

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Weiss, Haley. "Unfinished Business, 40 Years Later". *Interview Magazine* (March 8, 2016).

Interview

UNFINISHED BUSINESS, 40 YEARS LATER



Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, and [David Salle](#) are three artists bound by paint and personal history. While their aesthetics diverge, their paths run parallel. The trio met at the California Institute of Art in the early '70s. Back then, according to Fischl, Bleckner sported long hair, t-shirts, and bellbottoms, while Salle smoked a pipe, grew out a Van Dyke beard, and wore an ascot. After finishing their studies on the West Coast, they individually migrated to New York (they all arrived by 1978) and were brought into the fold of [Mary Boone](#) Gallery. New York's art scene in the early '80s served them well; they each earned solo shows soon after their arrival, and the state of New York has since become their permanent home. Each artist now lives within an hour-long drive of the Parrish Art Museum on Long Island's East End.

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It's fitting, then, that the Parrish is the birthplace of a show surveying the period of their burgeoning artistic growth, from 1976 to 1987, titled "Unfinished Business: Paintings from the 1970s and 1980s by Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, and David Salle." As David Pagel, the show's curator, explains, there's liveliness in their "restless and unresolved" canvases. "The [show's] title is meant to imply that their works require active and engaged viewing—that each canvas or work on paper is fundamentally unfinished, in that it lives in the present as viewers interact with it," he says. This sentiment is echoed by Fischl. Beyond the friendships between the three artists allowing them to challenge and encourage one another, the dialog surrounding painting's relevance when they created these works sharpened their practices and reinforced their faith in the medium.

"Of course I found myself in constant defense of the great tradition [of painting], but not against those who chose not to paint," Fischl recalls. "It was against other painters that the arguments and defense were leveled. Tempers and passions ran high. The more dismissive, the more outraged, the more pain we could inflict on each other served as proof that painting was very much ALIVE!"

There's much to learn about each artist in "Unfinished Business." The origins of Bleckner's dizzying, vibrating stripe paintings are suggested in early studies on display, and the dimensionality of his dark, textured surfaces is best served in person. The same is true of Fischl's richly coated, confrontational oil portraits, and Salle's vivid, layered tableaus. Perhaps Fischl best summarizes their work when he tells us, "David is a poet who uses only nouns, Ross is a mystic, and I am a moralist realist." Collectively, "Unfinished Business" is a testament to being spurred on by one's peers, as well as a visceral reminder of painting's ongoing efficacy—the medium's vitality and the guttural *oomph* it can elicit.

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"UNFINISHED BUSINESS: PAINTINGS FROM THE 1970S AND 1980S BY ROSS BLECKNER, ERIC FISCHL, AND DAVID SALLE" IS ON VIEW AT [THE PARRISH ART MUSEUM](#) IN WATER MILL, NEW YORK THROUGH OCTOBER 16, 2016.