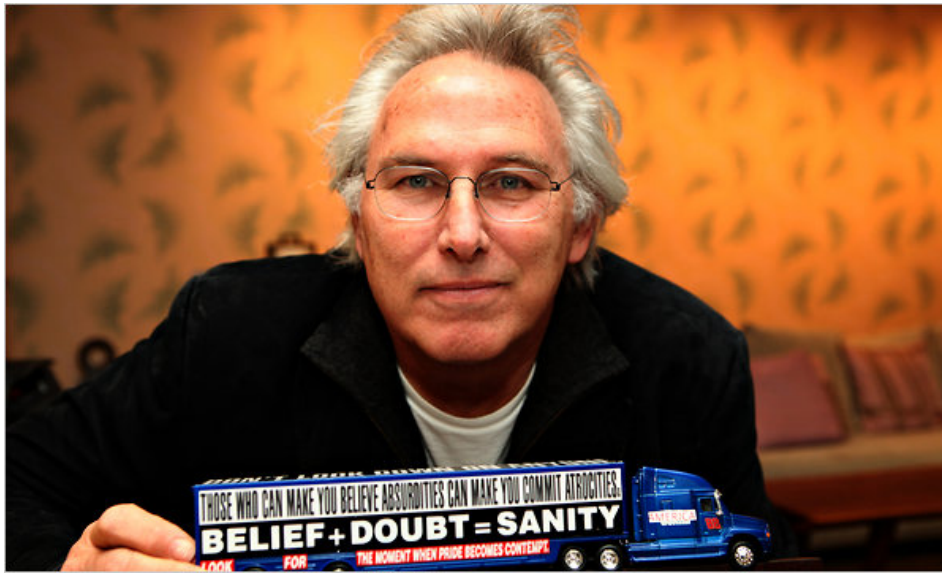


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Culture, Rolling Into Towns on Big Rigs



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The painter Eric Fischl, with a truck model.

By RANDY KENNEDY Published: March 30, 2011

Trucks transport 70 percent of the freight in the United States, according to the Department of Transportation. And if a prominent New York artist and his friends have their way, a tiny fraction of that total — six 18-wheelers full, to be exact — will soon be a variety of cargo not usually found barreling down the interstate: art, fresh from painters' studios; poets', playwrights' and songwriters' pens; and filmmakers' cameras.

After years of rumors about a Great American Art Trip in the works, the painter Eric Fischl has announced a privately financed program in which a truck-based roving museum and performance space will tour the country for two years to address what he sees as an identity crisis in American culture.

The idea, he said in an interview, grew out of a strong conviction in the years after 9/11 that the country, as it grew more politically polarized, was losing a sense of its

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"America: Now and Here"

Works going on the road include Ed Ruscha's "There and Here State 1."

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"America: Now and Here"

Laurie Simmons's "Red White and Blue Room," also part of the exhibition.

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Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times
Mr. Fischl with the model layout of the interior of the roving museum.

place and direction in the world, more so than at any time since the 1960s.

"This came just from talking to friends, peers, acquaintances, students, local grocers, whoever I talked to," he said. "America doesn't usually turn to its artists for help with something like that, but I actually think it's something that artists do very well. And I thought, 'If America won't turn to its artists, then I know a lot of pretty famous artists and I'll ask them to go out and do it themselves.'"

The project, called "[America: Now and Here](#)," will begin with a nonvehicular preview before the specially outfitted trucks are built, setting up first in Kansas City, Mo., in a temporary exhibition space that will open on May 6. The show will move on to similar spaces in Detroit in July and Chicago in October.

Then in fall 2012, the plan is for six trailer trucks to hit the road, stopping in towns and smaller cities that have yet to be selected, where the convoy will set up like a miniature state fair, swapping the Tilt-a-Whirls and show pigs for paintings and photographs by artists like [Ed Ruscha](#), [Susan Rothenberg](#), [Gregory Crewdson](#), Laurie Simmons and David Salle; short, conversational plays by writers like [Edward Albee](#) and Marsha Norman; and music by artists like [Lou Reed](#), [Philip Glass](#) and Roseanne Cash. Four of the truck trailers will partially unfold and link together to create a 3,300-square-foot gallery space, and two more will contain materials for a covered pavilion and a screen and seating area to show short films by

documentary makers like Lauren Greenfield and Mitch McCabe.

The project has also recruited 54 well-known poets, who collaborated on "[Crossing State Lines](#)," a book of linked verse in the tradition of the Japanese renga, published this week by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

For those with long memories of the lore of art and the open road, the project may bring to mind the 1979 comic song "[Truckload of Art](#)," by the Texas artist and songwriter Terry Allen, among the musicians recruited by Mr. Fischl to participate. In the song a group of New York artists rent a "spankin' new, white-shiny, chrome-plated cab-over Peterbilt" and fill it with "hot avant-garde" to drive to California and show up their West Coast counterparts.

The truck in the song overturns — "a terrible sight if a person were to see it, but there weren't nobody around" — a fate Mr. Fischl and his collaborators hope to avoid.

They also take pains to stress that their tour is not about trying to show up anyone else's idea of art, or to instruct people who live outside the major art centers about the merits of big-city contemporary culture.

"The conversation we're hoping to start is not about art but through art," said Dorothy Dunn, a former official at the [Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum](#), who will serve as the program's director. In each city and region the show visits, she said, it will

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collaborate with local artists and institutions, and the hope is that it will be able to raise enough money to continue beyond its initial two-year run, with new groups of artists.

Mr. Fischl said the project was raising money from some of the participating artists as well as from foundations and corporations. Though a few artists he approached declined to take part — “There were artists who were scared, I think, that it sounded nationalistic or patriotic with the capital P” — most, he said, seemed eager to have a chance to reach audiences outside museums and galleries and commercial theaters.

“The art world has become incredibly insular,” he said. “There’s such a disconnect between what artists are trying to do and how what they make ultimately gets used.”

Though he first considered conducting the tour by train, he said, he and others felt that trucks would allow them to go more places.

“Plus, when these trucks come to town and unfold, people are going to be totally curious about what’s inside them, in the same way they are when the circus or [Nascar](#) comes to town,” he added. “Americans love trucks; they aren’t intimidated by them.”

Ms. Norman, the playwright, said in an interview that she saw the program as providing people with ways to think about America other than those offered by the media and pop culture.

“As much as we love [Brian Williams](#), I don’t think he can tell us in the same way as a painter or a poet what it really feels like to live in Iowa,” she said.

But she added that giving artists a blank slate and free rein to create whatever they wanted was always tricky, especially for an exhibition that will set up shop in areas of the country much more conservative than New York or Los Angeles.

“You ask playwrights for a response and of course you’re going to get three works that are going to have naked people in them,” she said, adding that the project was still trying to figure out how it would handle that. “One of our jokes is that we’re going to set up the ‘Nude Tent,’ and whoever wants to come in and see those plays can.”

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