

HERE IN AMERICA

AN EXCHANGE ON TRANSGRESSIVE ART, CENSORSHIP, ABUSE, AND FAMILY

in correspondence between Eric Fischl, Susan Twomey, and Joe Pinkelman



Viewers at the opening of 64 Arts 2012: *America Now and Here*, a show juried by Eric Fischl at the Buchanan Center for the Arts, in Monmouth, Illinois, September 2012. This wall marked off the alcove behind which potentially objectionable material, including Joe Pinkelman's work, was to be placed. Photo by Bear Dancer Studios, Rushville, Illinois.

Around the middle of the last decade, in the wake of 9/11 and deep in the midst of the Bush years (which that event had so darkly colored), the eminent American painter Eric Fischl began noticing “how quickly the conversations I was having with my friends turned anxious and unsettled”—this in the words of his forthcoming memoir, *Bad Boy*. “It wasn’t just politics: it was the places they were looking for comfort, solace and certainty. It seemed that everything had become toxic and everything

endangered.” Such feelings, he explains, became even more exacerbated as he surveyed the country as a whole, where a yawning divide in sensibilities seemed to be growing. And yet, he felt, it was precisely the role of artists, broadly understood (which is to say, including poets and playwrights and the like), to address such civic concerns; and it was out of these musings that the idea was born for his *America: Now and Here* project, “an arts fair that would set up in small towns and regional centers across the country and try to spark a

national conversation through art about the feelings and longings... dividing America." His notion struck a chord, and soon dozens of artists were contributing original work, over twenty playwrights provided five-minute flash plays, and more than fifty poets collaborated on a braided renga-style group poem. Plans were being made to package the whole thing in a convoy of trucks and send it on the road.

And then the financial crisis struck, and, alas, not terribly much came of the idea. Still, Fischl's efforts weren't entirely in vain, and therein hangs a tale. One particular outcome of Fischl's initiative came when Susan Twomey, the executive director of a small community arts center in Monmouth, west central Illinois, amid the sprawling wheat fields about three hours southwest of Chicago, contacted Fischl to see whether he'd be willing to serve as judge for a national juried arts show at her center. Fischl agreed, and things proceeded apace.

*Now, Fischl is no Grant Wood; he isn't what one might call a gentle American pastoralist. His breakthrough works, in the early '80s, were edgy and transgressive, evoking sub-urban angst, and particularly sexual unease, in all sorts of never previously attempted ways: consider the eponymous painting *Bad Boy*, in which a naked woman, spread atop an empty, disheveled bed, exposed herself voluptuously before a pubescent boy, whose hands, behind his back, were busily pilfering her opened purse. So the series of events that followed—when one entrant, California artist Joe Pinkelman, submitted a trio of conventionally kitschy ceramic vases, covered over with conventionally kitschy Catholic imagery (a saccharine sweet priest, the fish symbol, floating bouquets, and the like) interspersed with considerably more disturbing imagery lifted from hardcore homoerotic sites—might not have been entirely unexpected. The way they played out across the sequence of letters that follows, however, was thoroughly engrossing, and raises all sorts of issues—regarding freedom of expression and censorship, civic duty, and the role of the arts in American life generally—that continue to play out far afield.*

—Lawrence Weschler

PART I

Dear Eric,

I am writing this letter to you today because, frankly, I don't quite know what else to do. I am truly stuck between a rock and a hard place.

When Joe Pinkelman sent in his works, addressing pedophilia and the priesthood, I really struggled about what to do. I agree with the viewpoint of the artist, 100 percent. I was, however, truly worried about the backlash that those works would bring to the Buchanan Center for the Arts [BCA] and the conversations that we are hoping to build.

I warned my board to prepare for the possible repercussions with these pieces.

As you know, my father has been helping me install the show. On Thursday, I started expanding the spot where I hoped to place the priest pots, and I unwrapped one. My father went ashen. There is a long history between myself and my family and religion. I am the one that the Catholic Church didn't capture... and while that is a sidebar story for another day, it certainly was an issue that colored the discussion that followed. It actually wasn't a conversation, but a divisive, hurtful, and painful moment between my father and myself. My father left. I felt nauseous and spent the rest of the day either in tears or feeling the rise of anxiety.

My father returned the next day. I could tell he really hadn't slept; I hadn't either. He told me that he had been up all night thinking and had decided that if these items were to be displayed, it could ruin the BCA, and that I may indeed lose a majority of my funding.

I learned a long time ago that civil discourse with such polar extremes is generally unproductive... just hitting my head against the brick wall. I also know that the graphic nature of these works won't start a conversation: it will end it.

Dad told me that after much thinking, he'd decided that if the pieces were to be shown, he would pull his support from the BCA. On a personal level, that kills me. My father is in his eighty-ninth year. We have worked hard over the last few decades to put our differences aside and focus on the love we have instead. This morning, it was quite obvious that my father still hasn't slept—nor have I. He didn't really speak to me, but followed me out to my car to reiterate that not only could the funding go away, but that a poisonous board member that I've had to endure (another sidebar for another day) would like nothing better than to use this as a springboard to oust me from my position here. I have no doubt that he is correct in that assumption.

When I came to the BCA, in 2008, I found a small, rural community art center, nearly shuttered and with a

huge deficit. I have worked around the clock for four years to bring her back into the light and help to build community using the arts. We have an annual operating budget of approximately \$125,000. That includes everything: administrative salaries for two people, teacher salaries, lights, art supplies, programming expenses, children's-theater productions, classes. We are the only institution like this for more than sixty miles in any given direction. The loss of funding from the Twomey Foundation would devastate the BCA. And others, knowing that my father pulled funding, would follow suit in a heartbeat.

Although it may seem easy to think that my father is being unreasonable, I have to remember the time and generation he came from. A large portion of our membership and funders come from the same time and generation. I also have to bear in mind that the award monies are financed through the Foundation and one is named in honor of his deceased sister, Mary Jane. My Aunt Mary was a lovely woman: kind, very devout, and a true innocent. Even if I could convince him that the pieces should be displayed, any attachment to the memory of my Aunt Mary makes that impossible.

So much good has come from having this center here. I know you saw the piece on "The Lost Boys." That is one small example of the joyful moments and tender mercies brought about by using the arts as a catalyst for change. These moments have brought joy and hope, and a renewed sense of vitality to our community.

I can't tell you how happy people are knowing that this show is about to open, that you are coming here: the artists are thrilled, the sense of pride that people feel is palpable.

I have struggled to reconcile my feelings and what I suspect the outcome will be if I don't make a decision that will bother me personally, but would potentially cause the closing of this center. If I include these works in the exhibition, I would be burning down the library to save one book. On balance, I have decided to burn one book.

I am hoping that you will look at my situation with empathy and understanding. It is not a choice I hoped to face, but in the end I must.

In truth, I don't know what the next step is. I am very dispirited right now.

Susan

PART II

Susan,

The last thing I want is to see you and the great work you've been doing be damaged, possibly destroyed, by forcing this issue on you.

I must confess I found Pinkelman's pieces aggressively upsetting because of their graphic nature but more importantly because of their subject matter. I really wrestled with selecting them. I have no doubt that they are solid, intelligent, and heartfelt works of art. The way the artist has balanced the decorative with the shockingly ugly content is not an easy thing to do. The choice of the vase as a container for emotions, experiences, for cut flowers as well as ashes of loved ones, is in itself poignant. But no doubt about it, they are very hard to look at and very upsetting.

I have wanted America: Now and Here to be a catalyst for a conversation among our citizenry. I do not want art to end the conversation, and I have to agree with you when you say that these pieces will do precisely that. I also feel that it is not the place of ANH to go into communities to tell them what they should and shouldn't think or feel. It is about listening once the conversation has begun.

I think that we should try and find a way to make comments about this incident, find some way to have this conversation aired without having the works present and displayed. The reality is many, if not all, art institutions are dependent on money that has agendas, either expressed or not. You have very clearly stated the argument for a pragmatism that leads to certain types of censorship, and it is a reality that must be addressed.

Best,

Eric

Dear Mr. Pinkelman,

I am writing to you today to tell you something that I have been nervously skirting for some time now. I hope you will bear with me and read this with empathy and not anger.

When I first received your entries for our juried invitational, I was tempted not to submit them, though I am in total agreement that the issues your works address need to be opened up for discussion.

However, my problem came not with your message but with the images that you used on your works. They

are quite graphic—many would say pornographic—and I was fearful of what might happen. Censorship is something I have never approved of. I wrestled for a few days about what to do, but in the end I felt I should submit the works.

When I received the list of chosen works back from Mr. Fischl, my heart sank when I saw your artist number, not once, but three times. How could I honor your work, Mr. Fischl's choices, and my principles, without causing an uproar? I finally decided to construct an alcove area off to the side of the gallery, thinking that if the works were placed there, it would be difficult for someone to just “happen upon” the images.

The Buchanan Center for the Arts is a rural community arts center and gallery, located in a rural county in west central Illinois. I have worked almost continuously for the last four years to create a place where everyone feels welcome. To ensure that people didn't feel as though they needed a special language or level of education to come and enjoy, to feel, to learn. To that end we have been really successful: young and old come here on a regular basis. Farmers come in from the fields, schoolchildren come here after the last bell. We have had so many wonderful things happen because there is an arts center here. Wonderful moments where art has become a true catalyst for change, sweet and tender moments of clarity and joy. But finally, when all else is said and done, this is a rather conservative area.

As I was putting the show together, my eighty-nine-year-old father and my daughter came to help me with the installation. As we prepared to unwrap your pieces, I warned my father that they were graphic. When we unwrapped the first piece, he looked positively stricken. He wanted to know how I could even think to put something like that on display. I showed him where I was going to place them, and he said, “What if school kids come in here and you aren't there right away to keep them from seeing them?” and many other similar questions. I explained to my father that I was in agreement with the artist, that I had no right to assume to be a moral authority, and that the religious right has hogtied this nation long enough. I reminded my father that I had no way of knowing the artist's reason for producing these works, perhaps the artist was himself a victim, and who was I to stop his story from being told? Suffice it to say, it was an incredibly difficult conversation.

My father and I have a great love for one another, but we have always been polar opposites, and I learned long ago that

politics and religion were subjects best left for discussions with someone else. My father left that day visibly shaken.

He returned the next day, and it was obvious that he hadn't slept. I could see the exhaustion in the color of his skin, I could hear it in how softly he spoke. He told me that he had been up all night, thinking, worrying about what to do. He ultimately had decided that if your works were in the gallery he would be forced to pull funding from us. Believe me when I tell you that he did not come to that decision lightly. And nor will I, though as you can imagine, I feel terribly torn.

When I moved back home four years ago, I began a tradition with my mother and father. Each Sunday morning I take them the newspaper and a bouquet of flowers for my mother. Mom cooks us breakfast and we have a chance to talk and catch up. I work six days a week, and this is really the only time we have to be together, and a time I have come to treasure. Sitting there that morning, with the silence pounding in my head, with the exhaustion and conflict I could see in my father, with my mother's confusion: it all definitely added to the heartache that I was feeling. My mother kept trying to understand why we weren't talking. I left there miserable and came to work.

I sat down and I wrote a letter to Mr. Fischl. I told him what had happened, and how difficult things had become. I told him that I had decided not to put the works into the gallery. While this decision did not sit well with me, I felt that this was the decision I had to make in the best interest of this organization. At the end of the day, as I told him, I felt that to include the work would be burning down the library to save a book, and that on balance I felt I needed to save the library and burn the book.

He was gracious, kind, understanding, and forgiving in his response. As I hope you will be.

I hope you will understand that this decision has caused me a lot of grief. I am not the sort of person to go against my principles. I often seek paths to compromise, in an effort to affect change, but that middle ground has never included my own code of ethics. In fact, I think this is truly the first time I have compromised them, and I hope with all my heart that it will be the last.

Please accept my apologies for the lateness of this letter. I regret the circumstances that have caused it to be written.

With kindest regard,

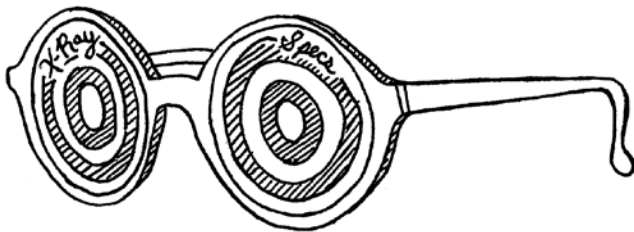
Susan

PART III

Hi Susan and Eric,

Thank you so much for your notes. I actually would have been surprised if the pieces were shown, and I'd gotten the sense that they weren't displayed. Eric, I want to thank you so much for selecting the work. I still remember being an art student and seeing your painting *Bad Boy* and thinking that it was a great painting and that you were really pushing the envelope. Since that time I have always followed your development in regard to your artwork. So when I saw that you were the curator, I thought this would be my opportunity to have the work accepted by somebody whom I totally respect. Thank you for accepting the works.

In one sense, the work tries to address the way in which we have become desensitized to things. Another example of our becoming desensitized is the way the U.S. continues in the longest war in its history in Afghanistan, thirteen years so far, and nobody really questions it. In fact, the Republicans in the Senate just rejected a bill that would have helped its veterans be hired as police officers, firefighters, teachers, etc., and shield them to some extent from income tax. Instead such veterans get tossed in with that 47 percent that Mr. Romney dismisses. My point is that here again, with these veterans, we find it difficult to truly sympathize with what I would term the "victims." In regard to the sexual abuse by priests, the priests become the victims, and people are more prone to sympathize with the church. Your father is more ashen by my work as opposed to being ashen by the young children who fell prey to these pedophile priests. In his mind he can say that it is very unfortunate that those events occurred and are still occurring, but he is removed from it just as we are removed from the war in Afghanistan. The people that are truly grieving the war in Afghanistan are the families whose kids are getting killed. What if



your father's own grandchild had been sexually abused by a priest? Maybe that would really cause him to lose sleep.

Again, thank you, Eric, for selecting the works. And Susan, thank you for your honesty. I completely understand your circumstances and harbor no bad feelings. If I were in your situation I would probably do the same thing.

Best regards,
Joe Pinkelman

Dear Mr. Pinkelman,

Thank you for your kind, heartfelt response and your understanding.

I completely agree with the fact that we have become desensitized to so much that goes on around us.

Discussions with my father about pedophilia and the priesthood very quickly devolve into ones about homosexuality and deviant behavior in his eyes. I try to explain to him that pedophiles and homosexuals have absolutely nothing in common with each other. Pedophiles are monsters who use the priesthood, the Boy Scouts, coaching, whatever profession, as a ruse that will give them trusted and easy access to children. Homosexuals just happen to love someone of their own gender. One of my friends (who happens to be gay) came to see the works. Her response was "Oh, no, this will just make people think that gays are pedophiles." She felt that the images of adults engaged in sexual acts that are the same acts that [pedophiles] engage in would create problems by blurring the lines. She is one of the most honest and forthright people I know. I didn't have the heart to tell her that is exactly the conclusion my father jumped to. Others have had similar comments. I appreciate hearing your reasons for the graphic nature that you chose.

I hope you know that I am sensitive to what is happening in our world. It angers me, it sickens me, it confuses me. I have participated in marches and protest rallies, I donate financially to human-rights organizations, I don't go to church, not only because of this issue, but many other falsehoods and deceitful tenets that they uphold as holy, and I have always been vocal about my feelings in regard to the priesthood. I actually wrote to the Pope once and called him a bully among other things. I didn't hear back, of course, but I did feel better saying it.

With gratitude,
Susan ☆