

ArtSeen

Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros

By **Steven Pestana**

Installation View, *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros*, Curated by Eric Fischl. Hall Art Foundation, Reading, Vermont. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation.

A buxom blonde nude with bright red lips plays joyously atop a white fluffy cloud, stars overhead. Beneath her cloud, crude blue lettering reads, “We are just complicated animals.” This neon sculpture, by Dan Attoe, casts a cool glow through a gallery that was once a farmhouse, highlighting the kind of tongue-in-cheek wit that animates much of Eric Fischl’s own work. In this multi-generational group exhibition, curated by Eric Fischl, representations of mankind’s most basic and everlasting instinct—the compulsion to copulate—waver from existential to carnal in a vein that is often ribbed with humor. While none of Fischl’s own work appears in the show, his taste is everywhere apparent.

READING, VT
Hall Art Foundation
May 6, 2017 – November
26, 2018

MARTOS GALLERY

Hope occupies three of the Foundation's buildings. The first, the aforementioned farmhouse, is intimate and domestic, the ceilings low. The majority of work here depicts the female form, ranging from abstract to hyper-realism. As with Fischl's own paintings, the imagery is largely sexual, though less lascivious than Balzacian: a human comedy, blindly underpinned by our opaque animal natures. In one room a trio of paintings by Ellen Berkenblit, Marcel Dzama, and Tala Madani, respectively, portray cartoonish figures in the midst of performing or insinuating sex acts (in one case, while wearing a horse mask). Their partners? A human-sized mouse, a surly pack of dogs, and a playmate suggestively wielding a hobbyhorse. The absurdity of the work is perfectly in keeping with Attoe's neon aphorism. Complicated indeed. On the neighboring wall, a diminutive salon grouping of five small paintings by Ridley Howard, Walter Robinson, Aura Rosenberg, and Tom Wesselmann depict the female nude as it is so often represented in contemporary eroticism: recumbent, faceless, depersonalized, and sexually available. Seductive though the imagery may or may not be, taken together, the selections lean towards a transactional view of desire, with the body as currency. What is the psychic cost of a culture grounded in objectification? This question resonates throughout *Hope*. As with his own voyeuristic canvases, Fischl mostly abstains from overt judgment, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions.

In the rear gallery of the second building—a larger and brighter room, previously a horse barn—two oversized wall works address the complexities of real-world relationships that spill into public view through visual art. Judith Eisler's canvas *Liz and Rock* (2014) recreates a moment of onscreen tenderness from the 1956 film *Giant* between co-stars Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson. Eisler's hazy brushwork and soft, cool palette create an air of wistfulness, or perhaps tension; cinéastes might complicate this reading with a knowledge of the actors' lifelong friendship. Towards the end of Hudson's life, following his revelation of off-screen homosexuality and AIDS illness, they grew even closer. By contrast, the pseudo-eroticism of *Fingers Between Legs* (1990), from Jeff Koons's photographic series, "Made in Heaven" (1989 – 1991) is anything but tender, and, in reality, the relationship between Koons and the porn-star turned politician, Ilona Staller, was ill-fated. Appropriate to any exercise in high conceptualism, that disjunction occurs in



Judith Eisler, *Liz & Rock*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Judith Eisler.

MARTOS GALLERY

the mind of the viewer.

Standing ten feet tall, a lumbering giant, *Egg Figure I* (2009) by Thomas Houseago, awaits in the far corner of the cow barn, the third and largest of the buildings. The figure is backlit, on the verge of ominous, except that his crestfallen shoulders and gloomy disposition are more likely to inspire pity than fear. Houseago's forlorn behemoth stands in, fittingly, as this comedy's sole representative of loneliness.



Joan Semmel, *Untitled*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 69 x 81 inches. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Joan Semmel.

The remaining selections are the most painterly, a vibrant and tactile playground of gesture and chroma. Sensuous moments abound, such as Bjarne Melgaard's *Untitled* (2005), a lusciously liquid pink, beige, and green-slathered abstraction, and André Butzer's heavily impastoed, monstrous, phallus-headed *Portrait*

Carl Zuckmayer (2004). They are messy physical documents of fugitive bodily encounters between the artists and their materials, singing the body erotic. In a walled-off area at the heart of the gallery, two orgiastic scenes face one another: the first a 2009 riff on Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) by Peter Saul reinterpreting it as gaudy caricature (although, given the theme, some might say it was already this), and a frenzied bedroom scene, *Session*, (2005) by Peter Schoolwirth, where wild, disjointed limbs defy the bounds of space and time. Joan Semmel's 1971 coital devotional, *Untitled*, composed of luminous color fields, revels in unselfconscious abandon. Another wall features three paintings focused on comically exaggerated male and female derrieres. Two by Carroll Dunham, *Untitled I (July 28, 2005)* (2005) and *(Hers) Night and Day #2* (2009), feature humorously grotesque physiques demarcated with swollen black lines. They appear on either side of a third butt painting by C.O. Paeffgen, also featuring bold outlines but this time more anatomically correct. The differences are more compelling than their similarities, with Dunham's brushwork layered,

MARTOS GALLERY

loose, and lawless, while Paeffgen's is muted, harmonious, and oddly classical.

Even in the earliest Greek comedies, sexual foibles played a key role in the farces of deeply relatable and even poignant characters. In Fischl's exhibition, the motivation is Eros, god of sexual desire, and, in Hesiod's words, conqueror of "the mind and wise counsel in the breasts of all gods and men"—in other words, hope and hazard captured in a single archetype. Throughout *Hope*, Eros appears in sundry forms of attraction, seduction, tribulation, and consummation with Fischl in the role of chorus. Nevertheless, *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros* does more than extrapolate these themes through others' work. In fact, it locates them within a powerful framework for understanding human nature, namely that of the ancient tradition of drama and its enduring visions of love, lust, and the utterly inscrutable.