***Wow, so you've got a strong connection to photography.***

ERIC: What photography does is capture life in such thin slices that everybody is offbalance and everybody is in motion. In snapshot photography everybody is slumping, turning, twitching, closing an eye—doing something animated. And it is that animation which triggers narrative. You put somebody in a scene where they're beginning to turn and, you immediately wonder about why. Are they turning towards something, or away from something? If they're turning towards, what is it that they're turning towards? If they're turning away, why are they turning away? You can just sort of take it from there. Is somebody turning to somebody who's turning away? Are they both turning towards each other? Is one turning because somebody just left the room? Can you see the evidence of that? Is somebody turning because their dog just walked in? What is going on here? And so all of these are results of that kind of questioning. I start with a figure or two and then just begin to build a narrative. So my process is allowing myself to wander and to associate and to try to understand the feeling these images of people, these characters, are causing me to feel. Art is about trying to make sense of it all.