

THREE FIGURATIVE ARTISTS:  
SCHIELE, DEKOONING, FISCHL

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For centuries the female form, draped or nude, has been a popular subject of artists. This paper will examine how three artists from different eras in the 20th century handled the figure. Their works are expressive and conjure up a sensuality that excites, inspires and influences the figurative work of other artists. Within their art is an erotic, emotional, expressive and psychological spirit that many want to instill and incorporate into their own artistic endeavors.

The three artists in this discussion are: Egon Schiele, from the early 20th century; Willhelm DeKooning, from the 1950's; and the contemporary artist, Eric Fischl. Their reaction to the figure differs in the psychological feeling present during the time in which they worked.

In the early 1900's, especially in Vienna, economical, social and political changes were manifested in problems of malnutrition and poor living conditions. The artists of this time were not solely concerned with such conditions, instead they rebelled against the art of the elitists and the bourgeois insistence on beautiful and academic art. In addition, they wanted to break from the decorative art of the Secessionists. A new consciousness of the human psyche was emerging from a book by Sigmund Freud, Interpretation of Dreams. Artists like Egon Schiele, were searching for man's true nature.

Schiele painted many self-portraits, often strongly introspective. Many are nude studies with him gazing out to the viewer with a fixed

stare. In fact, the use of a mirror meant that actually he was looking deep into himself. That same spirit is suggested in his female nude works. In the painting "Seated Female Nude with Black Stockings" (see Figure 1), one sees an emaciated nude quickly drawn and painted with particular attention paid to the negative space around the figure. The design is simple, but the figure is almost tempting the viewer to come into the painting. Schiele concentrated his detail work in the pubic region, the hands and up into the face. The white outline around the figure seems like an aura of the person and exudes her psyche to us. Perhaps this was the inclusion of the invisible electric activity that supposedly surrounds us. Or was this effect simply the fact that it was left unfinished? Because of the many numbers of works left in this stage, the writer suggests they were intentional and aura-like.

Regardless, his work is anti-beauty in the sense there is no decoration and lacks attention to an academic portrayal of the nude. They are more of a psychological and expressive portrayal of the artist's intention, an almost ugly (for its time) statement of his exploration of the figure. It is only in recent times that Schiele's works become lauded for their fresh, expressive and psychological qualities.

The lack of background and reference to any social statements give Schiele's paintings a timeless look. This intensifies the malnourished or emaciated handling of the nude.

Schiele's preoccupation with death probably was "nourished" by the dying and extensive deaths in Europe caused by the plague and flu. His



Figure 1. Seated Female Nude with Black Stockings, 1910, Pencil, Water color and Gouache. 54 X 36.2 cm. Signed and dated at center right: S.10.

family members, Gustav Klimt and World War I friends were dying before him, and the "Spanish Influenza" took his life at the young age of 27<sup>1</sup>.

At an early age Schiele was doing explicit drawings of his sister, Gertrude. They would lock themselves in their bedroom after dinner and he would do nude studies of her. They had that emaciated quality to them perhaps due to her pre-pubescent age. The writer suspects that he may have become familiar to her in a sexual way because of the sometimes erotic poses.

Schiele was also later imprisoned for 29 days for luring young children into his home and exposing them to erotic drawings. In fact the local police actually suspected him of sexual abuse and having the children pose nude for him, but could not prove it.

Schiele's search for man's nature and open attachment to his models, his preoccupation with death and experience with the law, had an effect on his drawings and paintings. Most works were of singular figures in a semi-dressed or nude state and, at times, were involved in erotic self-indulgence. Even his self-portraits seemed to show Schiele masturbating. For these reasons his works become very alluring erotically and psychologically; and their strong vertical compositions, sharp cutting lines and negative space almost define other figures or invisible human forms.

Achille Oliva best sums up Schiele's work in the book Egon Schiele by Serge Sabarsky: "The work of Egon Schiele in it's totality

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<sup>1</sup>Erwin Mitsch, Egon Schiele Drawings/Watercolors, (Verlag Galerie Welz Salzburg, 1961), p. 13.

represents the stoic consciousness of a sensibility that exercised through art the sound nihilism of not making images of world salvation. Death truncated the young life of Schiele. Nevertheless, the reserve of his extant works reveals the narcissistic remains of an eroticism that, even if mutilated represents the sole deterrent against delirium that existed until the end of that era."<sup>2</sup>

The second artist to be discussed is of particular interest to this writer. He is the post-World War II artist, Willhem DeKooning. In 1950 DeKooning started the painting that would inspire a wonderful series of female figures. It is called Woman I (see Figure 2). This series caused great consternation among the critics and art world at large. For the most part, they thought the violent abstract approach to the female form was ugly and degraded women.

Looking at Woman I makes the viewer come alive. It appears to have been freshly painted and is still wet. Its lively and free handling demands your attention and draws you into it. The brush strokes are applied in a varied manner. There are wide ones, small ones, strokes that are transparent, ones that are opaque. Some strokes splash and drip, thick and thin and overlapping so that you can almost sense DeKooning's decision making. The colors are vibrant and twist around and through the figure. This application of paint gives the figure an erotic and sensual feeling that becomes quite exciting.

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<sup>2</sup>Serge Sabarsky, Egon Schiele, (Rizzou Publication, 1984), p. 27.



Figure 2. Woman I, 1950-52. Oil on canvas, 75 7/8 X 58 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York Purchase.

She is half-naked and possesses the large "blonde-bombshell" breasts indicative of the times. Such female images were frequently seen in calendars, advertising, sweater girls, up-lift bras, etc. The female has a gripping stare and snarl that suggests a feeling of omnipotent power. The "bug-eyed" stare has a concentrated intensity familiar in Byzantine icons. For this reason, DeKooning sets the figure up as more of a goddess than an ugly degradation of womanhood.

Advertising used the beautiful woman to sell products as it does now. Perhaps this is why many thought DeKooning's work was ugly, foreboding and insincere. To some extent DeKooning could have been playfully attacking the advertising business as well as the Marilyn Monroe and Mamie Van Doren syndrome of the tight sweaters and exposed cleavage. He apparently wasn't trying to sell anything with his beautiful paintings; they were his honest and beautiful reactions to females and, if anything, he was excited by them. Harry F. Gaugh writes in the Modern Masters Series of DeKooning: "He kept a calendar (of Marilyn Monroe) in his studio, and when asked why he happened to paint her, replied:

'I don't know. I was painting a picture, and one day there she was.'

'Subconscious desire?'

'Subconscious, hell, he laughed.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Harry F. Gaugh, Willhem DeKooning, Vol. II, Modern Masters Series, (Cross River Press Ltd, 1983) p. 49.



About the women series DeKooning says; "'Women Series. That's all.' But he went on to say: 'I like beautiful women. In the flesh: even the models in magazines.'"<sup>4</sup>

At any rate, DeKooning's paintings are highly expressive and personal in his response to the female figure. His abstract-expressionistic figures were ahead of their time as was Egon Schiele's Figurative work, and they became the inspiration to many artists to come.

The third artist is Eric Fischl. His figurative work differs mainly from Schiele and DeKooning by its monumental size and its psycho-sexual and narrative content. The sexual content becomes very evident in most of Fischl's work. For instance, in one of his paintings we see a young boy standing in a child's wading pool; he is obviously masturbating. In the background are two empty folding chairs that seem to represent the existence of the boy's parents.

In this painting and in the painting "Birthday Boy" (see Figure 3), the viewer becomes overwhelmed with a feeling of candidly being a spectator in this drama. One's voyeuristic tendencies come into full force. Robert Storr writes in Art in America: "Like Baudelaire's wandering dandy, Eric Fischl escorts us through his sundry scenes of loneliness, boredom and forbidden impulse with an eye toward making us more than simply familiar witnesses to them: he goes to considerable lengths to ensure we are guilty participants as well."

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<sup>4</sup>Gaugh, p. 51.

In "Birthday Boy" (see Figure 3) a young boy stares into the crotch of a naked woman while she watches television in a motel room. Her pose is very seductive yet she seems detached from the situation. Upon viewing this painting, a man or boy can conjure up ideas and reminisces of catching a glimpse of his naked sister or mother or of looking into a Playboy or National Geographic for a peek of a nude. But to be in a motel room with a woman and to stare at one's leisure and length conjures up some perverse fantasies. Is it the boy's mother? Or is it a seductive stranger? What Fischl does is only imply perversity with his unnatural orchestration of figures in a collage-like fashion.

"It is more of a psychological than a physical nakedness. Fischl has said that he is concerned with grasping the pathos of youth as it gropes towards self-awareness."<sup>5</sup>

In Fischl's paintings the narrative is left untold. In this perverse world that we live in and see on television, it becomes easier for the viewer to feel the guilt and fill in the rest of the story.

What adds to the sexual scenarios of Fischl's is the grand scale in which they are painted and the sensual quality of the brush strokes. Fischl works very large and completes up to six paintings a year. The sizes vary from 5' X 7' to 7' X 13' and larger. He uses photographs in a collage-like manner to set his narrative. One surely can't imagine him taking these large canvases to the beach or a motel room to do live studies from the figures. The light source falling on the figures is so

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Storr, (Art in America, November, 1984), p. 124.



Figure 3. Birthday Boy. 84 X 108, Collection of Maramotti, Albinea Reggio Emilia, Italy.

realistic that one can sense the camera. But the large size and the sensitively painted surfaces come off as very "painterly" and fresh, the camera only being a reference for his mysterious settings.

"Fischl's realism has a photographic basis, but he uses "unrealistic" painterliness and almost manneristically complete composition, both with a virtuoso of control, to create an unconscious, uncanny, meaning that an ordinary photographic surface cannot communicate."<sup>6</sup>

Fischl says that he is infatuated with the flesh tones of the figure as opposed to the colors and folds of the draped figure. He feels that the form and shapes within the naked body are more interesting to paint.

It is Fischl's intent to keep his paintings fresh and spontaneous when using the photograph. He quickly splashes in a background and very gesturally puts in a figure or two. Then he begins to narrate and make formal decisions, such as composition, etc. At some point he will realize that something precious to him must be painted over because it no longer is important to the painting. At these moments he says he must be alone because it is usually difficult for him to destroy the original image with which he was working.<sup>7</sup> It proves that he has the ability to change and, therefore, to grow artistically.

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<sup>6</sup>Donald Kuspit, An Interview with Eric Fischl, (Elizabeth Avedon, 1987), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Kuspit, pp. 51-52.

Looking back on these three figurative artists suggest that each had a love for the nude female figure and the difference in their imagery was in their handling of the form. The difference in the era in which they painted set up their distinct reactions to the figure. They all reacted with sensitivity, and sensuality in a subconscious and conscious reaction to the environment, morals and feelings of the times and within themselves.

Schiele shared his feelings and summoned the viewer into his introspective paintings. DeKooning set up an iconoclastic figure in a new world of advertising with an outward, flamboyant and abstract style. Fischl shocked the viewer into examining their own sexuality in an era where perversity is commonplace and we are bombarded with a multitude of images.

Because of Schiele's untimely death at age 27, we are at a loss as to what his images would be like today given their time to develop.

Fischl's narratives of the figure in modern motels, boats, swimming pools and with televisions in suburban settings definitely tells us of life in the 1980's. It will be interesting to see how he develops in the future.

This writer has chosen these artists because they are unique in their response to the nude figure. I feel that as a subject matter the nude surpasses all others because within it contains all the universal forms of life and there is a psychological bond between the artist and the nude model.

The figure can be painted in a way that suggests a still-life, a landscape or a non-objective or abstracted form. The opposite is not

true. When dealing with a still-life, for example, the painter's response to it cannot be figurative in feeling because the figure does not exist in it. It would actually become a figurative study with a still-life quality. Also, why would an artist reacting to a landscape try to make it into a figurative nude? This response is not inconceivable, but isn't he then really responding to the nude? And why would someone dealing with the non-objective depict a nude? On the other hand, while drawing the nude it is very possible to abstract and treat the response non-objectively.

I suggest that if one can draw the nude well, he or she then possesses the ability to draw anything else because the nude figure contains all the geometric shapes, linear qualities and values that are found in all things. A square box does not contain a figurative nude but the square can be found in the nude. The figure is unique because it also possesses a spirit and psychology inherent to the human being.

All three of the above-mentioned artists responded to the nude with an honest approach to the forms as well as the psychological nature of the human. Their response was unique to the times in which they worked. They took chances and became leaders, ahead of their time, instead of followers. They were prolific and painted with creative abandon.

I am truly excited by the nude figure, especially the female, with her earthy, sensual and suggestive forms. I feel that an artist, especially figurative, is something of a voyeur at heart. When painting a nude, there is something special that happens. The artist has emotions and feelings, consciously and sub-consciously, that come to the surface to affect his response to the nude.

The nude, as well, has her own emotional feelings which are transposed and intertwined with those of the artist. Between them there is a fusion of emotions that can become an electric and magical moment for the artist while he is painting. Knowing the model personally can even intensify that bond. This empathetic feeling goes beyond the response that would happen when drawing a box or square, etc. I sense that these three artists experienced this phenomenon. They brought the spirit of sensuality and sexuality into their works in candid, unusual poses and configurations. They did it by reacting with truth and honesty in their endeavors.

DeKooning's ageless and timeless paintings are favorite to me. They are wonderful gestural figures that could evolve from any age and I will never tire of looking at them. They have a natural and intriguing spirit that demands my attention. They are not masked by trickery, cleverness, or narration but are fresh, spontaneous and expressive.

I am also a figurative artist. My hope is that I will instill my heart and soul into my paintings and that they will reveal a special spirit and genuine feeling as do DeKooning, Schiele and Fischl's works.

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