

## Vernon Fisher: American Tragedy

Charles Cowles Gallery

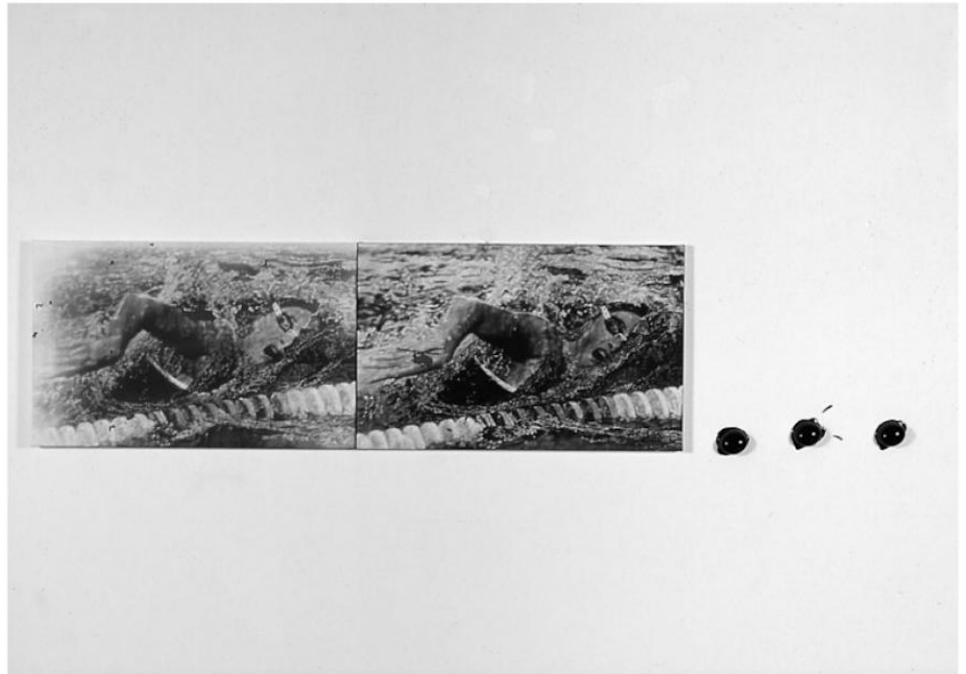
John Ewing

The term *mixed media* describes not only the materials Vernon Fisher uses to create his art but also its content and the way it works on the eye and mind. Fisher is primarily a painter, but I can't think of another Texas artist who mixes more "media" into his art—that is to say, painted representations of newspaper clippings, comic strips, film stills, printed texts, graphs, snapshot photographs, digital imagery, etc. Playing "traffic cop" to these wildly different strains of information—which collide in paintings, assemblages and installations—is the conceptual challenge Fisher has continually set for himself over the last three decades. Consequently, making art of "making sense" has always been an issue at the forefront of Fisher's work, though the two are not always synonymous. Oftentimes, one trumps the other.

As for making sense, Fisher's *American Tragedy*, a recent suite of nine mixed-media paintings, feels particularly cogent at this moment in time. The artist's technique—quoting snippets of visual culture in a "messy," blackboard-style collage of information—feels like an appropriate metaphor for how we relate to our current government and the widening gap between what we do and don't know about its global machinations. Fisher's works have the jerky shape of a bad high-school history lesson. They are a carefully "jumbled," digressive mixture of fact, personal reflection and prognostication, which certainly resonates with the current political dialogue.

Constructed like a word phrase, the title piece, *An American Tragedy*, is composed of two painted works separated by a comma made of cast and painted polyurethane. On the left is a painting on canvas, a realistically rendered copy of a forties- or fifties-era black and white photograph of a man and woman struggling in a capsizing rowboat. Amusingly, the surface of the canvas is smeared in places, visually relating to the flailing arms of the subjects. A smattering of tiny yellow squares across the painting's surface suggests the lost pixels of a digital file. In the upper-left corner, a snippet of an unrelated image—a man holding a block of ice with tongs—floats on the surface of the larger image in Fisher's characteristic style.

On the other side of the glossy black comma is a cartoon rendering of an atomic-bomb blast, painted in white with blue outlines on a cutout panel. This two-part visual "phrase," if read left



to right, conveys a wry, slapstick statement about actions and consequences.

*Perfect Unchanging Sky* is an idealized version of the same "narrative." To the left of the comma is a photorealist image—a beautiful ocean scene with puffy white clouds—painted on a large, white cutout form with the same cloud outline. Some of the image has been blacked out: a portion of the horizon that could contain an island, a ship, or an aircraft carrier. That portion has been censored, much like the overall phrase, which, in this case, does not continue after the comma.

Also grammatically structured—and just as ominous—*S-s-swimmers* is a twice-repeated image of a competitive swimmer painted in black and white on canvas. Frustrating the surface are more tiny, pixellike squares, this time in blue, which coalesce into military helicopters that hover menacingly over the swimmer. The canvas is followed by three black polyurethane dots—an ellipsis—which, according to Webster's, indicates "an omission or suppression" of information.

*Upstream*, a large canvas painted in oil and acrylic, features even more swimmers heading breakneck toward the right, this time each arrayed at random over a background of painted graphing paper. In the center is a lovely photorealist image

Vernon Fisher, *S-s-swimmers*, 2005  
Acrylic on canvas, enamel on cast polyurethane  
25 3/4 x 108 1/2 inches

of what looks like the head of a river surrounded by low mountains, seen at sunset. That exact same setting is repeated in *Death of Marat* (2002–03), this time the river scene painted on wood and enclosed in polyurethane parentheses, preceded by a cartoon rendering of a spilt can of black paint.

English teachers might look askance at Fisher's creative punctuation, but when combining images with commas, parentheses, etc., he leads the viewer to impose a thread of reason onto otherwise oblique imagery. *Dead*, the show's major work, is fairly straightforward. Lifting from a dictionary and other sources, Fisher lists twenty-five definitions for the title, beginning with "no longer living" and ending with "bang." In between are various painted images and text references to James Joyce's *Dubliners*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix and Disney's *Bambi*. Fisher's "history lessons" might not always make literal sense, but they are always ample food for thought.