The Prophetic Principle: Biblically Affirmed Nude Art

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"The human body is a glory of structure and form. When an artist draws or paints or sculpts it, he is a battleground between his intelligence and emotion, between his rational side and his sensual side."[1] So says Jacob Kahn in Chaim Potok's novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Young Asher has been sent to Jacob Kahn, an accomplished artist, to learn about painting. During one of his lessons, Asher, a Hasidic Jew, enters the studio to find that his teacher wishes him to draw a nude female. Asher begins to sweat and nearly refuses. Yet Jacob the master artist recognizes that nude art is a powerful confrontation on a battleground; the artist is the battleground and the body instigates that battle. Painting addresses both conflict and community—the two poles of this battle—both aspects of which are made manifest perhaps most clearly in the form of the human figure.

This thesis will read nude art through Christian Scripture and offer a theological framework for evaluating nude art that uses an Old Testament conception of prophecy. This framework, which I have called the "prophetic principle," will be applied to two artists from the same era yet different hemispheres of the world: Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl. I hope to establish a Christian rationale for the innate goodness of the body and the occasional usefulness of the *nude* body in certain forms of art. The prophetic principle should better enable individuals to understand, appreciate, and critique nude art, all in a way that affirms the body yet recognizes its necessary boundaries, one of which the prophetic principle enumerates.

In *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the character of Jacob Kahn recognizes that art, particularly nude art, can cause harm, for there is power in nude art. Asher realizes this also but sees the necessity of mastering this art form, as one does a still life. This conflict on the "battleground," as Jacob Kahn calls it, is a search for identity, because to engage with the battle results in a new or transformed identity. (And by identity I mean one's sense of self, groups one aligns with, or a subjective answer to the question, "Who are you?"). One does not address the poles of the battle, conflict and community, without being

[1] Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 229.

changed. The title of the book, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, is a statement of identity, and the novel follows Asher as he decides with whom he wishes to identify. Is he an artist? A Hasidic Jew? Can he be both? Like Asher, each of the artists this thesis evaluates—Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl—confront environments where a loss of identity is threatened.

Asher's conflict with art as a Jew is with the making of graven images, as prohibited by the Decalogue (or so one interpretation regulates). However, the *worship* of images, also called idolatry, is the forbidden element, not their creation or representation in sculptures or paintings. When Asher attempts to represent the nude woman, he begins to sweat. Her body prompts a battle within Asher's body. Jacob Kahn attempts to show Asher that this tension, this visceral reaction, is necessary and that one *must* physically respond to bodies with our *own* bodies, for we ourselves are physical bodies in a physical space. Asher eventually experiences a "sudden light"[2] that represents a balance of the rational and sensual, akin to Augustine's "two wills" struggling within that tore apart his soul before conversion.[3] With this we find the **motive** to study nude art: nude art is beautiful because the body is beautiful. It provokes desire in us because we recognize something desirable. This thesis proposes, though, that beauty is not the sole feature of worth for the nude body; the nude body can be prophetic and also not meet conventional definitions of beautiful. Perhaps the motive is best framed then as a pursuit of truth, a category which includes both the prophetic and the beautiful.

Nearly all metaphors and expressions involving nudity or being naked indicate some type of *exposure*. To strip ourselves literally is often to do the same figuratively. In nudity there can be great shame, longing, joy, and vulnerability. Because of the loaded connotation of even the word *nude*, it might be argued that one must train oneself to look at nude art. To react with excessive sweating,

[2] Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, 231.

[3] "Thus did my two wills, one new, and the other old, one carnal, the other spiritual, struggle within me; and by their discord, undid my soul." Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. by Edward B. Pusey (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909), 130. A sensual reaction should not always be assumed to be wrong, however. Further, people often need time in order to transition out of a solely sensual reaction and into a balanced one, or from a completely rational reaction into one that unites the rational and the sensual.

shame, and unrestrained craving is problematic, if these are one's only or primary reactions,[4] for the Bible speaks of the hazards of lust and losing control of one's body (1 Thess 4:4-5). Even within a marriage, surely a context for appropriate nudity, a spouse should have a balanced reaction to the other spouse's body. Our bodies' frequently erotic reaction to nudity, however, should not rule out engagement with it. But we need to be trained, as Jacob attempts with Asher Lev. Human beings are not only intellectual, mind-driven beings, but also *bodies* with desires. Philosopher James K.A. Smith writes,

> [W]e are fundamentally noncognitive, affective creatures. The *telos* to which our love is aimed is not a list of ideas of propositions or doctrines; it is not a list of abstract, disembodied concepts or values...A vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well. This is why such pictures are communicated most powerfully in stories, legends, myths, plays, novels, and films rather than dissertations, messages, and monographs.[5]

I would add paintings to this list. Paintings have stories as well, especially when you look at the body of an artist's work. The artist Nikolai Getman uses both literal and figurative elements, sometimes to enhance the sense of evil, other times to reveal unexpected beauty. Eric Fischl mixes in sarcasm into his "good life" pictures, making a sardonic judgment.

Smith gives us a hermeneutic for this (ad)venture. Ask not what worldviews are embedded in works such as paintings. Rather, ask, "What vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice?"[6] Smith calls it the "good life" while Jesus talks of the "abundant life" (John 10:10). Both give language to the ultimate goal of existence. For life, for art, for paintings, for *nude* paintings, ask, "How

[4] To a degree, a sensual reaction is a necessary part of the progression of moving from one pole, either sensual or rational, to a balanced middle.
[5] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 53.
[6] Ibid., 89.

does this point to the good life?"[7] That is the **outcome** of much of art, to picture and point to the good life. Another way to phrase this is that art, *good* art, works to "set back the boundaries of the fall."[8] The fall of Genesis 3 thwarted the good life in the garden, but art can give a vision of a good life even beyond the beauty of Eden. Or take a philosophical approach from Aristotle: "Art completes what nature cannot bring to a finish. The artist gives us knowledge of nature's unrealized ends."[9] Rather than asking what ideas are infused into a piece of art, we can better honor the artist's intentions and ask of artwork whether it displays "the beauty of creation, the appalling reality of evil, [or] the universal human longing for redemption and a better world."[10]

Lastly, our **method**, or, how should we study nude art? Paul Tillich writes of the "*Protestant* principle" with regard to art. I present a "*prophetic* principle" as an evaluative tool that can be applied to nude art: prophecy is a word of judgment against oppression or injustice, and nude art can be biblically affirmed when it operates within this paradigm. I would define "biblically affirmed" in two ways: First, it means to be able to use Scripture to justify or explain something; second, to justify or explain something using Scripture *in such a way that* builds on a broadly accepted definition of Christianity as enumerated by the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, or more specifically, the Westminster Confession and Heidelberg Catechism. This thesis uses Protestant ideas to continue the tradition and to expand the conception of how Scripture can apply to life.

The nude can mediate a vision of the good life that other ways of presenting the body cannot, perhaps a vision that is even *exclusive* to nudity. Ultimately, this unique gift of nudity is related to the leveling that occurs when bodies are unclothed. There is a commonality of "structure and form," to use

[7] For this thesis, I examine the "good life" as defined by Christianity as seen in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, Westminster Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism.
[8] Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 22. This phrasing of Barrs' intentionally follows the "story" movement of Scripture. See the section "Out of the Cave to Fig-Leafing the Body, or, There and Back Again."
[9] As quoted in Kenneth Clark's *A Study in Ideal Form: The Nude* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 33.
[10] Barrs, *Echoes of Eden*, 131.

Jacob Kahn's phrase, that nude bodies share, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, or size. Human bodies are much more alike than they are different, certainly when compared to plants or animals. But there is also a psychological leveling, for to be nude with someone can often be an occasion of exposure, an occasion of vulnerability, of humility, even.

So, we look at beauty/truth (motive) to picture and point to the good life (outcome) with the process and perspective of prophecy (method). Motive, outcome, and method. The former two give some philosophical and theological underpinnings for this thesis, while the latter, method, is our primary concern.

This thesis begins by presenting a summary of some of the general ways and contexts in which the nude body is presented. I consider modern art's religious considerations from the perspectives of three Christian theologians, each of whom writes on art's relationship with theology—Paul Tillich, Jeremy Begbie, and Nicholas Wolterstorff—before pulling from these scholars what I take to be the three most important considerations when evaluating art. Take note that this thesis is offered from a Christian perspective, and that I fully recognize that other religious traditions may (and do) view these ideas quite differently. The remainder of this work examines the relationship of Old Testament prophecy—defined here as *a word of judgment against oppression or injustice*—to nude art, with particular attention to the episode of Isaiah's nudity in Isaiah 20. This odd biblical instance gives a grid to evaluate the works of the Russian Nikolai Getman (1917–2004) and the American Eric Fischl (b. 1948), whose art I ague is nude art acting as prophecy.

Bodies: The Three Faces of Steve

Before considering ways in which the body is encountered in our culture, we need to clarify our terms. I will use the term "nude" to refer to a body completely unclothed, whereas "naked" might refer to a body in a partial state of undress, such as a man (call him Steve) wearing pants but no shirt. In that

example, Steve would be naked but not nude. The word "naked" connotes defenselessness while "nude" is a term that implies beauty, form, and confidence.[11] The performer is not the *Nude* Cowboy but the *Naked* Cowboy because he wears boots and underwear (and a guitar, if one can be said to "wear" that).

The nude body is frequently shown, used, or encountered in three primary ways: sexually/erotically, clinically, or artistically. There are more than these three, and I am aware of the arguments for separating the sexual and the erotic—I will use these terms interchangeably—but I only wish to broadly expose the reader to the general spheres where nudity is considered appropriate or common.

First, the erotic. I will skip over the private use of the body as erotic (for that matter, with the clinical and artistic as well) and focus on *public* uses. A body may be presented erotically in a night club; streaking on a college campus; on a Super Bowl halftime show stage; in film, paintings, or sculptures; or in a multitude of other places. What sets this category apart is the motivation of the artist (or performer) to sexually arouse the viewer. If the goal is to arouse, or if the body is presented in such a way where it can, within that culture, be interpreted as sexually explicit (and serve little or no other purpose), then we can call it "erotic." If Steve was employed by the website *Guys Gone Wild*, and there was little other purpose for this site's existence than to arouse its visitors, the erotic category would apply. The hyper-sexualization of North American culture since the sexual revolution[12] has made America increasingly comfortable with images and instances designed to titillate. Though desensitized to erotic stimuli, we are nonetheless *human*, and humans, as James Smith earlier insisted, are characterized chiefly by their ability to *desire*. Asher Lev eventually is able to paint nude women without sweating and feeling shameful, but there is still a physical reaction that his body undergoes when

[11] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 23.
[12] See "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" (2010). Accessed September 9, 2014. http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf and Sharna Olfman, *The Sexualization of Childhood* (Westport: Praeger, 2008).

confronted with nudity. That cannot be denied—tamed perhaps, but not denied, for one *should* have some measure of a sensual reaction to bodies. Otherwise, bodies are just conduits for ideas, and we overemphasize the rational reaction.

Second, the clinical. Imagine Steve again, this time as an eighth-grader in a sexual education class. The presenter has elucidated on the dangers of unprotected sex and the necessity of prophylactics and has made use of PowerPoint to illustrate the effects of STDs. The presentation is designed to be educational, informative. The doctor who bravely (foolishly?) volunteered to speak to middle schoolers about how to be sexually responsible simply wants to teach the students best practices for the body. This lesson might involve nudity in a PowerPoint presentation. Or, say Steve were in college and needed some extra money. He might partner with the university's medical school to be a participant with whom medical students learn how to conduct physical exams. Again, the body is nude and public—at least "public" to the medical students and doctors present—and this situation is meant to have no connection to anything erotic. Medical students need to learn how to conduct physical exams on something more than life-size dolls. There are also a multitude of textbooks used in various aspects of medical training that contain both drawn and photographed pictures of nude bodies. Again, bodies in these circumstances are relegated to a clinical purpose.

Third, the artistic. The nude in art is as common as a landscape. Becoming skilled in not only drawing the body but the *nude* body is considered standard practice in art schools, and not simply because of tradition. Yes, the history of art is filled with masters of the nude—Michelangelo with the Sistine Chapel, or paintings by Titian or Renoir—but this subject was chosen because people recognized that the nude body was something supreme over even landscapes or animals. Christianity labels this quality the *imago Dei*, or the image of God, which I will define and discuss below. The beauty of the body can exist independent of its erotic nature; it can also be found in simple physique or form. But the

most holistic view of the body joins together the sensual (at times erotic) and the rational.[13] Viewing nude bodies this way takes time and training and is not "natural." With Asher, legalism had to be abandoned before a nude could be appreciated. There are many other barriers. Say Steve is, again, running low on funds, and this time he reads an ad asking for individuals to model nude for life-drawing courses in his university's Art Department. He applies, is accepted, and shows up at his first gig to model nude for a drawing class of college freshman art majors. Steve is part of a tradition (the nude), and institution (the university), and the class (life drawing) which all seek to teach the young artists how the nude body can be, like a canvas, contemplated and admired. The scene from *My Name Is Asher Lev* is exactly this. Jacob Kahn tells Asher to see the structure and form of a nude body.

In whatever arena one encounters the nude, one must fight the temptation to gravitate toward an extreme. Either pole—complete lust or rational objectification—is imbalanced and unfair to the beauty of what is presented. Either pole sees the body as less than it is. The body is more beautiful than a medical student who sees the body only as a broken machine might realize; the body is more complex than an artist who views the body only as a piece of stunning sculpture may consider. The mind should not overly objectify the body as a theoretical exercise in detached contemplation, nor can the body stew solely in lustful longing. The mind and body can walk the line, sharing rights to the artistic display. There is balance in bifurcated beauty.[14]

[13] By "rational" I mean a logical, distanced, or objectifying view of the body. Someone who approaches the body rationally is not sexually aroused and might see the body simply as a machine that occasionally breaks down (gets sick). Regarding the sensual view, even for Christians the nude body occasionally should be seen as erotic, as sexual. My contention is twofold: seeing the body *only* as sexual/erotic is to see the body only in part; also, that to present the body as erotic/sexual in public is of questionable worth. The prophetic principle is one occasion of public nudity that is biblically affirmable and therefore necessary to speak against oppression and injustice.

[14] There is no small connection here to Calvin's conception of the bipartite human. Since humankind is both body and soul, both aspects together represent the most holistically beautiful uniting of sexual lust and rational thought. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1990), I.15.2.

I will focus on nude art as prophecy, arguing that a nude body in, for example, a painting may be prophetic if it issues a word or judgment against oppression or injustice. This falls as a sub point under the third category: the artistic.

Out of the Cave to Fig-Leafing the Body, or, There and Back Again

Gerardus van der Leeuw, the Dutch phenomenologist and theological aesthetician, divides art into six areas—dance, drama, word, image, architecture, and music—and demonstrates how art and religion began as united fronts that ultimately became decidedly separate.[15] Van der Leeuw claims that these six categories each have an inherent, transcendent quality that is preserved post-fall but remains unresolved until the eschaton. We need art, for without it we not only lose a means of expressing the ultimate but we would lose one of the more humanizing aspects of culture. Friedrich Schleiermacher notes that without art there is a "barrenness and coldness of heart."[16] Art and religion can be friends,[17] for together they can proclaim "thy kingdom come" by displaying images of the good life, or at least images that make humankind yearn for a restored creation.

From the Greeks to Titian to Ingres to Renoir to Lucian Freud, nude art has been a pillar of artistic training, an often-revisited subject matter. To repeat an earlier point, the nude is important to much of western art not because it has a long history in the tradition, but because the body is innately beautiful, powerful, striking, even glorious (1 Cor 15:40). Christian theology locates this rationale in the image of God. A character in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* says that, "I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. . . . It has something to do with the incarnation."[18] The incarnation of Jesus affirmed the value of the human body, certainly including the face. This section proposes and

[15] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: the Holy in Art* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963).
[16] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Responses to its Cultured Critics* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), 206.
[17] "Religion and art stand beside each other like two kindred beings." Ibid., 200.
[18] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 66.

defends that art and religion belong together and that bodies are inherently good, according to Christian Scripture, and yet in a post-fall world they require boundaries, even within art. Without an understanding of the Christian affirmation of the overall body, there can be no affirmation of the *nude* body in Christian theology.

A brief word on this thesis' approach to Scripture. Exegetically, I examine the Christian Bible, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, as a cohesive story, one quite similar to that of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Scripture is a story; more specifically, it is a drama[19] where the earth is the theater for God's glory.[20] Scripture is the united, single, flowing, script of God, a tale that "runs from Genesis to revelation, centering on Christ, not only richly inform[ing] our mind [but] captivat[ing] the heart and the imagination, animating and motivating our action in the world."[21] Scripture tells a story that not only engrosses but also helps people determine their actions, including how to evaluate the pieces of the world, such as its art.

Many Protestant Christians view Scripture as sufficient for interpreting culture, but do not treat it as the sole rule of interpretation. Jesus evaluated culture by Scripture,[22] as did Augustine and many other church fathers, and the Reformers insisted on *sola scriptura*. Michael Horton points out that the phrase is translated as "'*by* Scripture alone,' not 'Scripture alone.'"[23] For there are also catechisms and confessions and creeds that help to frame our society and the Christian's interaction with it. Granted, Scripture does not speak about which person we should marry or whether or not we should make a certain business investment, but it *does* give an evaluative framework for most aspects of life.

[19] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
[20] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* I.6.2.
[21] Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 19. See also Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, Chapter 8 and B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 671.
[22] Matthew 19:1-6; Luke 6:1-5; Luke 19:1-10.
[23] Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 187.

Therefore, I use Scripture to evaluate art.[24] In the passages we will examine, especially portions of Genesis and Isaiah, I primarily assume a Christian biblical theology, which Graeme Goldsworthy defines in part as "show[ing] the relationship of all parts of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ and, therefore, to the Christian."[25]

Christian Scripture affirms the goodness of bodies. Scripture should not be understood to say that there is a sacred and profane divide. Bodies are neither completely demonic nor divine. Creation at one point had God's stamp of approval (Gen 1:31) and, after all, Jesus Christ came as a flesh-covered human, effectively affirming the body via embodiment (John 1:14; Col 1:15). In worship services, congregants eat, drink, smell, sing, talk, listen, stand, sit, and shake hands. We use our bodies. Christian worship has always been embodied and aesthetic, rather than solely didactic.[26] And there is the reality that humans are eternally embodied beings. The incarnation and bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 5:1-5) were previews of the new creation (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-4) where dead men and women regain bodies lost. Augustine even theorizes that the resurrection bodies of martyrs will maintain the scars of their torture and death, what he calls their "marks of glory."[27]

In Scripture, bodies are essential, eternal, praiseworthy, and praised. Thomas Aquinas insists that "God loves all existing things"[28] and that "[t]here is nothing wholly evil in the world, for evil is ever founded on good. . . . Therefore, something is said to be evil through its escaping from the order of some particular good."[29] Not only are bodies to be lauded, but the *products* of the bodies are admirable, too. James Smith notes that Jesus instituted a ceremonial, recurring, and sacred meal that revolves around bread and wine. Jesus did not look out the window and speak to or of *all* creation; he focused

[24] The reverse is also true, that art could be used to understand and give insight to Scripture, especially considering that art comes from humankind, and humankind comes from God.
[25] Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1991).
[26] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 144.
[27] Augustine, *City of God*, ed. R.W. Dyson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.
[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2013), I.20.3.
[29] Ibid., 510.

specifically on the bread and wine—products whose creation require human hands.[30] For even the "grain and grapes" of Communion are not grain and grapes; they are bread and wine—parts of culture, and products of man's hands.[31]

Genesis relates that initially humans were "naked and unashamed" (Gen 2:25). Soon after, however, comes the most haunting question in all of Scripture: "Who told you that you were naked?" Adam and Eve were blissfully naked on one day and then clothed, shamed, exiled, and cursed the next. That transition is relevant for our discussion of bodies, nudity, and boundaries.

In the beginning and before their crime and punishment, Adam and Eve were made to be like God, bearing his image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). The *imago Dei* is not a trait such as "personality, understanding, the will and its freedom, self-consciousness, intelligence, spiritual being, spiritual superiority, [or] the immortality of the soul."[32] Rather, to be an image bearer means to have a unique relationship[33] with God that results in certain actions which rightly represent God to the world.[34] A human might *badly* image forth God, but that does not make that person unhuman, just a poor one.[35]

Then Eve ate, as did Adam, and everything changed (Gen 3:6). This included clothes. But clothes did not spontaneously generate from their bodies; the environment which Adam was told to "work and keep" (Gen 2:15) provided the clothes. First, the plants provided loincloths (via leaves) and then the animals (via skin). Consider exactly what these two humans covered up once they had sinned and had their eyes opened. There was no mark of Cain and no removal of body parts, nor were clothes made to cover feet, head, or hands. Rather, their *genitals* were covered with "loincloths" (Gen 3:8). Their

[30] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 149.
[31] Ibid., 199.
[32] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 149.
[33] Claus Westermann names Karl Barth, J.J. Stamm, W. Riedel, Th.C. Vriezen, V. Maag, and himself all as individuals who conceive of the *imago Dei* as a relationship between humans and their creator. Ibid., 150-151, 158.
[34] "There is only one proper image by means of which God shows himself in the world, and that is humanity." H. Wildberger in Ibid., 153. "So the person as such, created by God, is God's witness." W.H. Schmidt in Ibid., 153.
[35] James Cone might phrase this differently, but his view and mine seem to be the same. "But in [humankind's] passion to become superhuman, man becomes subhuman, estranged from the source of his being." *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 63.

biologically male and female distinctions were hidden. One can see why Christian history jumped so quickly from this fact to a denigration of the body and sexuality, yet God did not *remove* their sexuality when he used animal skin to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness; he just placed a boundary on its publicity. Westermann proposes that the act of clothing Adam and Eve contains within it "something positive as well."[36] Adam and Eve covered as a result of their nude embarrassment, but there is also a growth in cleverness (Gen 3:22). Westermann compares this to a child becoming an adult, a transition wrought with a period of shame as well as increased knowledge and maturity. The boundary of clothing is a result of shame but also a means by which humankind can go forward and not dwell in the embarrassment or shame.

The first couple walked in the pre-fall garden naked and without shame for a period of time, but immediately following sin they decided to wear clothes. Why the change in behavior? One possibility is that their consciousness and conception of their nudity became different. Sin led to a boundary of the body, whereas before this was not the case. Before the fall they did not even *realize* they were naked, so it didn't matter that their genitals were exposed. But the introduction of sin suddenly, radically, and unfortunately bent the world. If Adam and Eve were "naked and unashamed" in Genesis 2, then it fits to say that they were clothed and shamed in Genesis 3. Shame, discomfort from dishonor or "a reaction to being unmasked or exposed,"[37] seems to be one result of sin. Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "The proof that sex is a very crucial point in the spirituality of sinful man is that shame is so universally attached to the performance of the sexual function."[38] Shame is attached to exposure, exposure to nudity, and nudity is related to sex.[39] Niebuhr locates the beginning of the link between sex/nudity and shame in the

[36] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 251.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 238. This is an overstatement, and I would agree that *many* cultures—perhaps not *universally*—pair shame and sex.
[39] Westermann helpfully notes that we need not *directly* and immediately connect nudity to sex, for Adam and Eve were conscious of each other's sexuality already in 2:23. They were naked, unashamed, *and* aware of sexuality before the fall. *Genesis 1-11*, 251.

aftermath of the fall.[40] I would agree with this but with the exception that shame does not necessarily need to be the primary or only way we relate to the body.

Shame is a result of an individual's fear of being truly known, or fear of exposure. Humans are shamed first before God, even *primarily* before God, which secondarily translates to shame before others. Offering a nude body to another gives the receiver the chance to know us, reject us—to hurt us. We fear someone seeing our dark self as we also fear rejection.

Shame is also a result of objectification. To objectify is to deny the unity of a body. It is to see only the flesh and not the spirit, to err on one side of the duality. When we feel shame, we are experiencing a reaction to our failure to be appropriately human. Shame often results when we do something that dehumanizes another or ourselves. Think of activities that emphasize the *instigator's* pleasure and power in an act, such as rape. With this an individual is using another's body as a means to a satisfying end. Rape ignores the consensual beauty of sex. Rape entails the rapist seeing the body of another as a tool, as a pleasure-delivery device, even if that pleasure is found only in the act of power or domination. There is no submission or offering of the self to another. That is objectification. The result for the victim typically (and unfortunately) is shame.[41]

Granted the abuses of nudity, nudity can still be appropriate in the right context. Adam and Eve were at first unashamed because nudity was fine in *all* contexts—that is, until the fall. Erotic/sexual presentations of the nude body often objectify, and the same can be said of clinical settings, where bodies are seen as machines that annoyingly break down. But there is an avenue for artistic portrayals of the nude body to honor the structure and form as well as for the nude to function as protest.

There are times when the shedding of clothing functions as an act of protest, protest that can align itself with forms of prophecy. Consider Sojourner Truth removing her clothes to bare her breasts to

[40] Genesis 3:7—"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."
[41] See Sara Sharratt, *Gender, Shame, and Sexual Violence: The Voices of Witnesses and Court Members at War Crimes Tribunals* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

an audience that believed she was a man. She declared that her breasts had nourished many a white baby and that she would be happy if those in the audience wished to suck her breasts now.[42] Sojourner Truth used her naked body as a means of protest against the oppression and injustice of patriarchal assumptions, simultaneously shaming her detractors and actually through her nakedness not shaming or embarrassing herself, but elevating her body via its exposure. She broke cultural boundaries of propriety in order to conform herself to a different set of boundaries that legitimized her bodily protest. She "shamed" herself to shame the audience, but really she *transcended* her shame, harnessed it, and directed it in an act of protest, an act of prophecy. To lose clothing, to become nude in the act of protest—this makes sense, for nudity recalls both the hopeful yet ultimately sorrowful beginning in Adam and the sorrowful yet ultimately hopeful end in Jesus. The story of humankind begins and ends with nudity, each fitted to its context. Naked humanity begins in a good garden that becomes bad, and humanity (as we know it) ends on a cross, a cross that becomes the means by which Jesus creates a "new humanity" (Eph 2:15).

In *Telling Truths in Church,* theologian Mark Jordan pairs together Adam and Eve's loincloths with Christianity's habit of covering a crucified Jesus. (To be historically accurate, artists would need to be consistent with Roman tradition and depict those crucified as nude.) In nearly all artistic representations of Jesus on the cross, Jesus is naked but not nude.[43] We cover Jesus because of sin.[44] A nude Jesus would feel improper, because we as humans do not know how to carefully and lust-lessly deal with the body. Without control over our bodies (either our physiological or psychological reactions), we require boundaries. Clothing provides that.[45] The naked body is not evil or sinful, but rather our

[42] Larry G. Murphy, *Sojourner Truth: A Biography* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 82.
[43] Historically, while many paintings and sculptures might have portrayed Jesus as nude, those were later covered or altered.
[44] Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 86.
[45] Clothing is also a source of life, as Walter Brueggemann writes: "[Adam and Eve] cannot deal with their shame. But God can, will, and does. To be clothed is to be given life." *Genesis Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 50.

reaction to the body can be wrong; therefore, the body should not *always* be covered with clothes.[46] Again, we are a battleground.

To conclude, bodies are good. Even *nude* bodies are good. That God covered Adam and Eve's bodies does not mean that bodies are bad but that they require boundaries. Just as humans have guidelines for clothing in our interaction with each other, Christians need guidelines for evaluating art's presentation of the nude. According to Scripture, there is and should be private sexual pleasure with the bodies of those united by marriage (see, for example, the Song of Songs[47]). Publicly,[48] however, while there is historical precedence in Christian history for individuals being baptized naked so that converts could identify with the nudity of Jesus *and* Adam, nudity beyond the bedroom is rarely accepted, yet biblically there is a case for nudity within art when it is presented as a part of a prophetic act. To ignore or demonize the body is to be guilty of a type of Gnosticism. Always nude and never nude are two legalistic polar extremes that miss the borders set in place after the fall. We need a balance. We need boundaries. There is a place between the poles, and that place is prophetic art, the point at which art and religion can comfortably reside.

Tillich: On the Terrible and the Tender

I once asked abstract expressionist Makoto Fujimura whether I as a viewer had an obligation to stay faithful to the artist's or my own views when interpreting a painting. He said that this was a false

[46] Nor does any of this mean that there is any inherent connection between sex and sin. Brueggemann writes, "But to find…any linkage between sex and sin is not faithful to the narrative." *Genesis Interpretation*, 42.

[47] While there is no scholarly consensus that the lovers are married, there is support. See Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 575 and Tremper Longman III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2001), 59. Regardless, according to Longman, the poem's "primary intention is to address the issues of human love and relationships," which includes sexual pleasure (62).

[48] Here is a small selection of biblical instances of nudity: Leviticus 18 & 20; Ezekiel 16:37, 23:10; Nahum 3:5; Matthew 25:36. No examples in Scripture come to mind where non-marital (public) nudity is presented as shameless. The mysterious man, possibly Mark himself, in Mark 14:51-52 runs away naked and is likely not only afraid because he was seized but also shamed at his linen cloth having been torn off. There is no indication in the passage that his nudity was intentional or shameless. Yet absence of examples does not a commandment make.

dichotomy, that art should be generative and not restrictive, and that the chief job of art is to provoke, even if this means that the viewer forms a narrative the artist did not intend. A great work of art should create something new, even if that newness is in the mind of the viewer. Christian curator and author Daniel Siedell sees art's function as being communicative and contemplative.[49] The artist communicates and the viewer contemplates, but to simplify a piece of art to having a single worldview is to strangle the experience. Siedell writes, "The challenge is to experience art's transcendence, not simply to *interpret* it, *decode* it, or *define* it."[50] Art can induce revelation, or as Rowan William puts it, "Revelation…is essentially to do with what is *generative* in our experience—events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life."[51] Modern art can provide viewers with a revelatory experience of prophetic proportions, if we are able to listen to and contemplate the true, good, and beautiful. The world of modern art, particularly *expressionist* modern art, provokes this, as Paul Tillich argues.

German theologian Paul Tillich knew both the terrible and the tender,[52] from his experiences in the trenches of World War I to the solace he found in modern art *during* that war. Modern art was a respite, a glimpse of something beyond the war. "Modern art is not propaganda but revelation. It shows that the reality of our existence is as it is. It does not cover up the reality in which we are living."[53] Rather, modern art enlightens. Tillich claimed to have learned more from paintings than books on theology[54] and to see more sacred content in a tree by van Gogh than many paintings with explicitly religious subject matter.[55]

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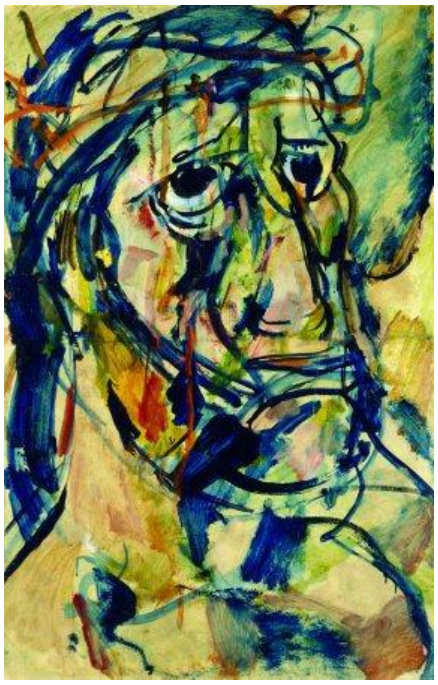
[49] Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery (Cultural Exegesis): A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.
[50] Ibid., 39.
[51] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 134.
[52] Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 174.
[53] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 147.
[54] Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 18.
[55] Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 89.

For Tillich, art *reflects* the ideals of a time more than it *creates* them.[56] Good art reflects but does not try to simply reproduce or be overly sentimental. He lumps all artists from Rembrandt through roughly 1900 into a sub-category of the naturalism he so hated called "beautifying realism."[57] Then modern art changed everything. Expressionism, a movement within the broader category of modern art, attached itself to existentialism, and both expressionism and existentialism ask questions for which, according to Tillich, only Christianity can give the answers.[58] Take Georges Rouault's *Head of Christ* (Fig 1). The painting acknowledges the evil and suffering of the world and yet also gives Christianity's answer to the darkness—Christ. The painting asks the question of why there is evil, recognizes evil, and answers evil with Christ's defeat of it during the crucifixion.



(Figure 1)

[56] Here, Schleiermacher would disagree and argue that art has nearly conversion-like abilities: "Suppose there are occasions where a person envisages his rising beyond the finite, where his sense for the highest emerges in an instant as though by an inner and immediate illumination to surprise him by its splendor. If so, then I believe that the sight of a great and sublime work of art might accomplish this miracle more than anything else." *On Religion*, 199.

[57] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 100.

[58] Ibid., 156 & 184.

Expressionism—and keep in mind that Getman and Fischl fall within this movement—is "the artistic impulse…to break through the ordinarily encountered reality instead of copying it or anticipating its essential fulfillment."[59] Expressionism dwells in the land of in-between. Tillich, partially because of his experiences in World War I, knew the world could be cruel, and that to ignore it as such would be a falsehood. For art to be honest, it needed to have as its metaphorical (and sometimes literal) subject matter "man crucified, not God-Man resurrected," for "[no] convincing image of glory has been produced so far."[60] Expressionism deals more with the crucifixion than the resurrection because the artists feel that is being true to their times. Triumphalism and the flawless worlds of Thomas Kinkade are disingenuous. "I would say this is an expression of the honesty of our artists that they don't feel adequate yet to depicting [sic] symbols of glory, and they should not attempt to do so prematurely."[61]

Tillich says religion is the "substance of culture,"[62] that religion is "ultimately concerned, asking the question of 'to be or not to be' with respect to the meaning of one's existence."[63] Nothing, therefore, is secular.[64] And thus, for Tillich, there is certainly no secular art.[65] All people and all cultural artifacts are religious because each "has a religious dimension insofar as it contributes to the answer of the question of the meaning of our existence and existence universally."[66] Art expresses "the artist's sensitive and honest search for ultimate meaning and significance in terms of his own contemporary culture."[67] While the conclusion of the artist might differ from one country, time, or culture to another, the *search* is the common element. All humans have something or someone for which they are

[59] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 159.
[60] Ibid., 138.
[61] Ibid., 154.
[62] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 22.
[63] Ibid., 92.
[64] There is plenty that is profane, however, for much mocks God and is irreligious. But even the most mocking attempt is rooted in a search for or expression of meaning, certainly a religious (or sacred) activity.
[65] Schleiermacher would go further than this and say that the "whole world is a gallery of religious scenes, and every man finds himself in the midst of them." *On Religion*, 181.
[66] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 166.
[67] Ibid., 232.

ultimately concerned.[68] According to Tillich, everyone would be willing to become a martyr at some point, for we all—deep down for some, on the surface for others—have an "ultimate concern."[69] Painting, *expressionist* painting, is the catalogue of this genuine longing.

For Tillich, all artifacts of culture are therefore religious because they were made by humans, and humans cannot help but seek and express ultimate concern. With this idea, Tillich challenged the sacred/secular distinction. To summarize: "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concerns of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion."[70]

What exactly *is* that religious element/dimension of art? Tillich locates this in the artistic style, such as naturalism, idealism, and expressionism.[71] Naturalism attempts only to reproduce, and it catches only the surface layer of reality. Idealism strives for that which is not and misses the reality of the world. Expressionism balances the two extremes and is authentic art, "an otherwise hidden quality of a piece of the universe…[which] is united with an otherwise hidden receptive power of the mind." Art is inauthentic when it "copies the surface instead of expressing the depth or because it expresses the subjectivity of the creating artist instead of his artistic encounter with reality."[72]

Expressionism achieves what Tillich calls "belief-ful realism":

> Two elements mark out belief-ful realism: on the one hand, a stress on the real and the concrete, *a refusal to ignore things as they appear to us*; on the other, a recognition that finite forms point beyond themselves to an *ultimate meaning*, the infinite power and depth of reality.[73]

[68] Ecclesiastes 3:11 is the Old Testament answer to this, that all people have "eternity" in their heart and seek union with it.
[69] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 33.
[70] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: University Press, 1964), 42.
[71] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 173.
[72] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 64.
[73] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 25. Emphasis mine.

Here Tillich battles with dualism, affirming and uniting sacred (the transcendent) and secular (the material/immanent). Art shows the ultimate through the finite.[74] This "ultimate" is not just a worldview embedded in art waiting to be found, but rather the ultimate is experienced, encountered, and formed by wrestling with a piece. We use a Janus-like method of study in belief-ful realism because we look equally at the *realism of the world* and the *beauty of the ultimate*.

While belief-ful realism calls attention to the real-ness of the world as well as to an ultimate meaning, Tillich's most pertinent aesthetic idea for our purposes of finding the prophetic in nude art is his idea of the "Protestant principle." Tillich was a Lutheran, and Protestantism is a tradition that holds to the "priesthood of all believers," an idea which levels clergy and laity by refusing to separate the sacred and secular in art.[75] While Tillich adamantly believed all art was a sacred work of human hands pointing to an ultimate reality, he still held that—and this is the best summary of his Protestant principle—"nothing which is less than ultimate should be allowed to usurp the supremacy which belongs to God alone."[76] Jeremy Begbie phrases this even more directly by saying, "the finite cannot hold the infinite."[77] The finite is a marker, a sign; yet the marker and the sign are *not themselves* ultimate. It is like the Buddhist *kōan* that says that the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon—it is only a finger. Honor the moon, not the finger. Art has the ability, imperfect as it may be, to point toward, call attention to, and acknowledge the ultimate—God. Tillich holds that nothing is absolute but God—not sacred texts, other religions, philosophies, or governments—and to claim otherwise is idolatry. Applied to art, the Protestant principle can judge works based on whether they give temporal answers to spiritual questions.

[74] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 256.
[75] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 36.
[76] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 26.
[77] Ibid., 49.

The Protestant principle underscores "the infinite distance between God and man"[78] by emphasizing God and deemphasizing humans. When we apply the Protestant principle to art, we learn that Tillich would locate the value of a work of art in its ability to acknowledge humans' distance from God. What I am calling the *prophetic principle*[79] is not about separation or estrangement or even primarily about idolatry; it is about commentary, or *judgment* against oppression or injustice and how nudity plays its role in this.

Of all the pieces of art in the world, Tillich chose Picasso's *Guernica* (Fig 2)—the same piece Jacob Kahn selected for young Asher Lev to memorize for his first lesson—as the best example of his principle and how Protestantism can be inspired not to shy away from sin and darkness.

(Figure 2)

Guernica was painted by Picasso in Paris in 1937, in response to the Nationalists who, during the Spanish Civil War and supported by Nazi Germany, bombed the Spanish town of Guernica. Tillich saw *Guernica* as a great Protestant painting because it shows "disruptiveness, existential doubt, emptiness and

[78] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 119.

[79] Tillich uses the phrase "prophetic principle" in one of his works to state that a prophet who points to God is *not* God, much the same as the Buddhist *kōan* about the moon and the finger. This thesis' prophetic principle makes a different statement: that a certain form of nude can be biblically affirmed when the body is used as part of a word of judgment against oppression or injustice. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 227.

meaninglessness."[80] There is no explicit religious content (unless one counts the pair of figures on the left hand side as a pietà).[81] The painting shows a town on fire, citizens writhing in pain, and many symbols of estrangement and defeat. The very cubist form of the painting, broken planes and fractured figures, mimics the distress of the event. The form emphasizes content, the essence of modern art. *Guernica* is certainly a great "Protestant" painting (insofar as it acknowledges depravity without setting up a system usurping God), but it is a painting that gives no answer in the way Rouault's *Head of Christ* does. *Guernica* gives no easy answers and does not descend into idolatry.

(Figure 3)

One criticism of Tillich is that he almost seems satisfied for modern art to remain where it is, focusing on the "crucifixion" of man, the darkness of the world. Reality is harsh, yes, and most art that points to glory is horribly executed kitsch, but Tillich fails to provide a pathway to resolve this problem. Art should (and can!) reflect a crucified world—the crucifixion is, after all, by this thesis' conception, the greatest act of prophecy—but art can also point to a hopeful resurrection, even a figurative one. Each piece of art certainly cannot portray the entire story all the time, but an artist's body of work would not

[80] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 96.
[81] My thanks to Professor Larry Bouchard for pointing this out.

have the ring of truth if was totally hope*less* or totally hope*ful*.[82]

If we take Christian Scripture to be a story, as discussed above, then the fullness of the story is not understood unless an artist engages with creation, fall, *and* redemption. This is not saccharine, empty optimism but substantive hope. Asher Lev fails to do this. The novel begins with an allusion to a painting, *Brooklyn Crucifixion* (Fig 3)—actually painted in real life by *My Name Is Asher Lev*'s author Chaim Potok—that Asher paints showing his mother in a crucifix pose. Asher's goal is to emphasize the extent of her suffering. Asher offers no resurrection, either literal or figurative. Consider Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. While Luther's work certainly asserts the realities of sin, it also points to the hope of joy in Jesus Christ. Luther does not leave people in their sin but assures Christians of the peaceful endgame.

That leads to my second criticism, namely that Tillich certainly talks of "ultimate concern" but does not give clear preference for the best form for that concern to take in the Christian faith. Specifically, Tillich's approach to aesthetics lacks sufficient emphasis on the cornerstone of Scripture, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Tillich acknowledges the primacy of Jesus in other writings[83] and contexts but never in relation to his evaluations of and requirements for art.

Tillich started the conversation of how Christian academics can approach modern art, for which he is to be praised. His views would resonate with John Calvin, who writes regarding "secular writers":

> …let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole function

[82] Other religions have other definitions of ultimate hope, but for Christians, the primary source of redemption is through the resurrection of Jesus and how it points to the restoration of creation in the eschaton. The forms of hope that aren't located in Jesus are legion. Suffice it to say, in a Christian framework, which this thesis adopts, hope, redemption, and restoration are located in the risen body of Jesus (Matt 28).

[83] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 112. Even in this example, Tillich discusses the cross/crucifixion and not the resurrection.

> of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear.[84]

Even those outside the church can provide insight for "in house" church matters as well as insight for issues which affect all of humanity. But Tillich leaves us slightly naked and alone once we decide to move beyond the existential angst that is his approach to modern art. We look to Jeremy Begbie and Nicholas Wolterstorff for some guidance before I synthesize these three thinkers into an alternative system of art analysis.

A Rung on Jacob's Ladder

Jeremy Begbie labels his approach to Scripture as "incarnational trinitarian theology."[85] His theology is shaped by how we as humans can be actively engaged in the world (rather than just present), as modeled by the Trinitarian God of Christian theology. One principle is that of co-creation. Humans create similarly and differently than God—similarly in that God and humans can fashion something new, differently in that God can create *ex nihilo*. "Human creativity is supremely about sharing through the Spirit in the creative purpose of the Father as he draws all things to himself through his Son."[86] All aspects of human culture, all its creations, both material and ideological, share a likeness to God's own omnipotent creative power. Perhaps then we would be better named "sub-creators."

In a single passage Begbie addresses my two criticisms of Tillich: "Beauty…has all too often been abstracted from time and temporal movement, and turned into a static, timeless quality. Suppose, however, we refuse to divorce it from the transformation of the disorder of creation in the history of Jesus Christ."[87] Begbie acknowledges that the fullness of truth, goodness, and beauty are found in Jesus Christ—naming clearly the parameters of the "ultimate concern" in the Christian faith—while also

[84] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.15.
[85] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 228.
[86] Ibid., 179.
[87] Ibid., 224.

pointing beyond the "crucifixion" in the world to the transformed, redeemed creation. Beauty is not a set of objective principles like order, symmetry, and harmony—and on that point Tillich would agree—but beauty is rather to be found in Jesus and his new creative work in righting the post-fall world. Art seeking *this* kind of beauty finds its inspiration in the Spirit of God. "Art which truly bears an imprint of the Spirit will thus not so much hark back to an imagined paradise, as anticipate within space and time, provisionally but substantially, the final transfiguration of the cosmos."[88] The cultural mandate to "work and keep," which includes the sub-creation of art, given through Adam to all humankind, is a gift rather than a burdensome command.[89]

Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the co- or sub-creative act of art "world projection."[90] Painting has the ability to portray a world separate from this one, yet similar. Artists project worlds whenever they make an artifact. Consider this as an extension of James Smith's notion that we all long for the "good life." Artists, and certainly painters, use fiction (even the fiction of paint on a canvas) to present another option. It is here in this projection of a world that is not quite achieved that an artist might engage in prophecy.

> [T]he traditional artist aimed to produce a work true in significant respects to what his community found real and important, our high-art artist in the modern West characteristically *sets himself over against society*. He aims not to confirm them in their convictions, but to alter their convictions, by showing them how things are, illuminating them, so as thereby to awaken them from their somnolence, or release them from their self-indulgent ideologies, or energize them into action…[T]he consequence of the work of artists who aim to produce works true in significant respects to what they themselves in distinction from their society find real and important is often that others find their convictions altered.[91]

In this scenario, artists show *this* world for what it is and show a *new* world for what it could be.

[88] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 228.
[89] Ibid., 256.
[90] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1980), 122.
[91] Ibid., 146. Emphasis mine.

Artists are not obligated to sanctify but to show. Asher's teacher Jacob Kahn chastises Asher for his desire to try and sanctify the world. Kahn says that the world is dark and harsh, and therefore Kahn's art reflects that. He occasionally sees beauty, but he says he does not "sculpt and paint to make the world sacred."[92] The world is "wild and raging and hideous, and only occasionally beautiful."[93] But beauty is still present. This is not only a crucified world, yet it is also not a completely resurrected one. Using the formula Begbie broadly outlines—that of co-creation with God and recognition of the death of God but also his resurrection in Christ—gives artists the option to project a world that is beyond and better than the present without disrespecting present suffering. Prophetic art can honor the pain and call for or show an alternative. Artists can reflect the Golgotha of now and the glory of later, though perhaps not at the same time or in the same work.

As the ladder that Jacob saw in Genesis 28:11 bridged the space between heaven and earth, so too do Begbie and Wolterstorff unite heaven and earth with the way their theories allow artists to craft and create in our present world with one eye on the temporal and one on the transcendent. Let me add one more rung. We need to have a certain attitude before we begin our analysis of Getman and Fischl, and we also need a framework to guide our analysis of the paintings. Our posture before art should be that of seeking understanding. Seeking to understand the artist, artifact, and arena must come before judging any of the three. We need to engage in exegesis before eisegesis, to listen to a work before speaking of it.[94] Any work of art deserves and requires attention to the following:

1. **Artist**—life, biography, autobiography, interviews. Artists have a history which can be accessed either through their own written documents or those others have written

[92] Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 226.
[93] Ibid., 226.
[94] One biblical example of the look-and-listen-before-judging formula is how the Apostle Paul engages with thinkers outside the Christian faith in his sermon at the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17:16-34. Paul had to understand the poets he quotes before commenting on the helpfulness of their words for his message.

about them.[95] Artists paint what they know, so look at what personal events might have shaped the artist.

2. **Artifact**—medium, craft, subject matter, artistic style. A painting employs a certain medium—oil, tempura, etc.—and each movement within the history of painting has fairly standard rules that are helpful to consult. If an artist draws a bowl of fruit or even a nude on a couch, there are ostensibly certain standards by which to evaluate the artist's craft.
3. **Arena**—cultural and historical context. This final item is twofold. Regarding our three headings, if a focus on the artist is a narrow look at the creator and a focus on the artifact a narrow look at the work, then the arena suggests the bird's-eye view. First, there is a socio-cultural period that might bear upon the artist or the artifact. Second, there is the cultural *impact* of the artifact. Ask yourself how the artifact was received by the culture and throughout history. An artist's intention might have been completely ignored, missed, or refuted by the receiving audience.

Take Picasso's *Guernica* for example. Briefly and simply, consider the three criteria of artist, artifact, and arena. Picasso read in a newspaper that the village of Guernica had been bombed in northern Spain, his homeland. He soon undertook to paint a massive work, roughly 10'x25', to express his disgust with the death and destruction of his countrymen. The subject matter in the painting concerns individuals who are dead, mourning, or attempting to escape fires. Interestingly, without the painting's title, one might never directly associate the painting with the tragedy in Guernica, Spain. Historically, this work was done before the start of the Second World War, as Hitler was continuing to gain power, as European fascism snowballed. This painting protests this specific tragedy inflicted on the

[95] While certainly not everything an artist says (or that others say about the artist) can be completely trusted, there is still worth in knowing an artist's life story.

citizens of Guernica but has since become an international protest symbol against war's collateral damage.

I use this threefold method of analysis as I approach each work by Getman and Fischl. Before turning to Getman and Fischl, however, I will lay out the criteria for prophecy and suggest how Isaiah's situation brings understanding to nude art as prophecy.

Prophecy: Thus Saith

The primary lens through which this thesis looks at nude art is Old Testament prophecy. I will look at the history of biblical prophets, the different types of prophecy, and the features of prophecy before giving special attention to Isaiah.

Both art and prophecy must do more than portray or mirror reality; art and prophecy also *critique* reality. The prophetic principle can be employed when evaluating the use of nudity, especially in modern and contemporary art. Author and professor Leland Ryken writes, "As with Christian writers, so too with Christian critics: their calling is to wrest beauty and meaning from a fallen world and to help others to do so."[96] The prophetic principle is a way for people to use Scripture to wrest beauty from certain types of paintings that may not appear traditionally "beautiful." And as we criticize, we judge. Like God, when we judge we should also work toward re-creation.[97] Prophecy itself is tied closely to critique and, what Niebuhr calls, a "passion for justice."[98] And if an artist critiques through his or her art, chances are he or she is likely judging *something* and therefore operating in the realm of prophecy. The prophetic principle simply stated is this: *the way in which some modern and contemporary artists use nudity in their paintings acts as and aligns with one strain of Old Testament prophecy—a word of judgment against oppression or injustice.*

[96] Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 244.
[97] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 219.
[98] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Problem of a Protestant Social Ethic," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XV.1 (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1959), 11.

While prophecy may either edify or judge, its intent is to communicate *truth*. Like Dan Siedell's goal for art, prophecy is likewise for communication and contemplation. Prophecy concerns a desire for goodness and beauty and begins with a statement of truth, a "redescription" of the world as that which God wills. Scripture first gives the title of "prophet" to Abraham, but it is Moses who sets the precedent for prophetic behavior (Gen 20:7). The working definition of prophecy this thesis uses—*a word of judgment against oppression or injustice*—is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt.[99] The Hebrews, post-exodus, were too frightened to hear from God directly—God was all thunder and lightning and smoke—so they requested a buffer, Moses.[100]

The primary job of the prophet was to bear (or receive) the word[101] and to bring God's word of truth to a people or individuals, words that were considered to be the literal words of God.[102] A prophet brought the private into the open by exposing sins often in public ways. This word was a Wolterstorffian act of "world projection."[103] Prophets responded to a "divine compulsion"[104] and proclaimed or demanded a new, true reality, rather than the false reality adhered to by those to whom the prophet spoke.[105] Walter Brueggemann writes that the purpose of prophetic ministry was to "nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the

[99] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 16.
[100] The notion that God is a being or force which must be filtered is as old as civilization and as current as the moral of Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2001). The novel proposes that God is simply too much for humans to process, so religions have stepped in as mediators to filter the God-Being to the world, thereby validating portions of all religions. We can digest God's story and self when facilitated by religions. Raw, he is too much.
[101] Childs calls attention to Jeremiah 18:18 in his assertion that the prophet bears the word, that God speaks to his people not through wizards like other nations, but by his word. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 124.
[102] Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 155. See also Deuteronomy 18:18.
[103] See the section "A Rung on Jacob's Ladder."
[104] Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 124.
[105] "Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us. There is a yearning for energy in a world grown weary." Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 111.

dominant culture around us."[106] The Old Testament in particular is a chronicle of God's word giving meaning to history, often elaborated by the prophets.[107]

Priests also engaged with God's word regularly, most often by carrying out and teaching the Mosaic Law.[108] A priest separated or distinguished between the "clean and the unclean, the pure and the sacred."[109] *Wise men* might get a "word" from anywhere—any culture, context, or mind. But *prophets* were the exception. A prophet was on the boundary of society between the priests (temple) and outside world (wise men). Again, you could say the prophets not only mediated God's word but also mediated the words between the priests and the wise men. I will demonstrate that Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl are mostly "worldly-wise" wise men that occasionally morph into prophets.

The Old Testament is filled with prophets—Abraham[110], Moses[111], Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, etc.—and each was given a charge to speak a different word to a certain people or person. Still, these prophets also shared several common features. Many prophets, even those outside of the Old Testament, acknowledged the unacknowledged (Nathan pinpointing David as "the man" who committed murder and adultery [2 Sam 12]); had and shared visions; cited an outside source for their material (typically God or gods); used their own iconography of symbols (such as Ezekiel's "wheels" and Abraham's smoking fire pot [Ezek 1; Gen 15]); and renarrated the dominant story of a culture. Others often worked by contrast, describing the evils of a nation and then pointing to a holy God. Most prophets had the office placed upon them, rather than it being willfully pursued or assumed.

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[106] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 13. James K.A. Smith would call this a reworking of the culture's "social imaginary," a term coopted from Charles Taylor. See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 65. This is done by the prophet first offering what Brueggemann calls a "redescription" of the world. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 2.

[107] "The Old Testament is not a message about divine acts in history as such, but about the power of the word of God…[History] receives its meaning from the divine word, and not *vice versa*." Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 337.

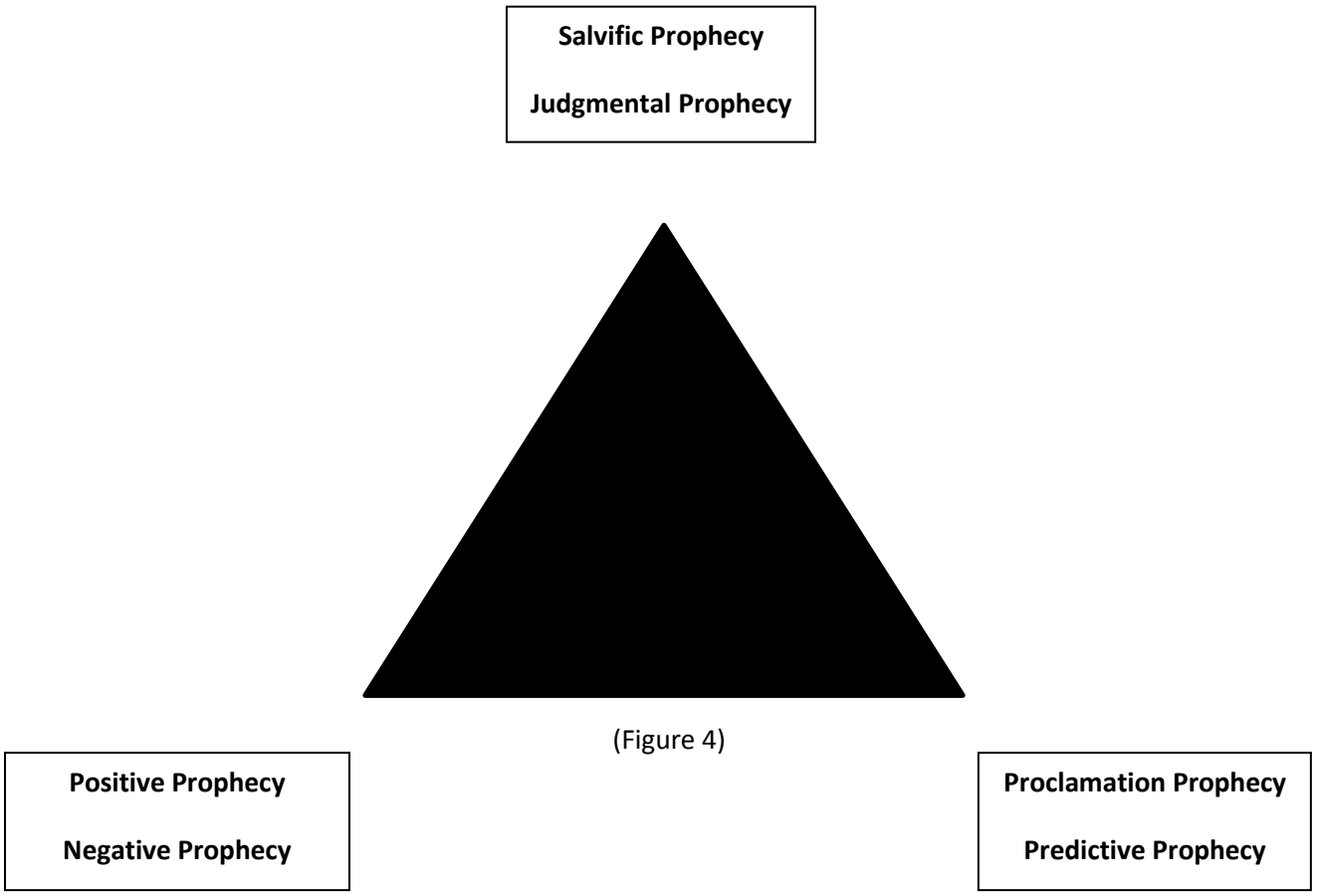
[108] Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 150.

[109] Ibid., 153. See also Leviticus 10:10.

[110] Genesis 20:7.

[111] Deuteronomy 18:15; 34:10.

Each prophet had his own message, but the message and method of delivery could vary. Much of prophecy can be divided into three categories (Fig 4):



(Figure 4)

This paradigm covers the variety of forms in which a prophetic message can function and be delivered. Most prophetic words fall into one of each of these three categories:

- *Salvific prophecy* brings a word of salvation or good news. This type of prophecy encourages, praises, blesses, and affirms the true, the good, and the beautiful. Prophets often call this the "day of the Lord" (Mal 4:1-3).[112]
- *Judgmental prophecy* brings a word of judgment.[113] It condemns, rebukes, denounces, and criticizes the false, the bad, and the ugly. While the "day of the Lord" is a time of salvation (see above), it is also a time of judgment for the unrighteous (Zeph 1).

- *Positive prophecy* urges or "summons"[114] a people (or an individual) to actively begin doing something not already being done. For example, Moses gave the Law to the Hebrews which said to worship and fear the Lord God (Exo 23:25; Deut 6:13).
- *Negative prophecy* urges a people to cease doing something *currently* being done. Jeremiah told Israel to stop worshipping idols (Jer 44).

- *Proclamation prophecy* states that "this *is*."[115] It announces a present reality and might describe either the upright qualities of a people or their sinful state (Exo 33:5). B.S. Childs writes that these "men of insight" were more often "forthtellers not foretellers," "proclaimers rather than authors."[116]

[112] Rather than "salvific" and "judgmental," Brueggemann uses the language of "energizing" and "criticism." See Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 14 & 67. Salvific prophecy gives energy, and judgmental prophecy criticizes.
[113] Childs notes Jeremiah and Jonah as two of many examples of prophets bringing a specific word of judgment. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 127.
[114] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 7.
[115] Childs distinguishes between a prophet who "describes" Israel's sins (proclamation prophecy) and a prophet who speaks of the "consequence of the sin" (predictive prophecy). Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 126.
[116] B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 122.

- *Predictive prophecy* states that "this *will be*." It is forward-looking and may be a forecast of redemption/restoration or of *Sturm und Drang*.[117] The seventh and eighth chapters of Isaiah are a future prediction of the messiah that the New Testament applied to Jesus Christ (Matt 1:23).

We will operationally define one strain of prophecy—and this is a trimmed-down definition from the fullness that prophecy actually is, as we have just seen—as *a word of judgment against oppression or injustice* and apply this to the prophet Isaiah, whose words to Judah place him within the categories of judgmental, negative, and predictive prophecy.

Isaiah the Prophet: Nudist Extraordinaire

In Judah around 740BC Isaiah spoke against the rebellion of God's people, the Jews. Specifically, Judah's sins included injustice (Isa 1:17), excessive luxury leading to pride (3:17), oppression (10:1), excessive drinking (28:7), and idolatry (57:1-13). The people had forgotten the Mosaic Law and that their function as a nation was to be different and offer hope to a world where the *other* nations were meant to be the ones struggling with injustice, pride, oppression, drunkenness, and idolatry. Still, God offered hope, the renewal of materials, where even swords are beaten into plowshares (2:4) and death is swallowed up forever (25:8).

In addition to internal conflict, Judah faced a precarious political situation. An Assyrian invasion was impending, and Judah had to choose whether to trust in the world (and ally themselves with other nations in the Fertile Crescent) or to depend solely on God's promised protection. Chapters 13-23 cover

[117] Brueggemann notes that the Old Testament prophets are "future-tellers" but particularly with how events in the future impact the present. See Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 12. Childs offers further nuance in saying that the "Old Testament prophets were not soothsayers, but proclaimers of the will of God." Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 132.

ten oracles relating to ten historical peoples or nations.[118] Chapter 20 concerns Egypt,[119] a potential ally for the Jews against the Assyrians. Chapter 20, only six verses, is short enough to quote in its entirety:

> In the year that the commander in chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it—at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, "Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet," and he did so, walking naked and barefoot. Then the LORD said, "As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, 'Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?'"[120]

Before the threat from Assyria, Judah was as peaceful and prosperous as it had been since the reign of Solomon. The Jews assumed this peace and prosperity meant God was pleased with them.[121]As the Assyrian Empire grew, Judah had to decide whether or not to support Assyria's plans for expansion. By the third verse of chapter 20, the Jewish city of Ashdod had fallen in the Assyrian invasion. Egypt had promised to defend this city, yet betrayed the agreement.[122] Still, the Egyptians asked Judah to join an uprising against the Assyrians, promising to help Judah if she rose up to fight. Formerly pro-Assyrian foreign policy became pro-Egyptian. Isaiah spoke against both options, reasoning that since Egypt betrayed Ashdod, it would likely happen again. Egypt instigated the rebellion, so the prophecy concerns Egypt but acts more as a warning to those in Judah. Isaiah's distilled message is: Egypt betrays, God does

[118] J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 131.
[119] As governed by individuals from Ethiopia, or Cush. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 167.
[120] All quoted Scripture is from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).
[121] John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 5.
[122] "The victory by Assyria in 711 thus is not only a defeat for the coalition [of southern forces] but yet another exposé of Egyptian unreliability." Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-30*, 167.

not. Isaiah stripped nude to show the fate of the Egyptian captives and how it was unreasonable and unwise to trust Egypt. The nudity was for shock value as much as it was an actual prediction. The sign (nudity) fit the meaning (defeat and humiliation); the form matched the content.[123]

Hezekiah, the king of Judah, seems to have listened to Isaiah, who was of royal blood, perhaps gaining the prophet some clout.[124] Egypt did indeed go back on its word by betraying another ally.[125] The prophesied Egyptian captivity, where the nation was marched out naked and ashamed, happened forty years later.[126] Isaiah 20 is an "interim fulfillment," a prophecy made and fulfilled in the lifetimes of the witnesses in order to build their confidence in Isaiah's prophecies that extended generations and centuries into the future.[127]

I wrote before of how nudity can be tied to shame. The practice of forcing captives to march nude served to shame the captives.[128] It was a sign of "exile, of humiliation, helplessness, and vulnerability."[129] It jarred the audience. Isaiah wanted to emphasize the shame the Jews would feel at having trusted a treacherous enemy, but the nudity also was just plain shocking. The message had a greater sense of urgency since Isaiah was doing something culturally forbidden. To be clear, Isaiah was not saying the *Israelites* would be marched out naked, but that the Egyptians would be deported and humiliated as captives, and that Israel's alliance with Egypt was wrong and would undoubtedly fail. Israel showed both her arrogance to pursue protection from someone other than God and her fear that God himself would not provide that protection in his own way, an example of what Reinhold Niebuhr would call "national self-deification," bringing about "prophets [who] prophesied in the name of a holy God

[123] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 167.
[124] Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 170.
[125] Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 9.
[126] Ibid., 386.
[127] Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 170.
[128] Babylon was prophesied to fall and endure slavery and exile, also marked by a pairing of nakedness and shame. Isaiah 47:3—"Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen."
[129] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 167.

[and] spoke judgment upon the nation."[130]

Was Isaiah actually nude, or only naked? Scholar Alec Motyer says that when Scripture says "naked" that it means without any clothing, not just without an outer garment, [131] as some have posited. But even if Isaiah was not completely nude and only wore a loincloth, being in public as such was nearly the cultural equivalent in our time of being nude. Further, Isaiah need not have been nude in order to communicate nudity. Scripture is riddled with the principle of parts implying the whole, and a loincloth would certainly have implied nudity in that culture.[132] Both the instances of nakedness (partial nudity) in 2 Samuel 6:20 and 2 Samuel 10:4 imply complete nudity, because the part implies a whole in those cultural contexts. I would point out, however, that verse four mentions "buttocks uncovered," hinting that the captives (and thereby Isaiah) would have been without *any* clothing.

Isaiah walked naked for three years to show Judah that salvation came not from political alliances, which could be broken, but from God. The passage ends with a rhetorical question—"And how shall we escape?" If the Egyptians succumbed to the Assyrian invasion, it makes no sense to trust in their aid. How could Judah escape? Without God, the implied answer is "they wouldn't." The follow-up question could easily be, "Where will [Judah] seek security?"[133] Isaiah's answer is Yahweh, not Egypt. So is Isaiah prophesying against an oppressive and unjust environment, to recall our definition of prophecy, or an unwise political decision?

It is both. Isaiah's nude body was directly acting as a word of judgment against oppression and injustice, thereby pairing prophecy to nudity. Continued political involvement with Egypt was directly tied to a degradation of Judah and the growth of oppression and injustice. Isaiah's performance art, by no means a rarity in the Old Testament,[134] was an embodied, incarnational mediation of God's truth.

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[130] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 214.
[131] Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 171.
[132] Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah,* 385.
[133] Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 132.
[134] Ezekiel 4:1-17; Ezekiel 5:1-4; Jeremiah 13-1-11; Jeremiah 19:1-13; 2 Samuel 12; 1 Samuel 19:20-21.

John N. Oswalt even compares Isaiah's dramatic gesture to the parables of Jesus.[135] The difference was that Jesus most often *spoke* his truths rather than acting them out.[136] But the overlap is there in the uniting of word and deed and in the embodiment of truth to the point of a physical picture—for Isaiah, a nude three-year stroll; for Jesus, ultimately a gruesome Roman execution. Both pictures mediate truth and speak against the oppression of sin and the unjust systems that further it. An argument could be made that the greatest work of nude art, if Roman tradition was strictly held, is Jesus' death on a wooden cross.

The Emperor's New Clothes

To fit within the boundaries of the prophetic principle, art must do more than *present* reality—it must comment on and critique it. Art functioning in a prophetic manner—a word of judgment against oppression or injustice—has historical precedent. Asher Lev is given two paintings to study to begin his formal training in the study of art; each is prophetic and each contains nudity. The first is *Guernica*, in which there are nudes, and Tillich himself calls the painting "prophetic."[137] The nudes emphasize the vulnerability and desperation of those killed in the bombing. The second is Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1611). Based on the episode in the Gospel of Matthew where Herod slays the male children in an attempt to defeat the prophesied king of the Jews, the painting depicts a reprehensible event of oppression and injustice—the murder of children—and uses nudity in its portrayal of the event. Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl are two artists that use nudity in the same vein as Picasso's *Guernica* and Reni's *Massacre*.

[135] Oswalt*, The Book of Isaiah,* 384.
[136] But Jesus was no stranger to a certain type of showmanship. Consider his healings of illnesses, exorcisms, and even the instance of Caesar's tax coming from a fish's mouth in Matthew 17.
[137] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 111.

Modern art is familiar, comfortable even, with nudity and has used the shape of the human body to shock, stir, and say just about anything.[138] Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl are part of this tradition. Getman is more clearly prophetic while Fischl requires heavier interpretive work on our part, but both men have a host of intersecting techniques and themes. While the contextual foes faced by each—the Gulags for Getman and American suburbia for Fischl—do not wholly equate, there are a noteworthy number of commonalities.

Both men focus on the immanent over the transcendent in that each employs earthly subject matter more often than anything supernatural or even Christian. Getman does use some Christian imagery, while Fischl arguably uses almost none. Each has his own internal iconography and symbol system, paints mostly from memory (at least for Fischl's early period, which is what we will study), and demonstrates that beauty is often most clearly seen by contrast. Augustine writes, "There is no pleasure in eating or drinking, unless the discomfort of hunger and thirst come before."[139] Getman and Fischl show human hungers and enrich the glory of their contrasts by the amount of time they spend depicting depravity. The two are figurative painters, expressionists explicitly, who interestingly praise *and* weep for their environments. Both men are prophets of their times who use nudity as subject *and* form. I will spend most of the remaining text on six works from each artist but will also briefly expand the discussion to the artists' entire catalogue of work, for to examine an aspect of creation too narrowly is to miss the overall unity, regularity, and order.[140] Getman will get a noticeably smaller treatment, for his art is more direct; our use of the prophetic principle with him will act as a primer for the discussion on the controversial work of Eric Fischl. Getman reports on and reflects his experiences, in almost

[138] A present-day example would be Kara Walker's sculpture *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, which forces viewers to confront the exploitation in the sugar industry, slavery, racism, and consumerism. This sculpture judges, and it uses the nude female form to do so.
[139] Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 162. See also Augustine's *City of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) Bk XI, 18 and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 45.3, 297.
[140] Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 117.

journalistic fashion, though he will occasionally indulge his expressionist side. Fischl, however, will receive the bulk of the analysis, because he often inserts nudity when it seems uncommon, unnecessary, or even unhelpful. We begin the application of the prophetic principle with Getman.

Nikolai Getman: From Golgotha to Glory

"I could've got more," Herr Direktor Oskar Schindler emotionally declares at the end of *Schindler's List*, in reference to the number of Jews he rescued. Schindler is portrayed in Steven Spielberg's 1993 film as a serial adulterer who is greedy, selfish, and at best unconcerned about those affected by World War II, particularly Jews. Schindler slowly changes and eventually uses his fortune to purchase the freedom of hundreds of Jews who otherwise would have been killed. The film features graphic nudity of men and women alike, from Schindler's sexual liaisons to the showers and physical examinations at the concentration camps. The nudity in this film is necessary; it is prophetic. Oskar Schindler's transformation from egotistical businessman to sacrificial servant would have been dramatically less…dramatic had the nudity not highlighted his promiscuity as well as the dehumanization of the Jews by the Nazis.

Artist Nikolai Getman's paintings prophetically function in the same way as nudity does in *Schindler's List*. Not only is Getman's nudity accurate regarding conditions in the Gulags, it also underscores the brutality and vulnerability experienced by those in the prison camps. Nikolai Getman is *intentional* with his prophetic condemnation of oppression and injustice, although his paintings reflect an unexpected beauty, even within the pain of Soviet labor camps. By pointing to hope beyond the world's "crucifixion" and occasionally focusing our attention on the gospel of Jesus, Getman easily meets Jeremy Begbie's criteria for holistic art. And like *Schindler's List*, Getman employs an arc, showing a movement from fall to redemption.

"[F]or as long as I can remember, I was always drawing,"[141] Getman remarked, reminiscing about his childhood in Russia, from which he vaguely remembered the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917. During his artistic training, a teacher told him that the "most important thing in a picture is color. It is through your use of color that you will make the viewer sense the mood of your canvas. Without color there is no art."[142] Getman followed this advice and created paintings of such colorful intensity and variety that van Gogh is an apt comparison. Another influential moment was when his brother was arrested and executed for committing a terrorist act against the Communists in 1934. Getman's painting *In the NKVD's Dungeon*[143] depicts his brother on his way to be shot. Getman did not witness this event, but the image reflects an intensity Getman gained by his years in the Gulags. The painting is as much a monument honoring family as it is an outcry against the political situation in Russia.

After finishing his service during World War II in the Red Army, Nikolai Getman himself was placed in the Gulag prison camp system because he was present at a gathering where a fellow artist drew a caricature of Josef Stalin on a cigarette box. For this "crime," Getman, along with the entire group, was imprisoned for nearly eight years in the Kolyma and Siberia camps until his release in 1953.

The Gulags were part of Soviet Russia's labor camp system, comparable to German or Japanese concentration camps. For over 40 years, from the beginning of the Russian Revolution until after the death of Stalin[144]—and even then, there were elements of the camp system until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991—the "quintessential expression of the Soviet system"[145] was the Gulag. GULAG is a Russian acronym for "Main Camp Administration" for prisoners (or *zeks*). The highest number of people

[141] Nikolai Getman, *The Gulag Collection: Paintings of the Soviet Penal System by Former Prisoner Nikolai Getman* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2001), 10.
[142] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 10.
[143] Any paintings not found in this thesis can be viewed online at the complete Getman collection: http://www.jamestown.org/aboutus/getmanpaintings/. Also, there is no record for the years in which many of Getman's paintings were completed.
[144] *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, eds. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), 190.
[145] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), xxix.

imprisoned in this system at one time was 2.5 million in the early 1950s.[146] Estimates vary, but Getman places the number that died under the Soviet regime at 50 million[147] with 28.7 million having been forced into the labor camps.[148]

Getman's paintings tell a story ranging from the execution of his brother until after Getman's own departure from the camps. In between we see displays of death, daily camp monotony, heroism, landscapes, and even moments of peace and love. For forty years following his release, roughly the mid-1950s until the mid-1990s, Getman painted in secret, even from his wife, calling it his "civic duty" to honor the memory of the millions who had died.[149] In 1997, he contacted the West to retrieve his paintings, fearing that upon his death his work might be destroyed.[150]

Before an analysis of six of his works, I offer a word on his recurring themes and iconography. Getman places details of his horrible circumstances amidst beautiful scenery. We see these moments of beauty in paintings such as *Newlyweds Meet the Sun* (1960) and *In Love*. This beauty is heightened when placed in direct opposition to moments of darkness, such as in *Yakutsk Diamonds* and *Kolyma Sandbars*. The conclusion he drew from his experience was that the Gulag could never extinguish the "strength of will" and that there was a "value of man" and a "dignity of his spirit and mind."[151] While certainly showing us man's inhumanity to man, Getman also insists on calling attention to the valor of his fellow captives and the undeniable splendor of the Russian landscape.

Icons repeat themselves in his paintings, and for now I will simply list them and analyze most of these within the discussion of the actual paintings: landscape, sun, moon, birds, crosses, and nudity. His use of nudity is far less noticeable than Eric Fischl's, but not necessarily less frequent. Getman's nudity is

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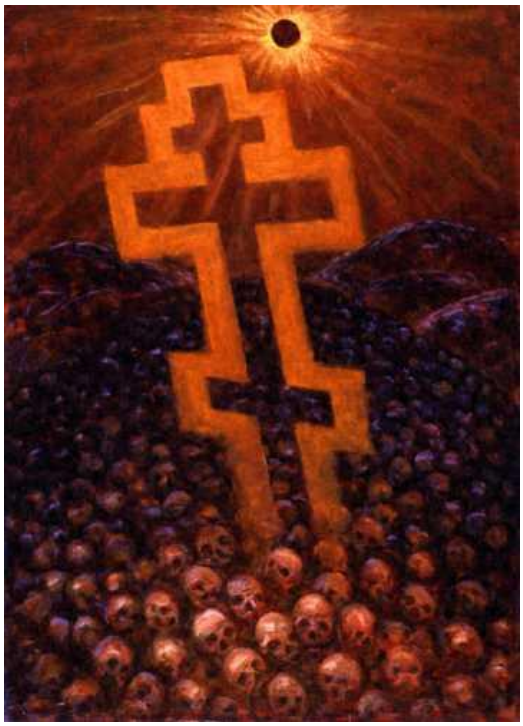
[146] *The Economics of Forced Labor*, 11.
[147] Getman*, The Getman Collection*, 16.
[148] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 581.
[149] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 12.
[150] The Jamestown Foundation (http://www.jamestown.org/) had charge of the paintings until their recent transfer to the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (http://victimsofcommunism.org/).
[151] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 14.

just one aspect of the horror he presents, so it can get overshadowed. In his 50 paintings, there are two cases of actual nudity—*A Search: They Find a Book of Esenin's Poetry* and *Scurvy Victims* (1977)—but also a host of implied nudity—*Gulag Prisoners' Morgue*, *Last Rites*, *A Dead Man's Bread Ration* (1990), *Eternal Memory in the Permafrost* (1994), and most shockingly in *Punishment by Mosquitoes*. Nudity is certainly historically accurate for the situations which he portrays, but there is also an Isaiah-like shock factor that emphasizes the dehumanization of the prisoners, the same strategy used in *Schindler's List*.



(Figure 5)

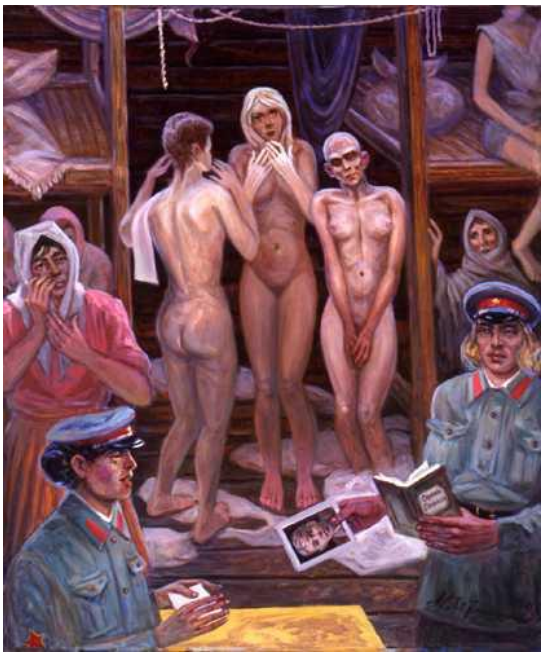
The story begins with our first painting to detail: *Magadan Hills (Golgotha)* (Fig 5), a morbid landscape of skulls surrounding a cross below an eclipse. Magadan was a port town in the Kolyma region, where Getman was imprisoned. The Magadan settlement was dedicated to mining gold, one of many Soviet ventures in the Gulags, which also included forestry, railroads, diamond mining, hydroelectric power, farming, construction, factory work, and logging. Golden light shines on a golden cross and golden skulls, insinuating the misplaced and unfair trade of gold for human life. The hills are

covered in or constructed of human skulls, an image Getman later repeats in an actual portrayal of a landscape sprinkled with human skulls in *The Last OLP (Separated Forced Labor Camp)* from 1989. The Magadan gold settlement was built on and at the expense of human bones. The skulls blend and fade into the background and recall the roads Nazis paved with Jewish headstones.

There is no nudity, but this painting, one of his smallest at 37.3 x 26.9 inches, is a guide for interpreting other works by Getman. His paintings are frequently figurative in that they represent reality but with a slight twist. *Magadan Hills* has allegorical elements, particularly the solar eclipse.[152] The rays spread out like fire from the eclipsed sun, historically assumed to be a sign of the end of the world. The "light" is gone from this terrain. Again connecting the images to Scripture, the sun was darkened (eclipsed?) at Christ's crucifixion, certainly a dark event (Mark 15:33).

Then there is the cross in the center, functioning in no small way as a tombstone. This Russian Orthodox cross is outlined in a glowing orange line that fades toward the bottom, suggesting that this cross is somewhat immaterial, perhaps even made of light. Making the cross see-through ensures that the cross itself does not act as the focal point of the whole painting but instead frames and filters the skulls in the background and foreground. The skulls, of course, are death, and millions of workers were enlisted in Stalin's projects in Russia's modern serfdom. The cost to maintain these projects eventually overtook what it produced or saved. Had the highly inefficient Gulags been a corporation they would have needed to declare bankruptcy. Getman was forced to participate in this and still claimed he would not have survived without the "absolute conviction that good would triumph over evil."[153] That belief, though clouded and crowded by skulls and darkness, is still ever-present in this painting, if we interpret the solar event as part of a sunrise and not a sunset.

[152] A sun or moon is featured in other paintings: *Moving Out*, *Headed for Kolyma* (1969), *Gold-Mining Dredge,* and *Lunchtime: They Bring in the Gruel* (1983).
[153] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 14.



(Figure 6)

Our second painting, *A Search: They Find a Book of Esenin's Poetry* (Fig 6), is the first to feature nudity, that of females being searched following the discovery of a forbidden book. Sergei Esenin was a Russian poet who criticized Bolshevism, and therefore his work was banned. The Soviets controlled even the prisoners' exposure to art. Female guards have found a book of Esenin's poetry in the female living quarters, and a search of the room and the bodies of those suspected is underway. Such an offense would usually have solicited time added to the existing sentence.

Of the trio that is naked, one is turned away, the second has her hands over her mouth in assumed shock, and the third, bald, is covering her privates, knees bent in shame. The room is in disarray, with sheets on the floor, and the guards look at the book and hold a picture of Esenin from its pages. The scene could easily be from a Nazi concentration camp in Poland were it not for the Soviet stars on the uniforms. The nudity jars the viewer into a realization of the complete defenselessness of the prisoners, who have no say even in whether or not to remain clothed, the dominance of the Soviets being so great, and the dominance being so greatly abused.

(Figure 7)

In *Eternal Memory in the Permafrost* (Fig 7) we view two frozen corpses that look like skeletons, both presumably nude. The living inmates performing the burial service seem to have chipped off blocks of ice to cover the dead, since the soil is too solid to churn. Like the corpses, the landscape is frozen and snow-covered. Still, the mountains tower in the back with their imposing strength, their promise of other lands, valleys, and freedom. Gallery owner Alla Rogers says, "In Getman's paintings, the landscape is both actual and allegorical."[154] The evil of the prisoners' deaths is juxtaposed with the beauty of the background.[155]

In *Eternal Memory*, we witness a burial of two prisoners, one Russian and the other Japanese.[156] The Russian and Japanese prisoners were typically kept separate, but this burial shows a uniting of cultures. Suffering has leveled nationality (Russian and Japanese) and religion (Russian Orthodoxy and Buddhism) when their fate, death, is held in common. Again there is a cross, a homemade one of sticks

[154] Getman *The Gulag Collection*, 22.
[155] Beauty amidst the ugly is also clearly seen in *At the Source of the River Arman* (1975), where, if the bottom few inches were cut from the painting, one would assume this was simply a traditional landscape unmarked by any technology of man.
[156] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 67.

tied together, a small but noticeable gesture at hope or at least a small comfort to the oppressed, for in Christian theology the hope is not just that Jesus endured pain and you should too, but that Jesus will return to conquer oppression and injustice.

(Figure 8)

Fourth is *Scurvy Victims* (Fig 8). Two inmates sit on a bench waiting to be treated while the camp doctor, likely an inmate with some degree of medical training and little or no equipment, prepares a shot. The prisoners are bald, emaciated—their ribs and spine noticeably poke out—nude, and sick. One's mouth is open in an unreadable expression, perhaps surprise. A prisoner needed to be near death to be excused from work, or else the prisoner and diagnosing doctor would be killed. Scurvy and dystrophy were common results of malnutrition, and the depicted prisoners are likely suffering from both. In the camps, a *Fitil'* was an inmate who would soon die.[157] The word translates literally as the "wick of a candle" and applies to these two men. These inmates' lives are draining away because of

[157] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 64.

inadequate food rations and conditions that exacerbate even the slightest illness. Interestingly, were one to remove the inmates and the doctor, then this scene would easily seem to be a pleasant, stove-warmed, straw-floored afternoon in a log cabin. That soft satire is also in *The Guards' Kennel*, where the guard dogs are shown resting near the camp perimeter. The Gulag dogs, trained to chase and kill, were given bowls of meat, while the prisoners received significantly less than the body's required nutritional intake. Getman believed that training the dogs to attack escaping prisoners summarized the "inhuman Soviet mentality."[158]

(Figure 9)

Punishment by Mosquitoes (Fig 9) is a work relating a particular punishment in many of the camps. For even minor offenses prisoners were taken beyond the barbed wire of the camps and tied nude to trees. Mosquitoes gathered around the bodies to feed, which usually meant the prisoners died

[158] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 47.

from blood loss or infection. Though Getman's painting does not depict nudity—perhaps he considered the image undignified enough already—prisoners *were* stripped nude. At least one other artist depicted this image with the prisoner completely unclothed.[159] The garment the prisoner wears in Getman's painting is not the traditional underwear assigned to the prisoners and might be considered an allusion to Christ's crucifixion loincloth, especially considering the crucifixion-style pose of the figure. Again, we see Getman's affinity for figurative painting. Remove the barbed wire from the bottom, and this portrayal could even more easily be mistaken for Christ's crucifixion. Jesus and the depicted prisoner suffered and each poured out blood. Getman seems to call our attention to the injustice of the suffering experienced by the prisoner by likening him to Christ. This is a pattern in his work, for no less than four other works feature crosses or crucifixion allusions: *Magadan Hills (Golgotha)*, *Smoking Break: Dialogue* from 1973 (where men were purposely placed in the shape of a cross to symbolize their burden as equated to Christ's[160]), *The Preacher* from 1988 (where an Old Believer of Russian Orthodoxy holds his fingers in the sign of the cross), and *Eternal Memory in the Permafrost*.

[159] The State Museum of GULAG History. Accessed July 22, 2014. http://www.gmig.ru/view/events/55.
[160] Getman, *The Gulag Collection*, 63.

(Figure 10)

The sixth and final painting is *Magadan's Port: Nagaevo* (1974) (Fig 10).[161] This port, constructed solely for the transport of prisoners, was a type of anti-Statue of Liberty for arriving prisoners and a glorious sign to see retreating behind them if they survived to depart. Still, Getman employs his characteristic color that blends like van Gogh, refusing to render the scene as a cloudy, gloomy day. Instead, birds fly, waves crash, and the sun shines on the snow-frosted landscape. Getman was fortunate enough to obtain his freedom, which he repeatedly symbolizes in this painting and others—*In the Far North*, *Moving Out* (1954), and *Newlyweds Meet the Sun*—as birds on the horizon.

Allow me to conclude Getman. Author of the novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the non-fiction work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave the latter the subtitle "an

[161] This thesis' "arc within an arc," the six paintings of Getman's I've analyzed, could easily conclude with *Rehabilitated* (1964), but I chose to end with *Magadan's Port: Nagaevo* to show Getman's ability to find hope and beauty in the landscape itself.

experiment in literary investigation." He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, largely for *The Gulag Archipelago*, a history of the Soviet Gulags. Solzhenitsyn was called by scholar Ralph Wood an "anti-communist prophet." [162] The book comes out of his own experience while imprisoned in the Gulags for eleven years because he criticized Stalin in a letter. The prophetic work *The Gulag Archipelago* does with words what Nikolai Getman does with images.

Solzhenitsyn, while speaking against the oppression and injustice of the Gulags and the Soviet Union itself, also wrote on the human condition in his famous line: "But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."[163] The human is divided. *Simul iustus et peccator*, Luther would say. This is just as true of art. Getman ends his series of 50 paintings with *Rehabilitated* (1964), his rendering of his release. This final painting is a portrait of Getman on which he pasted his actual release papers. The prison camps declared one "rehabilitated" when his or her sentence was complete. We appreciate Getman's release and understand what he was released *from* after having seen the graphic representations of the other 49 paintings. The arc from Golgotha to glory is concluded with hope. In his Nobel Prize speech, Solzhenitsyn said, "Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art. And no sooner will falsehood be dispersed than the nakedness of violence will be revealed in all its ugliness—and violence, decrepit, will fall."[164] Just as in *Schindler's List* we had to view the nudity and violence to see Oskar Schindler's transformation, we need Getman to show us the evils of the Gulags, nudity included, for how else can a viewer who has never experienced something such as the prison camps begin to empathize with the agony and respond with appropriate fervor against oppression and injustice?

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[162] Ralph Wood, "A Christian Response to the Debate Over U.S. Attitudes Toward Soviet Communism" (1985). BearSpace. Accessed August 8, 2014. https://bearspace.baylor.edu/Ralph_Wood/www/Dostoevsky%20and%20Orthodoxy/DostMarxSolz.pdf.

[163] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, abr. Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 75.

[164] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize lecture (1970). Accessed June 25, 2014. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html.

Eric Fischl: Siren of the Sensual

In the first minutes of the film *American Beauty* the character Lester Burnham narrates that he will be dead in less than a year. The film follows his suburban enlightenment as he learns to speak his mind, quit his job, talk back to his wife, exercise, smoke pot, and listen to Pink Floyd. Throughout the film we encounter another character, Lester's neighbor Ricky Fitts, who spends his time filming events as varied as dead birds, naked women, and plastic bags caught in the wind. The film has frequent nudity and sexual situations—from intercourse to masturbation to sexual banter. It would be easy for a strict moralist to dismiss the film, but the idea of disordered desires and the consequences of this disorder is the film's central refrain. Lester dies as promised, but before he departs he realizes that all of his petty pursuits of pleasure are unfulfilling, that true meaning is found in the loving relationships he already has (or had) with his wife and daughter. Shortly before his death he finds true beauty and rejects the object of his desire, a naked and sexually willing teenaged cheerleader.

American Beauty does what Eric Fischl does in paintings. Each act of sex or nudity is shown as destructive or beautiful in a way that Scripture can affirm.[165] The film is a condemnation of suburban life—its frivolity, its isolation, its abandonment, its automaticity, its desire for more and more…hence its voyeurism.[166] The tagline of the film, "look closer," is what Fischl's art requires of its viewers. His paintings plead for and train us to do this, much like the character Ricky Fitts does in the film. Fitts captures via camcorder moments of unexpected beauty and sees past the superficial layer of the world. James K.A. Smith says that the "sacralizing gaze" of Ricky's camera is both a means of grace and the way the world is graced.[167] Ricky sees the world as beautiful through his camera; he also endows the world with beauty when he frames an event. Painting too can gaze at the sacral *and* sacralize. Eric Fischl says,

[165] Scripture assumes sex, within the marital context, to be a blessing and good. See Genesis 2, Proverbs 5, Song of Songs (see comments on Song of Songs and marriage in the footnotes from the section "Out of the Cave to Fig-Leafing the Body"), or 1 Corinthians 5 & 6.
[166] This is most clearly seen in Fischl's painting *Sleepwalker*, which I will later analyze.
[167] James K.A. Smith, *The Devil Reads Derrida* (Grand Rapids: Wm, B. Eerdmans, 2009), 153.

"There's something sacred about paint."[168] Paint can also capture events, emotions, and insights, and many of those events, emotions, and insights within suburbia are the type to which *American Beauty* so loudly objects. This suburban frustration is *the* central theme of Eric Fischl's paintings.[169]

Continuing to apply our two criteria from Jeremy Begbie, we ask: Does Fischl point beyond darkness to hope? And does Fischl point specifically to the gospel (or at least to his own form of redemption)?[170] To the first we respond that he absolutely does point to a possibility of hope. Not only does Fischl criticize, express sorrow, and expose, I would argue that he shows that in community there is light. There is not a clear movement from Calvary to the kingdom of God, no explicit gospel references, but the nudity in his paintings functions in such a way as to be a word of judgment against oppression and injustice.

Eric Fischl is an American neo-expressionist, which in part means that he paints what he feels rather than what he necessarily *sees*. His subjective portrayals use figuration tinged with a touch of surrealism, though he never completely engages with surrealism because all of his scenes are entirely possible. A painter of "fleshscapes"[171]—nearly every painting contains a nude man, woman, teenager, or child—he is often compared to Edgar Degas, Max Beckmann, and Edward Hopper because of his style and tone. His content more accurately makes him a type of anti-Norman Rockwell, for while Fischl looks back nostalgically, he breaks the illusion of quaint peace with images of nudity and ambiguity. Rockwell promoted the American dream while Fischl works to break the illusion with paintings that could be described as cynical, unusual, and ugly.

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[168] Eric Fischl, *Speak Art!* Interview with A.M. Homes (New York: New Art Publications, 1997), 59.
[169] Less fulfilling and certainly less hopeful films showing the suburban blues would include *Pleasantville* and *Revolutionary Road*.
[170] An artist's body of work may not be adequately prophetic without doing both of these: pointing at and beyond darkness but also pointing to some form of redemption. Even the Old Testament prophets, at the height of their ferocity and directness, offered God as a hopeful solution to even the direst of contexts. Any work of condemnation against oppression or injustice implied God as a solution.
[171] Maxine Gaiber, *Eric Fischl: Prints + Drawings* (Wilmington: Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts), 4.

Fischl's childhood was not especially privileged or underprivileged. He describes his early life as a "white, upper-middle-class, Protestant suburban background. We had to go to church, but our parents didn't. I've been thinking lately that they probably used that time to have sex."[172] For a season he even attended a Presbyterian boarding school that publicly listed masturbation as a punishable infraction.[173] Though he uses religious language in his writing—*anoint*[174]*, exorcize*[175]*,* and *redeem*[176]—he insists he is not a religious person.[177] While he is not religious himself, I argue that his paintings are religiously relevant. Fischl's view of the "good life" is limited to this world, where "[t]he gods created life and death. Everything else in between is up to us, and our quality of life depends solely on our imagination and our will."[178]

Calling himself a "post-Fall Garden painter," he refers to his early work as a time where he was "standing outside the gate looking to go back in."[179] His paintings primarily bemoan a world where guidance is scarce and where adults, like kids, are trying to understand—and cannot. His characters desire meaning, some revelation other than the day-to-day of American materialism, while at the same time *reveling in* that materialism. Fischl paints this transient, unfulfilled feeling, but he misses a clear step toward redemption beyond the community he fervently promotes. In Fischl we see the creation and fall but little incarnation and glory.

His is an art of liberation and a plea for isolation to end, a plea for community. His paintings first call attention to a scene, critique it, and then ask us to reconsider our identity and what our own interpretation might reveal about our lives, our context. Fischl hijacks and uses shame, transparency, desperation, and implication, most vividly in the period of his work I will examine: 1979–1983. He

[172] Fischl, *Eric Fischl,* 43.
[173] Eric Fischl, *Bad Boy: My Life On and Off the Canvas* (New York: Crown, 2013), 23.
[174] Ibid., 120.
[175] Ibid., 196.
[176] Ibid., 339.
[177] Ibid., 288.
[178] Ibid., 310.
[179] Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007*, 288.

discovers his condemnation and prophecy even as he works, and we as viewers discover and even construct as we gaze at his sacralizing frame. The America we see in his paintings is sad and sometimes beautiful and can only be survived by linking with a community.

The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog: Nudity & Biography

(Figure 11)

The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog (Fig 11)[180]—a 1982 painting that will serve as an interpretive tool that initiates us into the rules, routines, and procedures of Fischl's painted world—is larger than any of Getman's works: 84 x 84 inches. Five figures plus a dog are on a boat in the water while a storm brews in the background. The oldest male drinks from a can and a blond woman holds in her fingers the lure of a fishing pole. Two young boys crawl toward the opposite end of the boat, and a

[180] Paintings not pictured in this thesis can be viewed online on Fischl's website: http://www.ericfischl.com/.

second woman is lying down. To move beyond these facts is to begin to engage in a story, one prompted by, but not necessarily in line with, Fischl's own ideas.

All of the figures are tan-lined and nude except the blond woman—she wears a bathing suit and life vest. One possibility is that this is a mother, father, two sons, a daughter, and the family Dalmatian. If the father is assumed to be the "old man" from the title, he does not appear to be all that old. In his early period Fischl paints from the perspective of a child,[181] so to a young one the man may indeed seem an "old man." The background displays dark clouds and ominous waves. Fischl labels the scene a "nuclear family…in jeopardy."[182] The only member of the family who seems sensible enough to recognize the potentially precarious situation is the blond. She points to the storm. (Hers is the only hair that is a color other than brown, further highlighting her dissimilarity from her family as a "seer." Her blond hair calls to mind light, and light helps other see.) Her hair blows in the wind of the coming storm. The boat may capsize, but even the Dalmatian, the trusted dog of firemen, acts as no messenger of danger, but looks the other direction. The two boys, in fact, seem no more intelligent or aware than the dog, since boys and dog are in parallel positions, a move used in a similar ocean painting, *Dog Days*.

If we set aside Fischl's interpretation of his own painting, we would be justified in thinking that the "old man" is not even pictured. Perhaps an old man owns the boat, one which five youths have stolen for a day's joy ride. With this version of events, we still have a group of people oblivious to danger, ignorantly enjoying the boat and the day rather than seeing the coming catastrophe that is the actual and metaphorical storm. The man looks over his drink and stares down the audience. The gaze of the man invites us to participate. He includes us, accuses us. But the blond girl is the explanatory focal

[181] Eric Fischl, *Speak Art!* Interview with A.M. Homes (New York: New Art Publications, 1997), 66.
[182] Nancy Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," ARTnews (1986): 77.

point. If Getman's backgrounds give us insight, for Fischl it is the foreground.[183] The blond girl points to danger, unheeded or unnoticed by any others.

Why is the group nude? For Fischl, nudity makes the figures vulnerable by leveling them, by bringing into the public that which is typically private. Nudity in a Fischl painting, even when in the context of a sexually explicit situation, is rarely meant to sexually arouse the viewer. The effect is more emotional and psychological, such as a search for identity, than erotic.[184] The nudity is casual in that the people behave as if they were clothed, almost with a pre-fall shamelessness. His paintings are of sexual content, but they are also of people who quickly become desexualized. The painted population is realistic and not idealized. There are unflattering tan lines, rolls of fat, body hair, and awkward poses, guaranteeing that no Fischl figures will be featured in any issue of *Sports Illustrated*. There must be something more to the nudity than simply sex.

Every time Fischl paints a nude, he is tapping into a major motif of art history. Visual artists know that the inclusion of certain objects in paintings—crosses, roses, doves, or skulls—trigger widely accepted meanings, and so does nudity. Artistic training that included live nudes has been documented at least since the middle of the fifteenth century[185] and as an art form was invented by the Greeks, who themselves distinguished sharply between the nude as the *subject* of art and the nude as the *form* of art, certainly favoring the latter.[186] Fischl knows this, and he uses both the subject of nudity and the form of bodies for his purposes.

Of the uncommon, Tillich writes, "Only if the things as they are ordinarily seen and heard and touched and felt are left behind, can art reveal something out of another dimension of the universe.

[183] This is true of *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* as well as for *St. Tropez*, *Barbecue, Bad Boy*, *Birth of Love*, *Vanity*, *Best Western*, *Birthday Boy*, and *Beach Ball: Scenes from a Private Beach*.
[184] See especially the section on *Sleepwalker*.
[185] Clark, *A Study in Ideal Form,* 452.
[186] Ibid., 25.

Without breaking our natural adherence to the familiar, the power of art cannot grasp us."[187] Public nudity surely is unfamiliar enough to grasp us. Nudity is the equivalent of cold water being dumped on our head to abruptly wake us up. Fischl's use of nudity calls attention to the suburban hypocrisy between private and public lives. By showing a private thing in a public place, Fischl's nudity primes us for a prophetic word by "breaking our natural adherence to the familiar."[188]

Fischl has said that he does not use live models but instead either his memory or photographs from French nude beaches.[189] His memory and eye serve him well, for if you paint what you know, then Fischl knows nudity: "[My parents] talked to us kids openly about sex and lounged around their bedroom—where we'd visit after dinner to watch TV—completely naked."[190]

That Fischl's biography matches his art will be noticeable with each painting. He grew up in the '60s, when the post-World War II American dream was at odds with the '60s American awakening. His paintings show that intersection:

> Fischl's suburban upbringing provided him with a backdrop of alcoholism and a country club culture obsessed with image over content. His early work thus became focused on the rift between what was experienced and what could not be said…He first received critical attention for depicting the dark, disturbing undercurrents of mainstream American life.[191]

Publicly, his family joined the yacht club and took holidays to Myrtle Beach. Publicly, his mother was a housewife and his father a salesman, the family of six residing comfortably in the suburbs of New York. Privately, his mother was an alcoholic, one whose discretion with her body occasionally waned: "When you're dealing with an alcoholic, particularly a narcissistic one, you're dealing with someone for whom

[187] Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 247.
[188] Whether a viewer can *receive* the nudity might be a subjective matter of conscience, for though all things are lawful, not everything is helpful (1 Corinthians 10:23). Still, we must push against the postmodern tendency to laud the imposition of conscience to all. For all we know, people may have been aroused by Isaiah's nudity rather and missed his prophetic word, but one's inability to receive does not invalidate the message. The prophetic principle does not mandate that all receive and view nude art; it rather states that the potential is there.
[189] Eric Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2008), 39.
[190] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 12.
[191] "Biography" (2012). Accessed July 23, 2014. http://www.ericfischl.com/html/en/bio/Bio.html.

boundaries are totally eradicated. It gets pretty complicated, especially as you move into puberty,"[192] Fischl bluntly writes. He talks of living in a constricting and frustrating "dual reality" with his private home life and his public life, where the alcoholism was guarded as an intensely humiliating family secret.[193] Fischl was still a young man when his mother's private suffering ended in suicide.

Fischl attended CalArts, a school that during his tenure was an experiment in free expression at a time when painting was considered a western white man's tool for oppressive power and therefore "dead," no longer occupying culture's center. Comparing art schools to seminaries, Fischl says that both "saw themselves as producing prophets rather than pastors."[194] The prophet was the truth-bringer, no matter how painful. The prophet's word was direct, uncompromising, and true. Pastors continually care for the flock and take root; prophets give a word, mic drop, and peace out.

Early on in his training as an artist, Fischl tried abstract painting, which he found insufficient for the message he wanted to communicate. Abstraction was unable to hold the clarity of meaning upon which figuration is based. That nudity represents vulnerability and hypocrisy or that water, as we will see, means transition and birth, is easier to extrapolate with recognizable figures rather than lines, squiggles, and splotches of color. Fischl sacrificed and shunned the avant-garde methods of his era for the sake of intelligibility.

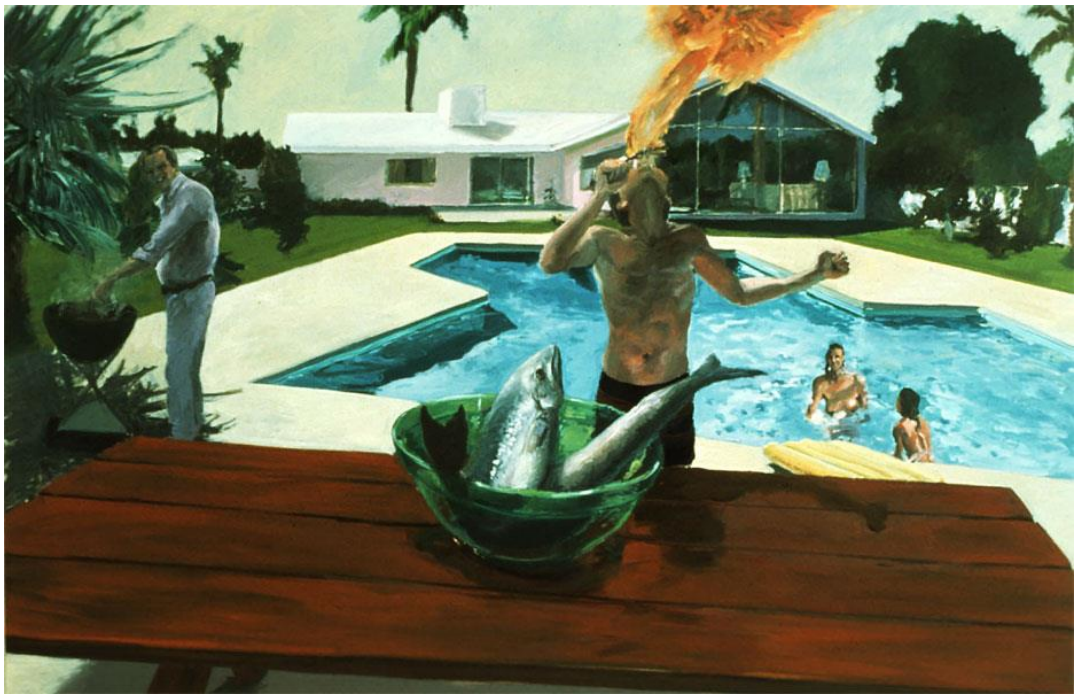
Before moving to full-scale canvases—and most of his canvases are around 5 x 6 feet—he painted his work directly onto transparent glassine sheets of paper. These he would change out and layer to make various scenes, like a felt board in a preschool class. The characters on the glassine sheets were assembled according to the story he wanted to tell in a particular work. From the beginning, he incorporated story into his art.

[192] Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007*, 108.
[193] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 10.
[194] Arthur C. Danto, Robert Enright, & Steve Martin, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007* (New York: The Monacelli Press), 13.

As Asher Lev learned during his first session drawing a live nude, nudity initiates within the viewer a battle. Feelings of body and mind jockey each other for dominance, and we ourselves must make the decision whether to continue to participate in the community of the painting by viewing it or to look away. In Fischl's paintings nearly everyone is isolated. Almost no one in his early paintings interacts in a way absent some sexual charge. His works acknowledge and bemoan loneliness while showing wanton sex as an empty response.[195]

In *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* a group enjoys the wind and the waves, the pleasure of a boat ride, while oblivious to the coming dangers. Families do the same while on land; we enjoy the comforts of culture while neglecting to recognize the hazards inherent in such ignorance. This family's private sins and worries manifest themselves in the natural environment, the storm, while everyone feverishly works to keep up the appearance of being a family on vacation.

***Barbecue*: Childhood & Water**



(Figure 12)

[195] See especially the section on *Inside Out*.

The second Fischl painting is called *Barbecue* (1982) (Fig 12). It depicts a family—mother, father, son, daughter—in their backyard by the pool. The dad is by the grill, the son is breathing fire, and the mother and daughter, both naked, are swimming in the pool. Each set of members is in various stage of undress: the father fully clothed in pants and button-up but with collar undone and sleeves rolled up; the son in his bathing suit; the mother and daughter wearing, it seems, nothing. The father, as he looks at his son, has an expression on his face that can best be described as an approving sneer. Palm trees surround a mockingly modern polygon-shaped pool that is assuredly in a suburban setting.

Thus begins our initiation into Fischl's postmodern iconography. Fischl uses symbols that are relevant to his context: beds, swimming pools, bikes, bathtubs, lawn chairs, etc. Rarely is an outdoor scene, including this one, without clouds, a kind of anti-transcendence. Examining the pool, we can apply one of Fischl's comments regarding the objects he chooses to portray: "I became acutely aware of the disconnect between appearance and reality, between people's emotional needs and desires and the status symbols and objects they surrounded themselves with. The suburbs were a culture big on superficial images."[196] This painting overall seems to visually show these "superficial images" in suburban culture. Pools and grills and palm tree-d backyards cover up much of the sincere emotional turmoil that is life; or, these images at least distract us from it. A pool is often a status symbol and certainly an object that helps distract people. The appearance of a family at a pool evokes ideas of fun and sun, while Fischl's painted scene has a more subtlety sinister tone. The abundance of trees and water in this painting recalls Eden, which also was a place of sinister tone, after the fall.

One example is the fire-breathing boy, who occupies the center of the painting. With his fire-breathing the boy declares his desire to be different and independent, like Holden Caulfield wearing his red hat. The risk of the activity—fire-breathing typically requires one to spit alcohol or fuel—is proportionate to his wish to state his presence, accentuated by his clenched left fist. This painting could

[196] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 11.

be placed in conversation with Getman's *Death by Mosquitoes*. In the Getman scene we have a man completely beaten, one who has unwillingly submitted to dominating power, while in Fischl's there is a boy declaring power, independence, even his own machismo.

Recall that Fischl's foregrounds are the interpretive tool for his paintings, and in *Barbecue* there is a most curious object: a clear, green bowl with two un-gutted, un-scaled fish. Fish have an easy connection to the ocean, the suburban version of which is a pool. Since the fish are not cleaned, the grill is already going, and because there are no visible tools with which to clean the fish, these fish seem more symbolic in nature. Throughout history in societies less dominated by technology than the West, fish have been and still are a visible quantification of what one has accomplished, a measure of worth and skill. The young man in this painting shows us his own "catch" with his fire-breathing. The whole spectacle in this painting juxtaposes suburban provision with "primitive" provision, a "clash of culture," another one of Fischl's consistently used refrains. This boy with his two fish (minus the five loaves) offers up to the audience a view into the psychology of childhood.

The nudity in this painting unnerves us, since it seems so casual. While this scene has the appearance of a happy family afternoon, the nudity and ease with which everyone accepts the boy's alarming and precarious fire-breathing show the audience that the happy family is likely a troubled, disturbed family—much like Eric Fischl recounts from his childhood. Like an inversion of how Adam and Eve gained knowledge and then covered themselves up, Fischl's characters gain knowledge and *lose* clothing. It is as if he is trying to redeem the nude, to contemporize it, update it. In Fischl's world, the direction of desire is not toward the sensual but the psychological.

Any confusion we have when navigating his paintings and whatever desire is displayed mimics a child's efforts to understand the adult world.[197] His works are a type of *Bildungsroman* on canvas, honing in on transition and presenting to us children often doing very adult things, not the least of which

[197] Martha Culliton, "Exhibitionism and Skoptophilia: Fischl's *Sleepwalker*," *Athanor* 10 (1991): 54.

is that they act as prophets. Children have difficulty lying, and maybe that is the appeal for why he draws so many. That pursuit of truth, even when it is hard and upsetting, aligns with the prophetic act.

His insistence on showing us adolescent and pre-adolescent nudity in works such as *Sleepwalker, St. Tropez, Dog Days, Birth of Love,* and *First Sex* comes from his notion that with children there are different levels of insight than with adults. Fischl believes that adolescence is one of life's most important periods, where the young shift from relative innocence to knowledge, or where carnal knowledge is equated with self-consciousness.[198] A child operates less in the gray than adults. So, to put a child in an ambiguous situation, especially if he or she is nude, requires of the watchers a closer interpretation. Childhood is often a time of blind acceptance. "You don't make any separation between the things that are promised you and reality. Everything that is promised is supposed to be delivered, but when it isn't…it shapes the very foundations of everything you do."[199] Fischl hints that one's childhood promises much but instead delivers confusion, alcoholism, suicide, and depression.

As Fischl matured as an artist, his paintings visibly "grew up." The perspective shifted from that of adolescents to adults, especially couples. The work grew with the artist. What appeared to children as hypocrisy—what he often *presented* as hypocrisy in his paintings from 1979–1983—was perhaps only complexity. Maybe the lives of adults are characterized more by ignorance than willful evil. That resolution is reflected in Fischl's most recent paintings, which are either of his wife and friends on beaches or portraits of acquaintances, such as *Self Portrait: An Unfinished Work*, *Saint Barts: Ralph's 70th*, or *Edie and Paul*. The later work exhibits a sense of peace, a settled-ness different from fist-clenching, fire-breathing rebellion.

[198] Fischl, *Fischl*, 35.
[199] Ibid., 20.

While childhood is important and recurring, the most prevalent Fischl symbol is that of water (either as oceans or pools), which is featured in the majority of his early paintings.[200] Fischl recounts that he drew his first representational figure as he frustratingly tried to engage with abstract expressionism and threw his brush at his canvas. The resulting accidental shape resembled a bed.[201] The bed shape was the instigator of his most-repeated theme: water. For Fischl, the bed is attached to intercourse, masturbation, fantasy, dreams, sleep, birth, and death. All of these elements relate to water, for water is birth. Fischl connects water, birth, beds, and boats.

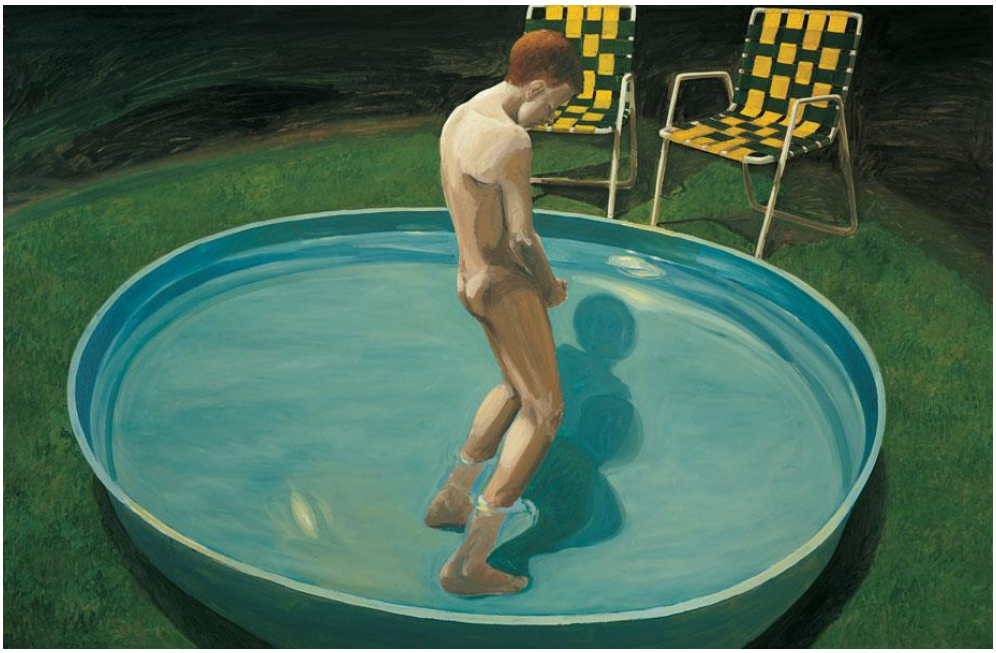
Boats both save you from drowning and deliver you safely to a destination, and Fischl's paintings conflate lawn furniture and tables and tubs and boats in works such as *Loungers* and *Boy with Broom*, both from 1978. Water, for which boats were made, can destroy *and* create life; it is a substance of transition that conjures connotations of Noah, safety, beginnings, procreation, and life. Water is a sacred substance as well as a sacred space. Fischl writes, "For me water represents the place we've come from, whether by way of biology or immigration."[202] Here he ties together procreation and water. Water is the location of a beginning, a birth, a change. "A body in water changes shape…It's a metaphor for transformation."[203] Water is the impetus and location of trouble, such as a tumultuous childhood transitioning into adulthood, and a marker for change. Those two themes, trouble and change, recur constantly in the paintings as the works function to prophecy against oppressive or unjust power structures, such as parents or a materialistic culture.

All of these acts—intercourse, masturbation, dreams, birth, death, sleep, and fantasy—can occur in a bed/boat and are all types of beginnings. Fischl's first full-scale painting he ever did was in

[200] Examples include: *Barbecue, The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog, Dog Days, Sleepwalker, Birth of Love, First Sex, Grief, The Last Resort, Christian Retreat, Birthday Boy, Private Beach, St. Tropez, Squirt, A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island, Close Up, Slumber Party, Best Western, Daddy's Girl,* and others.
[201] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 35.
[202] Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007,* 150.
[203] Ibid., 164.

1978 and called *Rowboat*, which was exactly that—a painting of a red rowboat. The very next painting he did was *Sleepwalker*.

Sleepwalker: Sexualizing Suburbia



(Figure 13)

In some ways Fischl's most shocking picture, *Sleepwalker* (1979) (Fig 13) shows an adolescent boy in a nighttime suburban backyard as he masturbates while standing in a kiddie pool.[204] This massive 6' x 9' canvas overwhelms the viewer and grants only one modest move, that the boy's back is mostly toward us. But that is the point. Fischl did not want a completely modest, tame painting, for this image is, like *Barbecue,* a statement of rebellion. And buried beneath that more obvious gesture, however, is also a plea for help. Rather than fire and fuel, the boy is spitting out an alternate substance to declare that he is his own, free, uninhibited by constraints such as age, rules, and especially parents. He too has given himself over to his task. Whereas the Russian woman's knees were bent in nude shame in

[204] The boy's posture, closed eyes, open mouth, and position of his hands negate the possibility that he is urinating. Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 76.

Getman's *A Search*, this boy's knees are bent in nude ecstasy and his whole self is saying, "HERE I AM." *Barbecue* demands our attention because we are curious at the anomaly; *Sleepwalker* demands our attention because viewers are slightly offended by the autoerotic act and its outdoor setting.

Two lonely lawn chairs sit off to the side, resting in neatly mowed grass, just inside the lighted area. This is a backyard, lit at night, and we take in the scene from a bird's eye view. We ourselves are spectators—voyeurs even. A light shines behind the boy, perhaps from the house, perhaps because someone has just turned it on, and the pool peacefully sits, ripple-less. Instead of a dark and foreboding horizon, typical for Fischl, we instead have a dark and foreboding area of yard where the light does not reach. The encroaching darkness threatens to overwhelm the boy's act, his statement, his ritual.

Sleepwalker is a modern wink at the nineteenth century classical bather pose. Fischl gives us a new take. The setting is not a bath, river, lake, or ocean, but instead a backyard kiddie pool. As stated earlier, Fischl is a neo-expressionist in that his reaction to abstract expressionism is to insert figuration while still maintaining a perspective that is subjective. The modern bather pose in *Sleepwalker* evidences the influence of the "Bad Painting" trend in the 1970s that was the forerunner to neo-expressionism. In "Bad Painting" artists "discarded classical drawing modes in order to present a humorous, often sardonic, intensely personal view of the world."[205]

The boy is not only sexually acting out—he is doing it *in public*. What makes this painting so surprising is not that a boy is masturbating. Adolescent masturbation is ordinary. The extraordinary part is that *we are watching* this spotlighted moment. Fischl shows a universal act—all children have sexual awakenings—but in a controversial and public spot, the backyard rather than the bedroom. He brings the private into the public, something rarely done in his own childhood, where secrecy ruled.

Even if the boy is not in his own yard—and whether or not he is awake—there is a noteworthy irony that a male, biologically now an adult, is inside a *child's* pool. This young individual is misplaced; he

[205] Marcia Tucker, "Bad" Painting Press Release, "Bad" Painting Exhibition (1978). Accessed October 7, 2014. http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/5.

should not be the one in the pool. He does this very non-childlike activity—at least non-preadolescent childlike activity—and his manual labor is juxtaposed with the kiddie pool. This irony-laden pool is the suburban equivalent to the ocean, the source of life, as well as a womb, another source of life. The boy is being born again as an autonomous man. He baptizes himself a being set apart from society, childhood, and parents.

This is a painting of a boy's transition, not only from pre-adolescence to adolescence, but from dependence to independence. While the independence is *from* his parents, the rebellion is *against* them. His sexual act is done in the presence of the chairs, representations of absentee parents, and while standing in the wading pool, which is "symbolic of the infantile state of dependence he wishes to leave behind…[H]e asserts his manhood and autonomy by masturbating."[206] This youth (consciously? sleepily?) defies that which he does not understand—a future alone. Recall again *Barbecue* and the fire-breathing boy's defiant hand. Here in *Sleepwalker*, the boy defiantly shakes and clenches not his fist but his penis, the body's member that is most concerned with the (reproductive) future.

Masturbation is an act that implicitly pleads for community, for sexual acts are at their fullest expression and enjoyment when done with another person. As the boy requires another person to shift from masturbation (a solo act) to intercourse (a shared act), he too needs the community of his parents to rightly navigate this new path. And he is alone. He masturbates alone, he is without a sexual partner, and his parents are absent. The boy bares himself to us, is vulnerable, and needs to be "dressed." He needs a community, whether that is another individual to fulfill his sexual desires or simply the real presence of parents. The painting is a celebration of growing up while also a lamentation for the adult reality which is phony and failing. The sex is a vehicle for a prophetic statement: children, especially suburban children, are shown an adult world filled with hypocrisy and told to initiate themselves into this life without any appropriate public rituals. For a child to break from parental control and care is

[206] Donale Kuspit, *Fischl* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 3.

right and necessary. What is troubling about this particular boy's break from his parents is that the lonely, sleepy, and public sexual act points to a frustrated boy who needs *more* guidance, not less.

Fischl calls adolescent masturbation in boys "a separation technique…[and] a metaphor for a moment of transition."[207] Sexual awakenings are transition. Rebellion is transition. The water-filled kiddie pool is transition. The suburb itself is a transitional place, the land of those on their way to either being rich or poor. Keep in mind that inherent in a transition is the idea of something that is unfinished. The boy is a work in progress, just as Fischl has even painted the scene in an unfinished way, with brushstrokes still visible. It is also significant that the sleepwalker is standing and not sitting. He stands in the circle of life, the womb. The boy is on the boundary, for is that not what adolescence is, life on the transitional border between childhood and adulthood?

The *Sleepwalker* boy seems thus named because he is "walking" through adolescence as if in a dream. He is unguided and lazily moves to a major moment in life—adulthood. He does this in darkness, and he does this without appropriate rituals. Without a definite ritual, the boys knows not how to act; hence his exhibitionism. Fischl is aware of how his title is a play on words:

> Central to my work is the feeling of awkwardness and self-consciousness that one experiences in the face of profound emotional events in one's life…One, truly, does not know how to act! Each new event is a crisis, and each crisis is a confrontation that fills us with much the same anxiety as when, in a dream, we discover ourselves naked in public.[208]

He further says, "In America we don't have cohesive cultural narratives."[209] Without a unifying narrative or unifying actions, Americans create their own; these actions can be called rituals. In the '60s, Fischl began to read about mythology and primitivism[210] and translated that interest into paintings that acknowledged a sad American truth: we have few coming-of-age rituals for our youth. There is getting a

[207] Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 76.
[208] Culliton, "Exhibitionism and Skoptophilia: Fischl's *Sleepwalker*," 54.
[209] Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007*, 128.
[210] Fischl, *Fischl*, 28.

driver's license or being old enough to vote, drink, get a tattoo, or get married, but those events are typically after a child has first felt the pangs of adulthood. America is so inward-focused as a culture as to miss that there are benefits to communal practices that recognize a boy becoming a man, a girl becoming a woman. "Americans don't really focus on their history as part of their myth, except the myth of the individual. So I wanted to find within daily life the things that became mythical. Needs and passions."[211]

Fischl endows the everyday activities—eating, urinating, sex, swimming, reading—with uncharacteristic importance. In *Sleepwalker*, he gives the boy's masturbation a "primitive" charge in order to highlight its importance *and* the fact that the boy is forced to create his own ritual, a somnolent, solo, sexual bar-mitzvah. Making the act "primitive" both universalizes it and renders it exotic. Sexual activity is familiar while the spiritual charge Fischl gives it is foreign. Fischl accesses the characteristics of the Primitivism movement found in art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Artists like Paul Gauguin and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner perpetuated the stereotype that "primitive" figures were more sexual, unabashed, and fertile. Fischl capitalizes on this as he also supplants it.

Some of Fischl's paintings have ritualistic, foreign objects in them, such as African figurines as seen in *Slumber Party*, *Last Resort*, *Time for Bed,* or *Brief History of North Africa*. Fischl decontextualizes these objects by painting them alongside white westerners. The "primitive" challenges the "progressive."[212] The cross-cultural condemns complacent suburbanites:

> I began to look at the people who had no religion, and at the emptiness of their lives, which they often fill with art, especially primitive art, to give it a boost…I think of religion as something that helps us understand ourselves in relation to the world. This is why the absence of religion was so devastating for these

[211] Fischl, *Speak Art!,* 67.
[212] I am speaking here of a contrast of cultures, such as the tribal cultures that would have these ritualistic objects versus modern, western, or first world cultures.

> people. It was responsible for their emptiness, because they had no way to explain themselves.[213]

This pattern of decontextualizing via insertion of the "primitive" gives credence to the notion that the boy in *Sleepwalker* is not only making up his own ritual, but is linking with historic and ancient powers. Regarding the painting, Fischl said, "It was taboo…It also involved the idea that calling up power implies that you can wield it. You can handle it, and perhaps are powerful yourself…[But the image] wasn't simply a trick to get power."[214] The boy attempts to call up surrogate parents by standing in a circle of power and making a nighttime sacrificial offering.

The novel *The English Patient* contains a scene in which an injured white man is taken to an African ceremony where a youth presents to the man a handful of his seed as an offering of celebration and honor, for water was scarce and sacred.[215] Like a desert culture which values and offers up body fluids such as saliva, urine, sweat, tears, blood, and, of course, semen, here the boy gives his own offering, his own "male water" in hopes of a new beginning, a better one than that offered by adults. [216] Transition requires sacrifice. As Asher Lev realized, there is a battle, and to survive the battle one must give up childish ideas and move from milk to solid food. Asher sacrificed his idea that the body was only evil and learned that there is artistic beauty in the human form. A man's seed is the beginning of another man (or woman), and is connected to birth. The *Sleepwalker* boy sacrifices his seed in order to hopefully call up a greater power to help, for the parents of his birth are elsewhere. He creates another birth of his own.

Sleepwalker is a celebration of the notion of a rite of passage but a condemnation of the environment. Fischl celebrates and mourns growing up. In a culture without proper ritualistic

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[213] Fischl, *Fischl*, 47.
[214] Ibid., 34.
[215] Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 23.
[216] Kaoru Imamura, "Water in the Desert: Rituals and Vital Power Among the Central Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers," *African Study Monographs* 27 (2001): 139.

recognition for manhood and womanhood, teens sublimate their desires into scandalous behaviors, such as stimulating themselves in public:

> I suspect that part of the current difficulty of developing a sexual ethic for young people is the absence of any other signs and rituals for becoming an adult. Thus, sexual experimentation and/or involvement become the signs in the youth subculture one has 'grown up.'[217]

The sexual activity is a symptom rather than the problem itself, for it reveals an unsettled-ness in the youth that can be quelled only with communal ceremony, not individualistic focus. This is the biblical story, that humankind begins in a garden but ends in a city, one filled with people. *Sleepwalker* prophetically calls for this type of communal living. His nudity and semen are offerings as part of a sacred request for help *and* a simultaneous statement that he does not need it. And what is more adolescent than contradiction?

This is more than just a dirty picture, for *Sleepwalker*'s nudity acts as prophecy. The Greeks too artistically portrayed nude adolescents, but their focus was more on the beauty of the body, its symmetry and musculature.[218] The skinny boy in *Sleepwalker* is not a Greek youth exercising in the gymnasium but rather a boy who is part of a dirty dream that isn't really dirty and probably not really a dream. This event portrayed is a reality that asks us to set aside our initial tendency to turn away. Even Fischl himself as the artist had to experience this revised arc of revulsion to revelation:

> I thought I would do a pornographic picture to give it power, to offend somebody. But that changed when I was painting it, because it didn't seem pornographic; it seemed like I was watching a natural event in a child's life. I couldn't condemn it. The only thing that seemed awkward to me was that I was watching, that I was put in that position.[219]

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[217] Stanley Hauerwas, "Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It," in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 503fn.

[218] There's no denying that many Greek artists were sexually involved with their subjects, both adolescents *and* pre-adolescents. Still, the finished piece of art was meant to show the body's beauty.

[219] Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 76.

Fischl's suburbia is not the place of involved parents, for modernism has drained the environment of the unique and left the commonplace. *Sleepwalker*, along with nearly all of Fischl's paintings from 1979–1983, deals with routine experiences and ties them to a place (suburbia), a time (mid-century), and a class (middle). Suburbs are not uniquely but *characteristically* American. "Suburbs," like "bourgeois," can be a loaded, non-neutral, negative term, for they are the commercialization of domesticity and often accused of being cookie-cutter, ambiguous, fringe, borderline (not quite city, not quite rural), grid, generic, banal, and affluent in the worst way. Each Fischl painting allows us to peer into the demented dollhouse of the non-urban, non-rural American life. Fischl refuses to endorse the false image of Edenic suburbia while also refusing to only show suburbia as malevolent. Instead he manages to show in each painting a stereotype and its reality: "Having grown up in Eden before the Fall, I had firsthand experience with how fragile the illusion of Paradise is, how devastating its loss. The suburbs were my utopia, a vision of prosperity, harmony, and optimism."[220] Amidst that paradise was his mother's alcoholism, her depression, her suicide, and all the family secrets to prevent this from being made public. Suburbia became a cover-up, the in-between of poverty and extreme wealth, a "purgatory" between heaven and hell, a place of ambiguity: "People aren't where they want to be. They aren't where they're going."[221]

Artist Nancy Grimes says that Fischl's paintings deal with "the dilemma of modernity: the absence of big meaning."[222] That is a tragic state of existence, as Fischl would argue:

> I think my essential vision of our lives is tragic…. We don't have a grand style to our lives, a grand vision of ourselves. So these basic archetypal relations occur in an environment that has completely defused their meanings.[223]

[220] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 315.
[221] Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 76.
[222] Ibid., 77.
[223] Ibid.

The chief archetype in *Sleepwalker*, sexual discovery, becomes stripped of its private and pure significance. Fischl never says that beauty doesn't exist, merely that suburbanites do not have easy access to it. Beauty is hard-pressed to penetrate a world where houses and lives are entrenched in middle class mediocrity. That milieu is both propagator and product of a slow death, for in suburbia nothing is sudden. It slowly wears a person down and slowly wears down morals. The imperceptible gradations create desperate people who turn to extremes.

In *Sleepwalker* the backyard and the bedroom are collapsed as a kiddie pool becomes the stage for an otherwise private act. The boy may be white-picket-fenced in to his own slab of Eden, but the parody has overtaken reality. The suburbs in a Fischl painting are shown as tragic and stifling, and *Sleepwalker* refuses to bow to their oppressive regime that stifles identities and perpetuates isolation; it puts private parts in public places by using not self-immolation but self-stimulation and nudity to demand recognition and guidance. The darkness outside the action of the painting certainly approaches but can be dispersed by the light that shines on a boy bordering manhood and his bodily, ritualistic act of concentrated protest.

***A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island*: American Nightmare & Revelation**

(Figure 14)

A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island (1983) (Fig 14) is arguably the most evidently prophetic of Fischl's early paintings. One could argue that its prophecies and parallels are even too blatant. We are treated to two canvases paired together, a modern ecclesiastical diptych, each side showing separate but matching scenes. On the left are four figures in shallow ocean water, separately occupying themselves on a sunny day: one woman rests on a float; another stands in the water wearing only a white shirt; a man walks near a boat; and a fourth figure (a boy?) swims under the water with fins and snorkel. All are nude except the shirted woman. A windsurfing board floats in the still, clear water, and in the background there is a condominium or hotel. The right canvas shows several dark-skinned individuals in a frenetic scene, for several look dismayed at the no less than four dead or unconscious bodies lying in the sand. The ocean is choppy, clouds dark, and wind strong. These two scenes are not just paralleled but mirrored, for the beachhead on the left has been folded over onto the right image. Fischl wants viewers to compare and contrast; his form and content tap into the dualities of light and dark, sacred and profane, heaven and hell.

The left side's figures are comfortably resting in and enjoying the water, while the right side's population could be escaping from the water. While Getman's *Eternal Memory in the Permafrost* showed the unity of different cultures, this work from Fischl shows the disparity. Cultures clash here, those of white consumerism and of an islander group. The title, *A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island*, describes the two scenes. The group on the left vacations on the island by going *to* it, while the group on the right gets a visit *from* a *Lost*-like island personification, for the figures are all either dead, unconscious, or pained-looking.

As we now know, Fischl's foregrounds often interpret, and in the foreground of each panel we have an image that tells us that nearly every element of the painting is to be compared and contrasted with the opposite panel. On the left the female figure peacefully rests in the sun, while on the right another figure lies face-up on the sand, perhaps dead. A child snorkels under the water face-down on the left against the face-down dead or dying individual on the right. On the left, all figures are white, the weather is sunny, and the water calm, whereas on the right, all the figures are black, the weather ominous, and the water rough. The weather especially serves to illuminate and imitate the surrounding scene. For the left, the beach is a place of peace and sleep, but for the right it is precarious, the scene of a disaster. Most important are the white shirt figures, featured in both sides. The first is a woman in a waist-length shirt who seems to be chewing her nails, maybe contemplating the excess of her lifestyle—the only possibility of hope in this painting—while the other white-shirted individual has a hysterical expression of anguish. Other than clothes, the right panel lacks any evidence of technology, abundant in the left panel: a condominium, snorkel, float, windsurfing board, and boat with propeller, at which a man casually looks, in contrast to the man or woman on the right who looks at his or her downed (drowned?) companion.

Again, we have the competing theme of something private (nudity) shown somewhere public (a beach). The nudity not only focuses even more attention on the disparity of the races, but it shows just

how different the contexts of nudity might be, for we see in this painting nudity as both an act of casual pleasure as well as a response to or result of tragedy. Both instances of nudity combine to form a single message. As the Dalmatian in *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* mimics and mocks the two farmer's-tanned boys, the scene on the right shames and shows the superficiality of a materialistic culture. Vacation and crisis comment on and heighten the intensity of the other panel. Fischl prophesies against the ignorance, surplus, and selfishness of modern culture.[224]

The American dream, to narrow Fischl's western critique, is actually an American nightmare, but perhaps just barely, for each Fischl painting is nearly normal save for one element. The boy in the kiddie pool might be a peaceful image until we know he is masturbating; the poolside afternoon is a family classic until we are disturbed by the fire-breathing boy; the beach scene is calm until we present it alongside some kind of catastrophe. The commonplace is overlaid with sensuality as well. Critic Kate Linker notes that Fischl's paintings "suggest the eroticism ambient in everyday life, pervading vernacular situations, and imbuing the most minor events with incipient sexual readings."[225] In a Fischl painting, everyone is naked, if not technically nude, for we see everyone's desires, sins, and activities. It is this flair for subtlety that leads art critic Robert Enright to called Fischl the "most important American realist painter."[226] His paintings can be more realistic and penetrating than reality.

Fischl's notions of revelation and meaning, which carry over into his paintings, match with a prophetic role. Prophetic revelation often comes without a full understanding of the ultimate result. Isaiah prophesied to those in Judah about the treacherous Egyptians without knowing the outcome, since he knew not whether the Jews would heed his word. A prophet receives a word, applies it, and

[224] I do not say modern *American* culture because the nude beach is likely set in Europe; so here Fischl expands his criticisms to western culture overall rather than just America's.
[225] Kate Linker, "Eric Fischl: Involuted Narratives," *Flash Art* 115 (1984): 58.
[226] Robert Enright, "Double Talk: Eric Fischl," Border Crossings (2013). Accessed August 4, 2014. http://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/double-talk-eric-fischl-the-process-of-painting-and-bad-boy-my-life-on-and-.

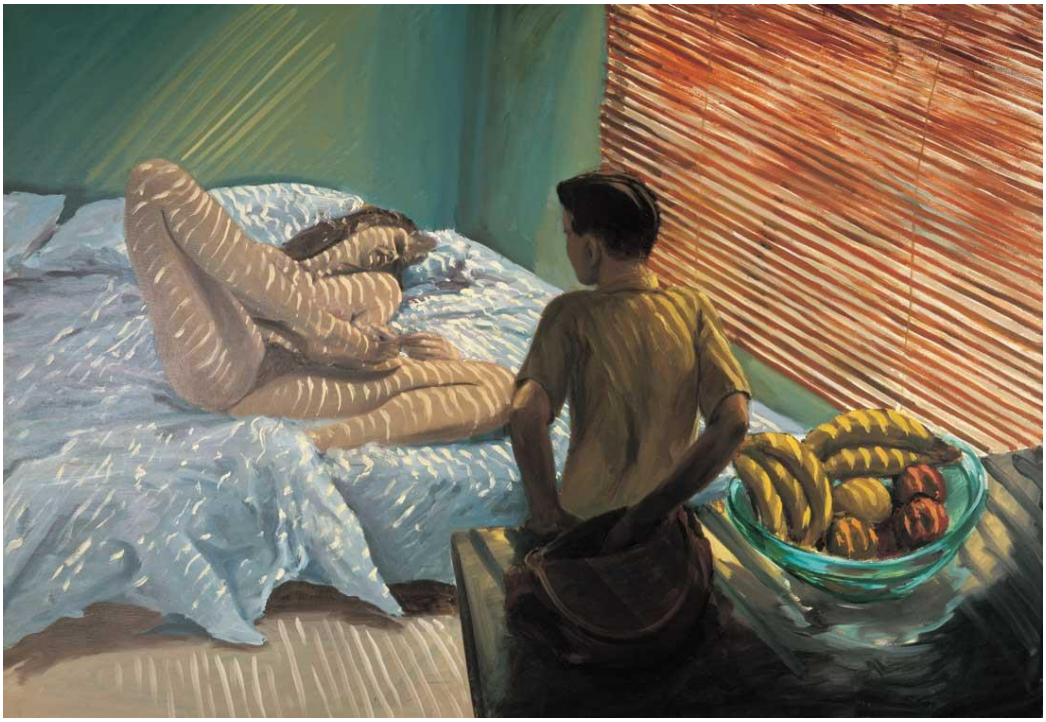
does not fret should he or she never see the endgame. Fischl seems to listen to a type of transcendent word, since he has "flashes of epiphany" and "desperate[ly] surrender[s] to voices from within"[227]:

> In real time the process is a blur, a state that precludes consciousness or any kind of rational thinking. When I'm working well, I'm lost in the moment, painting quickly and intuitively, reacting to forms on the canvas, allowing their meaning to reveal itself to me. In every painting I make I'm looking for some kind of revelation...[228]

Prophets are given a piece of a puzzle; it is unnecessary for them to know the entire picture is unnecessary. Perhaps prophets would be more reluctant to participate if they knew what was ultimately required of them, such as a three year nude spell for Isaiah, or what might happen to their audience, such as death or disease. Fischl says he doesn't begin a painting with a specific meaning in mind; instead, he discovers "the meaning of the painting as I paint and upon reflection."[229] The piece of the puzzle Fischl most often does not have is *our* interpretation of his work. Prophets do not create but discover, recognize, and distribute meaning. They diagnose more often than they treat. "You the viewer have to decide what your relationship to the theme is, and so you help create the possible outcome and meaning."[230] The idea of creating meaning brings me now to Fischl's next work, *Bad Boy*.

[227] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 340.
[228] Ibid., 156.
[229] Fischl, *Fischl*, 41.
[230] Ibid., 58.

***Bad Boy*: Voyeurism and Philosophy of Art**



(Figure 15)

Bad Boy (1981) (Fig 15) is Eric Fischl's most famous painting and, therefore, the title of his autobiography. The painting depicts a young boy in a bedroom watching a nude woman who is on a tousled bed. The blinds are partially open, allowing light to stream in, illuminating the boy, who is not only watching this grown woman but also, hidden behind his back, stealing from a purse on a piece of furniture alongside a bowl of assorted fruit. The view of the woman's genitals is direct and unimpeded. Our view is the same as the boy's. *Bad Boy* is the ultimate Fischl painting to highlight his favorite themes: the line between public and private, adolescent sexual enlightenment, disengaged/frustrated parents of suburbia, and ambiguous morality.

Not his first painting to treat or portray adolescent sexuality—we can cite also *Birth of Love*, *First Sex*, *Birthday Boy*, and certainly *Sleepwalker* as a small sample, for there are many more—*Bad Boy*'s title (the painting *and* Fischl's autobiography) is a triple play on words. The boy is bad for watching this

woman. He is also bad for stealing from her purse. Lastly, the third bad boy is *you*, the viewer, who is implicated as bad because you too are watching this scene.

Like so many works of Fischl, this is a fill-in-the-blank painting. The woman is perhaps the boy's mother. If so, then the theme of parents being scolded for not having provided appropriate guidance continues, as is seen in nearly all of Fischl's paintings concerning nude or sexualized adolescents. Whether the woman is the mother is a major question of the painting, for Fischl frequently asks the viewers to divine the relationships of the characters. Not knowing those relationships is part of what gives us as the viewers the creeps. The woman/mother has arisen from slumber or sex (or both) and absentmindedly picks at her toes, reminiscent of the woman chewing her fingernails in *A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island*. The boy, with his slicked back hair, is fully dressed and appears the quintessential American boy.

The window blinds are only semi-closed, and light enters, alternating with shadows. These shadows are cast upon the woman and resemble bars in a prison. That the suburbs are akin to a prison which stifles its inmates is an idea Fischl often portrays. Or perhaps the shadows streaked on the woman are meant to make her appear tiger-striped, for this woman is dangerous and exotic, more tiger than cougar. Regardless, the blinds[231] are a barrier marking the line between the public and private world for her audience of one—the young, bad boy. This scene is indoors, though Fischl has shown no qualms about portraying nudity and sexual activity out of doors. Why then is this painting set inside a bedroom? The bedroom setting makes us as the audience feel even more intrusive by watching. The painting forces us to focus on the indecency of having a child, whether this is the woman's son or not, view a woman in a compromising position such as this. The blinds, like her legs, are open just enough to allow for peeking, and parody what we the audience feel we are doing as Peeping Toms. A typical Fischl move is this public display of private acts. Further, this painting and others by Fischl are most often viewed in a

[231] Similarly, the tan lines of the figures in his paintings are another boundary between public and private.

museum, a public place. There again is that tension between the public and private, this time watching what should be a private scene—a woman exposing herself to someone—in a public place—the museum.

Bad Boy recalls two historic paintings. First, Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which shows five women, most of them nude, one in particular who has her legs widely spread apart. Her gaze connects with ours, and we are guiltily reminded that we are watching prostitutes in a brothel. However, in the foreground of Picasso's work is a fruit bowl, like in *Bad Boy*. A bowl of fruit is more fitting in a kitchen or dining room, so we should assume that Fischl's bowl is more of a symbolic prop, like the lawn chairs in *Sleepwalker*. Like the classic bathing pose in *Sleepwalker*, *Bad Boy* pokes fun at the still life genre of painting. The fruit bowl immediately connects Fischl's painting to Picasso's, for both paintings involve and accuse the viewer. We as viewers *want* to look at this picture, at minimum so we can put our minds to rest as to what exactly is going on. Martha Culliton's article "Exhibitionism and Skoptophilia: Fischl's *Sleepwalker*" accuses Fischl of exploiting skoptophilia (or scopophilia), which is the "primitive pleasure" and drive humans have to look at sexual images.[232] That titillating pleasure one feels when viewing a Fischl painting might make one feel guilty or odd—exactly what Fischl wants. Boy and audience both feel awkward and uncomfortable, in transition, unsettled—the very feelings that define adolescence. Our discomfort places us into the shoes of a puerile boy, interested *and* slightly repulsed by the sexuality.

The second painting *Bad Boy* recalls is Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (*Origin of the World*), which is of a woman's reclined torso, prominently featuring her genitals. This painting stares, accuses, and invites all at the same time—without a single face being drawn. *Bad Boy* has this ability as well; it lures and allures without us clearly seeing anyone's gaze. We see the gaze of the woman's sex,

[232] Martha Culliton, "Exhibitionism and Skoptophilia: Fischl's *Sleepwalker*," *Athanor* 10 (1991): 53.

however. Like the boy in *Bad Boy*, we seem to have stolen something when looking at an image as intimate as *L'Origine du monde*.[233]

One undeniable interpretation is that the boy is covertly stealing, and we watch him commit this crime. *Watching* is a loaded theme in Fischl's works. In *Sleepwalker* we watch the boy. In *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* the audience is watched. And in *Bad Boy*, where we watch the thievery, we are held by the gaze of the woman's genitals, as in *L'Origine du Monde*. Neither figure in *Bad Boy* looks directly at the other, and neither looks directly at us; yet we feel included, so much that we cringe and wrinkle our brows. The woman cannot see the boy stealing, but the audience can. This is a painting about looking *and* seeing. Like the boy, the woman also steals. She steals a piece of the boy's childhood—at least its simplicity—and prematurely ushers him into an aspect of adulthood that the boy—and this is notable—accepts without protest. One reading of her gaze is that she might be feeling some semblance of regret for her actions and therefore cannot make eye contact with the boy.

Bad Boy deftly pairs the voyeurism of the boy with stealing. He steals something that is not rightfully his, this sexual view of the woman, and at the same time steals from her purse. He slips his hand into her purse in a clear analogy to the woman's sex. Either act would shatter his innocence, but recall that Fischl's world has no blameless inhabitants. Whether incest, thievery, or both, the painting correlates sex and stealing, showing that the time for a scene such as this—where a man visually devours a nude woman—should be, for this boy, at a later age and in a different setting.

Again, nudity is required here, since there would be far less moral impact if the boy were simply stealing with his hands and not also his eyes. To double the theft doubles the message that this boy has taken something not meant for him, too early for him, unsuited for his age. The private nudity presented

[233] Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* is also a commentary on looking. The viewer peers through a hole in a door to see the "hole" of the woman's genitalia.

publicly to the boy is an injustice[234], or even an act of oppression, for how can the child not be weighed down by images beyond his ability to understand or to fulfill? (Recall the unfulfilled solo act in *Sleepwalker*.) Fischl's quest, like that of the Old Testament prophets, is to expose that which is secret, to publicize the private, but he still operates within a moral framework, and equating the Bad Boy's stolen glance to stealing from a pocketbook shows us that not *all* actions need to be seen through the blinds. For Fischl, privacy is not measured by isolation, but by the morality of the acts committed:

> I don't believe in privacy per se…. Privacy is what you do when you're not supposed to do something. It's darkness. It's not about being alone; that's not privacy. Privacy is—you're playing with yourself, you're stealing, you're having sex with your neighbor, whatever, you're not supposed to be doing it.[235]

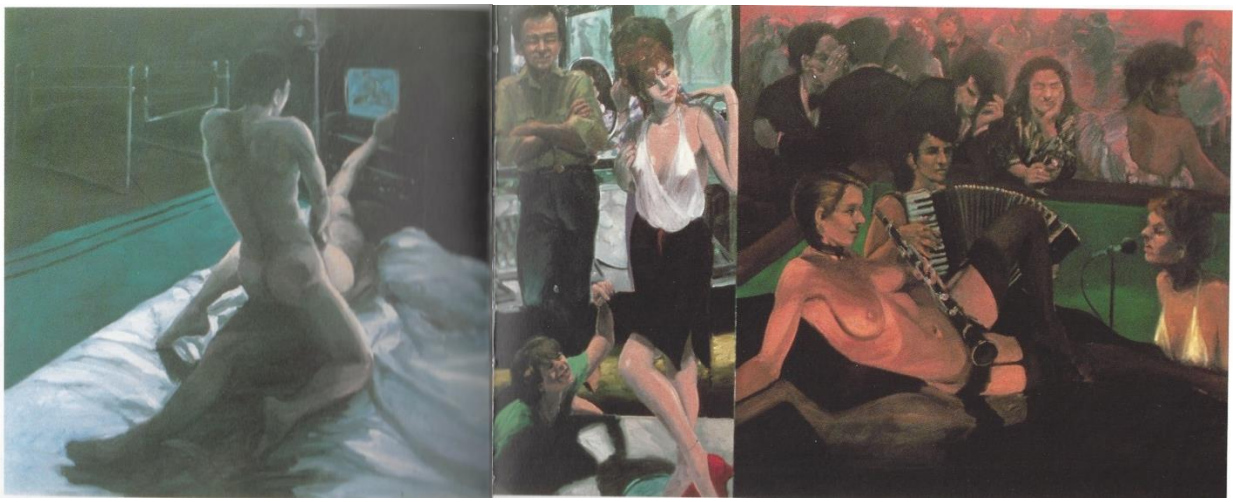
Art can help provide those communal narratives that America shuns: "Art gives experience its meaning and its clarity."[236] Art is communication because it operates in universals, using a "common language"[237] that "binds us to each other."[238] Art creates community and can prophesy against any maneuver that introduces oppressive and unjust isolation. For Fischl's work from 1979–1983, this largely meant absent, secretive, hypocritical adults, especially parents.

If art bridges people and cultures and creates a communal language, then art wields great power. The stories art weaves must be interpreted and applied carefully, for our methods of analysis and our conclusions reveal much about us. Put another way, art is a Rorschach test that can reveal our

[234] I assume in this painting's context that female nudity is dangerous or corruptive because the boy has entered or seems about to enter adolescence, a time when he will view himself as a sexual being in relation to others. The woman (mother?) who volunteers her body seemingly so absent-mindedly does not take into account what nudity means to the boy at his stage of development. Nudity to a five-year-old is not the same as nudity to a twelve-year-old. A woman (mother) helps (her) children not when she mindlessly flaunts herself as a sexual being, for arousal can lead to great confusion and shame.
[235] Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 70.
[236] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 292.
[237] Ibid., 336.
[238] Ibid., 321.

motives; art is also a tool that can be twisted to meet our own ends and needs.[239] Like interpreting prophecy, to interpret art is a sacred and dangerous endeavor. To extrapolate a story and overlay that onto our lives in a way that is relatable is, at best, precarious. Our last painting, *Inside Out*, will help us determine wise interpretive guidelines for the "overlay."

Inside Out: Narrative & the Community of the Modern Family



(Figure 16)

Inside Out (1982) (Fig 16) tackles many themes: consumerism, voyeurism, escapism, distraction, overstimulation, isolation, and exclusion. While *A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island* joins two canvases, *Inside Out* joins three, recalling ecclesiastical triptychs. The painting, like many of Fischl's, is "novelistic"[240] but not linear. Here Fischl pairs sex, shopping, and entertainment, giving each a sensual charge.[241] Fischl often joins sexuality and entertainment/media: *Slumber Party*, *Beach Ball, Private*

[239] William McDonald, "Concerning the Use and Abuse of a Medieval Statue in Germany from 1920–1940. The Case of the *Bamberger Reiter*." Perspecuitas (2013). Accessed August 8, 2014. https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/perspicuitas/mcdonald.pdf.
[240] Stephen Wright, "Eric Fischl, 'Inside Out,' 1982," Artforum International (1999). Accessed May 29, 2014. http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Eric+Fischl,+'Inside+Out,'+1982.-a054772289.
[241] Wright, "Eric Fischl, 'Inside Out,' 1982."

Beach, The Power of Rock and Roll, and *Birthday Boy*. And like the entertainment industry, this painting shows sex as requiring an ever-increasing exotic nature that we consume.

In Panel 1, a couple is sprawled on a bed having sex while presumably filming themselves with a nearby video camera. The light from a television casts a fluorescent glow, and we realize that the image on the TV is possibly the same couple having sex on the bed, perhaps filmed earlier. In Fischl's paintings from 1979–1983 any bed featured is never neatly made. The sheets are always disheveled, as if from intense sex or dreams. Panel 1's main idea is sex. A television image taking priority over actual intercourse is also portrayed in *Slumber Party* and *Birthday Boy*. The reclined woman in Panel 1 reaches up to adjust something on the TV and seems more interested in the TV than her male lover, but he too stares at the TV rather than the woman. The direction of gaze is revealing and sublimely insinuates that the act of sex is just not enough. The couple needs not only sex but the added layer of film to heighten the experience. Direct sex is insufficient, for now a TV filters it. The voyeurism amplifies the moment. They desire the fiction of friction when the reality is available to them.

Panel 2's main idea is shopping. A middle-aged man crosses his arms and leans against a jewelry display counter in what seems to be a department store. He looks down at a boy and gives an approving sneer (much like the dad in *Barbecue*) as the young boy lifts up the skirt of a female mannequin. This boy, recalling *Bad Boy* with his stolen glance, has a self-satisfied smile and a missing tooth, revealing that he is too young to see beneath a woman's skirt. As masturbation is a poor substitute for sex, so this mannequin does not truly satisfy the boy. This boy's act implicitly calls for community, not necessarily sex but at least parental guidance. The boy knows enough to have in mind what to look for but not enough to know he is breaking a taboo with this private act in a public place. He is unsuited for what he views, and the nearby adult offers no direction. The painting is more than just "boys being boys" but two boys (one a *man*) being offensively child-like. A woman behind the mannequin looks into a mirror and either does not see or ignores the mischief with the mannequin, which is curiously clad in a shirt

that barely drapes over her breasts. As we shop for jewelry and receive what we buy, so too the boy "buys" a sexual thrill from the mannequin and is not admonished by the adults present.

Panel 3's main idea is entertainment. We encounter a cabaret club where a crowd talks and drinks as three women play instruments and sing, one of whom is topless and sprawled on a piano. All figures in this painting appear to be tired, bored, or drunk. Whichever of the three apply, no one is captivated by any other person or action. The nudity of the clarinet player is casual, much like nudity in *Barbecue, Birthday Boy,* and *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*. Her clarinet could certainly function as a phallic symbol—phallic symbols populate Fischl's works: *Squirt, Birthday Boy,* and *Birth of Love* are an obvious few—but her bared breasts are enough to continue this painting's motif of sexuality. The pianist, curiously, wears the same white shirt as the mannequin in Panel 2.[242] The third panel portrays the superficiality of commercialized sex.

The title *Inside Out* hints at the reversed or improper nature of each activity. Sex is filtered through a camera and takes priority over the person present; a boy prematurely glimpses a woman's sex; and nudity at a club is informally exhibited and unappreciated. These images comment upon and replicate each other as well as our culture, for each panel has a reflection. In Panel 1, it is the TV; Panel 2 the mirror; Panel 3 the shiny surface of the piano. As each panel reflects a character, so *Inside Out* unfortunately reflects our society, where sexuality has been cheapened and commercialized, made public when it should be private. The reflections have become the reality. The couple chooses filmed sex over live sex; the boy chooses a mannequin rather than a real, consenting woman; and the nude musician chooses to display herself erotically, including the use of a phallic symbol, rather than pursuing a real relationship.

While much of modern art attempted to eliminate narrative and even dimensionality, Fischl infuses his paintings with both. His paintings are the visual equivalent of a story. Basically, they are a

[242] The man in Panel 1 might also be the same as in Panel 2, further interconnecting the three panels.

text, or "frozen moments"[243] that we must interpret. We could say that Fischl gives the outline, and the viewers create the plot, for his works are a choose-your-own-adventure, lending themselves to several interpretations, since one can never passively look at a Fischl painting. I said earlier that his paintings are like a Rorschach for our desires and ideas, but a better psychological analogy is the Thematic Apperception Text, where clients are given an ambiguous drawing, such as a woman covering her face near a room where a man lies upon a bed, and told to create a story. In modern art, the audience is never merely a receiver but a co-creator, or, as Tolkien says, we are each a "sub-creator" that makes a world like but *not the same as* this world.[244] Fantasy, and really *all* fiction, involves sub-creation. Modern art was persecuted and feared by regimes such as those under Hitler and Stalin because modern art requires that the creators and institutions release control over the interpretations of the works and give the power of interpretation to the people.

Fischl invites us to tell stories with him: "What I try to do is narrow the possibility of interpretation to a certain area so that they're never that far wrong. You don't want to control it so much that they have no room. You want [the audience] to participate."[245] He still sets the terms. There is still intent. There is just not an obsessive desire to control what the viewer thinks or feels. Fischl gives broad narrative structures that we populate with details that have meaning to us—and those details reveal much about ourselves. Author and curator Amelia Jones writes, "The identity we ascribe to a particular image or object…is intimately connected to our own psychic desires, fantasies, and projections."[246]

With abstract expressionism, painters wanted to strip art down, and that included stripping stories in a Reformation-esque narratival-clasm. Fischl did not feel he could communicate his ideas using

[243] Fischl, *Eric Fischl: 1970–2007*, 48.
[244] J.R.R. Tolkein, "On Fairy Stories," Brainstorm Services (1947). Accessed June 20, 2014. http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/fairystories-tolkien.pdf.
[245] Fischl, *Speak Art!*, 69.
[246] Amelia Jones, *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 78.

the nonfigurative form of painting, much like Jacob Kahn in *My Name Is Asher Lev*, who says to Asher, "I do not like geometric abstraction. It has no contact with our time. It is not in touch with what is human in man. Mondrian is a great artist. But he cannot express the feeling that is necessary in a painting if I am to care for it."[247] With his move from abstraction to figuration came a foray into narration. Therefore in the '70s he created a fictional family named the Fishers who lived in Nova Scotia.[248] This make-believe father, mother, son, and daughter were the characters featured in his transparent glassine drawings—the ones that he treated like a preschool teacher's felt storyboard—he used to reenact many scenes from his own childhood. As Asher Lev uses the nude model as a base from which to create a drawing, many painters, including Fischl, take experiences and talents and apply them to a canvas to tell a story. His paintings usher in postmodern and recall Roland Barthes-like open texts. Fischl does "open paintings." He wants to participate in modern art's dialogue when painting was presumed dead, unlike Getman, who used art's exposing abilities, its colors, and its universality to communicate the experiences of his life with little concern for the philosophical climate of the art world.

Fischl's stories are never complete, and more often than not they lack a climax. The paintings concern the time right before or right after an act. We have to insert meaning. And we want this. We want resolution, an ending. Fischl does not grant that, so our response is to insert. We do with paintings and narration the mental equivalent of connecting the dots, but Fischl's stories deny easy endings.

This type of co-creation aligns with the order God first gave humans in the garden, to "work and keep." A completely finished product does not need to be worked and kept. The garden was good but unfinished. It required human cultivation to reach its full beauty.[249] God's action toward humans is to single them out above the animals, for "God speaks directly only to human creatures."[250] Humankind's

[247] Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, 255-256
[248] Marge Goldwater, *Past/Imperfect* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1987), 7.
[249] "The role of the human person is to see to it that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God." Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation*, 33.
[250] Ibid., 31.

actions toward creation are those of authority: "The image of God in the human person is a mandate of power and responsibility [over creation]."[251] While God created *ex nihilo*, humans, especially artists, use existing materials in the world to order that same world. Fischl's paintings might be confusing, but rightly so. The world is befuddling and ever-changing, and, biblically, it requires us, like God, to create—in his likeness. We can't create from *nothing* but from the something already here: paints, chalks, pens, and clay.

Fischl practices affirmation by opposite, muck like Augustine's assertion that the beauty of the world is accentuated by its ugliness.[252] What Eric Fischl principally affirms is not even necessarily the ugly or the beautiful—he affirms human experience.[253] His paintings resonate with people because in them the audience recognizes familiar scenes. The modern family for Fischl is wounded, ambiguous, and gray. That is the central theme of his paintings: the painful present of suburban frustration held up against a hoped-for future of community. People are inherently social, and since America has a poor communal or ritualistic sense of itself, especially for its youth, it is consumed with individualism; subsequently, much of art is self-serving and unintelligible and eclipses and ignores human experience. Many have difficulty deciphering the desperate probings of a Rothko or a Kandinsky, but many can quickly see *some* grain of truth in the scenes Fischl presents. His paintings are true to our experiences. Fischl longs for community and centers his present skills on painting his friends, "…to remind me that I'm no longer alone."[254] We as a culture have not yet arrived at the good life as defined by Fischl—content but not complacent community[255]—but criticizing the disordered state is a start. If the biblical arc is

[251] Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation*, 32.
[252] Augustine, *City of God*, Bk XI, 18.
[253] Fischl might not accept my explicitly theological framework regarding his paintings—and I fully recognize that he isn't actively trying to "do" theology—but the push for unity, community, freedom, and justice is a common Old Testament motive that is present in Fischl's paintings and autobiographical writings.
[254] Fischl, *Bad Boy*, 344.
[255] To revisit an earlier theme, even shame requires community. Regardless of who the shame is before, shame does not take place "in the individual, but in relationship with others." Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 236.

from Garden to City, then Fischl resides in-between, right next to Getman, who is halfway from Golgotha to Glory.

To conclude my discussion of Fischl, part of what makes him so unique is that one needs no special training to look at his art, which he admits is "poorly painted but compelling."[256] He uses familiar icons and archetypes to say things we already know. His pictures, and especially his use of nudity, rebuke the viewer for their participation in the oppressive system. Like Getman, Fischl wants people to overcome injustice via exposure to the darkness. He rubs our faces in it. Our eyes are treated to a scene that is familiar yet skewed in ways that make us squirm, wonder, and watch. The paintings force us to automatically associate the right/normal/typical meaning of the situation illustrated, and then we are jolted because that meaning is certainly not what is portrayed.

Fischl is a siren of the sensual not because his paintings deal with sex, but because he acknowledges that bodies need other bodies, that senses must be stimulated, and what better way for that to happen than with other people? Fischl calls for America to move from the individualism of Athens and into the communal living of Sparta, and he uses the nudity in his "fleshscapes" to shock the audience from our natural expectations, to make the characters vulnerable, stripping them of a superficial veneer, and to heighten the scene's sensual tension. Nudity even gives us something in common with each other, for men and women are leveled by nudity and the common physical characteristics we share. The more we "look closer" at Fischl's work, the more we see beauty in community, for the frustrated individualism of suburbia fulfills no one. Just as in *American Beauty* where Lester Burnham finds true beauty in the solace of his family, Fischl turns our gaze toward the group as the good life. As we look at the paintings, we the audience identify with the impending doom in *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog,* the rebellion in *Barbecue*, the desperation of the boy in

[256] Grimes, "Eric Fischl's Naked Truth," 78. Also connect Fischl's comment that his work is "poorly painted" to our earlier discussion of the "Bad Painting" movement.

Sleepwalker, the hypocrisy of *A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island,* the secrecy of *Bad Boy*, and the boredom of *Inside Out*. Art creates community, demands it, and critiques it. With one hand Fischl holds up a middle finger to his audience's society, while with the other hand, he crooks his index finger, beckoning us to watch, participate, and think.

Conclusion: The Truth of the Journey

This thesis has proposed that nude art can be more astutely evaluated when distinguishing between an erotic, clinical, or artistic use of the nude body. Nikolai Getman and Eric Fischl are two artists who use nude art as prophecy and demonstrate the prophetic principle: *they use nudity in their paintings in such a way that it acts as and aligns with one strain of Old Testament prophecy—a word of judgment against oppression or injustice.* Using the analytical axis of artist, artifact, and arena we can see that the type of prophecy—judgmental/negative/predictive prophecy[257]—and the backgrounds of these men converge to portray the world's evil (crucifixion) and the world's beauty (resurrection), and thus we see the magnitude of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Prophetic art can be a realistic look at and a rendering of the "crucifixion" in the world, but also a sober pointing to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Getman does both and Fischl only the former. Both men give a vision of the "good life," but Getman points to the divine (Christ's kingdom) whereas Fischl locates the "good life" immanently (community). The two books of knowledge, God's Word and God's World[258], operate best when joined, and Getman could be said to represent the Word and Fischl the World. The hope to which Getman alludes is divine and Christian, the cross and risen Jesus Christ, while Fischl alludes to temporal community.

Recall Walter Brueggemann's definition of prophecy: to "nurture, nourish, and evoke a

[257] I would put Getman and Fischl in both the proclamation *and* predictive categories, but especially the predictive because each artist has elements in his works that speak of a hopeful future, a form of "this will be."
[258] Belgic Confession, Article 2.

consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[259] Each artist is a prophet bringing his word of truth as a judgment against oppression and injustice to change consciousness and perception. Think of the forms of oppression and injustice against which they prophesy: Gulags, isolation, murder, physical abuse, Soviet Russia, torture, communism, violence, slavery, and disease resulting from malnutrition in Getman's paintings; materialism, separation, frivolity, abandonment, automaticity, suburbia, ignorance, and the loss of rituals in Fischl's works.

Like the Old Testament prophets, each communicates truth; each artist also uses the nude body; each artist accesses the shame that is frequently tied to nudity as a result of the fall; each artist points to ultimate meaning or concern (Christ for Getman, community for Fischl); each artist appropriates rather than exploits the body. As Sojourner Truth demonstrated, the nude body can transcend shame. These painters remove the clothes of their painted figures in what becomes an echo of Isaiah 20: a prophet bringing the truth to bear upon an oppressive or unjust situation. Like Guido Reni with *Massacre of the Innocents* and Pablo Picasso with *Guernica*, or as Isaiah prophesied against the pride and idolatry of Judah, Getman and Fischl harness the power of the nude form to judge, whether that be the Soviet Gulags or stale suburbia.

Their methods resonate with Protestant Christians, who view the body as beautiful, a "glory of structure and form," as Kahn says. These artists honor the body, not necessarily by designing a perfect human representation like the Greeks attempted in sculpture, but our two artists used the form of the nude body as a protest piece. Yes, the body is beautiful and good and true (Gen 1:31; John 1:14; 1 Cor 15; Col 1:15), but the body also is a battleground, where our sinful selves clash with the inherent goodness that Christian theology confers upon bodies. Tillich advises that artists consider both extremes

[259] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 13. James K.A. Smith would call this a reworking of the culture's "social imaginary," a term coopted from Charles Taylor. See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 65. This is done by the prophet first offering what Brueggemann calls a "redescription" of the world. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 2.

in his notion of belief-ful realism, so that artists acknowledge the harsh world but also the hope of an ultimate reality. Tillich's Protestant Principle—that "nothing which is less than ultimate should be allowed to usurp the supremacy which belongs to God alone"[260]—gives the primacy to God. The finite is a sign pointing to God. Getman understands this when he points to suffering but then to the hope of Christ's cross. Fischl comes close when he locates hope in human community. Community is a deeply Christian concept—families, churches, the Trinity—but Fischl keeps his "resurrection" focused on the temporal. To echo again the Buddhist *kōan,* Fischl points to and honors the finger rather than the moon to which the finger points.

Still, each artist is a voice in the wilderness, one covered in Soviet snow and the other in sand, sunblock, and suburban pavement. Artists like Getman and Fischl contribute to modern art not only through an exploration of form but a pairing of form and content. The underneath meaning, or *Gehalt*, as Tillich[261] calls it, was that our present condition on earth is insufficient for the needs of humanity. We must look elsewhere for consummation. And life here on earth can at times best be understood and weathered by viewing beauty by contrast, a method Getman *and* Fischl employ. Their paintings of the various forms of ugliness lead us as viewers to long for a future beauty. And, for Christians, that ugliness and beauty intersect in Jesus, for he experienced ultimate oppression and injustice, but in his resurrection he displays hope. Niebuhr locates the biggest contrast to man's darkness in Christ: "The reason why there is a heightened sense of sin in Christianity is because the vision of Christ heightens the contrast between what man is truly and what he has become."[262] Getman hints at a christocentric solution, while Fischl's answer settles on human community.

The core of prophecy is truth, and these two painters speak truth. Society needs artists, their perspectives, their critiques, their affirmations. An artist often functions as a chronicler of the degree of

[260] Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 26.
[261] Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* ed. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 169.
[262] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 266.

separation for Solzhenitsyn's line dividing good and evil: "And they were mistaken, and will always be mistaken, who prophesy that art will disintegrate, that it will outlive its forms and die. It is we who shall die—art will remain."[263] We pray the prophecy of heralds like Hegel, who pronounced the "death of art,"[264] remain untrue. After all, artists like Getman and Fischl show us a philosophy of the body that Protestant Christianity can certainly affirm.

Our view of the body betrays other beliefs, such as the appropriate use of the body, Jacob Kahn's "glory of structure and form." Adam and Eve's post-fall donning of clothes taught us not that bodies are inherently bad but that they require boundaries. Bodies do not need to fall into the dualistic category of the profane. They are part of creation, the "very good" creation (Gen 1:31). To ignore or demonize the body is to resurrect Gnosticism. Bodies are not only shameful but often a glorious assembly of parts where content and form come together. Learning that truth can be a long process, one which can begin with an understanding and application of the prophetic principle.

Each of the three sections of *My Name Is Asher Lev* ends with a character saying, "Have a safe journey." That motif applies to bodies, which are as much a journey as they are a battleground, as much filled with conflict as they are with community. We must balance the sensual and the sensible, but that coupling takes time, training, and tenacity which the prophetic principle hopes to generate.

[263] Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize lecture.
[264] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. I, Trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), vi.