

## Empathetic Responses: Emily Falencki and Eric Fischl

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The upheavals of the 20th century—the end of a European political order that had held sway for almost a thousand years, two world wars, the rises and falls of imperialism, communism, and fascism—have had echoes that are still reverberating. In fact, given our present reality, aftershocks are perhaps a better analogy than echoes—the primary quake may have happened decades ago, but the aftershocks are still knocking down well-established assumptions.

Responses to this sense of upheaval are as varied as the people and societies affected, and there is certainly no consensus—elites, governments, citizens—all seem to be reeling from shock to shock. About all that is certain is that many of us are uncertain, fearful, and anxious.

These upheavals, described by Sigmund Freud as psychic wounds, have indelibly marked our history. While their presence is constant, it has subsided from a central concern to a background hum—the ground more so than the figure. Artists, through the works they make, can provide clues to how the wounds are being treated—can provide a way to see whether a society is being resilient, or is buckling under the pressure. Many artists, like so many of their fellow citizens, seek to escape from the uncomfortable realities we inhabit today—just witness the preponderance of angels, dragons, zombies and alternate histories that make up so much of our popular culture. Sometimes this escape provides a mirror back to our current reality, metaphor and analogy serving as critical tools of analysis. Too often, a vampire or zombie is just a vampire or zombie—entertainment rather than a lens, an opiate rather than a spur to thinking. Others meet the world as they find it.

Two artists whose recent work addresses some of our cultures many wounds are Emily Falencki and Eric Fischl. Specifically, their works look at some of the most disruptive instances of the effects of these wounds: the effects of the Second World War and its aftermath, and the ongoing battles of the “war on terror” and its victims.

Canadian artist Emily Falencki, whose exhibition of paintings inspired, in part, by her Polish/Jewish grandparents’ survival of the Holocaust (and the deaths of most of her extended family), is currently on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia’s Western Branch in Yarmouth, following its exhibition in Halifax. Falencki makes art that portrays the victims of violence, whether state sponsored or as the result of individual criminality. Consistent though, is the fact that the victims she depicts have suffered from violence