



- 1 Eadweard Muybridge is also the photographer who captured the iconic image of one of the fastest horses in the country, named Occidental, as a study to see if horses lift all four legs off the ground (1877).
- 2 In 2008, Jeremy Fish created a series Ghosts of the Barbary Coast. The series looks at the historical Barbary Coast in San Francisco, a pleasure quarter that grew during the California Gold Rush (1848-1858) made up of gambling, prostitution, and crime. Fish created the allegorical images that reflected on San Francisco as the boomtown over the course of a history that covered the Gold Rush, to the boom and bust of marijuana farming in the 1970s, and to the dot-com era of the 1990s.
- 3 All works in this series were created in 2009.
- 4 Jeremy Fish, interview with the author, November 2, 2009.
- 5 Ibid.



a solo exhibition by **Jeremy Fish**  
 November 8, 2009 - January 17, 2010  
 at **LAGUNAARTMUSEUM**  
 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach, California

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# Jeremy Fish

is of another era.

We can imagine him inhabiting San Francisco in 1873, the days when the first cable cars were being built. Or we can imagine him hanging out with Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904)—a photographer and, like Fish, a tireless worker—who held residence in South Park, San Francisco, in the late 1800s, capturing landscapes and the architecture of the West.<sup>1</sup> Fish draws from the roots of life in port cities. He was born in 1974 in Albany, New York, which sits on the Hudson River, and has made San Francisco his home for over fifteen years, in particular, North Beach, a neighborhood where Little Italy meets Chinatown, and where Chinatown meets the financial district. Fish often portrays the density and characters of these places, reflecting on the port city's strong influence on the economy and social structures. The figures in his work portray the motley crew of individuals one might see gather at the harbor—fishermen, pirates, ship captains, prostitutes, merchants, and misfits of the Barbary Coast—all confined to the delicate edges of a developing and ever-changing metropolis.

Fish is an artist who grapples with our modern condition by first exploring places, stories, and legends that have been passed down through generations. His first museum exhibition *Weathering the Storm* is a look into the American landscape, with a particular focus on the events that we have struggled with collectively.<sup>3</sup> Through this, he looks at the loss of industry in America, which once roared with promise and prosperity and once defined the landscape and the nation. He takes us on a journey that encompasses the West and the South, and taps into experiences that are communal and personal all at once.

Two main images weave their way through the larger narrative of much of his work. The first is the contradictory gesture of the hand: a support structure that extends to complete something outside itself, it grasps with greed yet remains the underlying apparatus that works and produces, often in powerful ways. The second constant image is the skull: an unvarying reminder that all things are mortal and ultimately temporal. Fish uses animals in his work with an Orwellian sensibility, a medium to express the complexities of human characters. No animal portrays a simple innocence, and none suffer utopian illusions.

In this exhibition, Fish covers several storm conditions. Some are light and impact us very little, while others are storms we continue to endure. One of the lighter storms, *The F-U-unicorn*, is an image of a sturdy-looking horse. Its head, however, has morphed into a human fist with the middle finger sticking straight up as its horn. A pun on 80s pop culture, the unicorn is the iconic image that adorned T-shirts and the covers of Trapper Keeper binders for many girls.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, it is a look at a young woman who sets herself up for heartbreak because of the attitude she wears on her head.

In the *Industrial Ghost* series, we witness the collapse of various industries. The first is film; the machine of the camera is represented by the grizzly bear, itself a species that is threatened to become completely extinct. Print is another industry disappearing and falling behind; a printing press sits heavily on the ever-slow turtle, an analog form that is disappearing in an impatient age that relies too much on the Internet. Fish portrays another ghost in *Auto*, a painting that depicts a funeral. The auto machine is represented by the extraordinary American bison whose grazing force once shaped the ecology of the Great Plains and whose population nearly became extinct by the end of the nineteenth century as they were hunted for their meat and their skins, which were used for clothing, rugs, and even industrial machine



belts. The unions that work to produce these automobiles mourn the loss of this auto industry. The auto industry that once defined the identity of the U.S. is overpowered today by other nations that have become more flexible in working toward sustainability.

Fish looks at these industries that are threatened to disappear but are still present in our lives. Will the auto industry come back to life as the U.S. explores more sustainable possibilities for a machine we rely so heavily on? Is there a way to employ millions with jobs that are worthwhile? Does every book have to be published in the Kindle format? Does our news have to be cut into sound bites? Each of Fish's paintings addresses these questions at a pivotal moment before the threat of extinction.

Drawing from experiences of recent travel through the South, Fish pays homage to some of the more lighter impressions he encountered, such as the armadillo, a.k.a. *Speed Bumps*; the inexpensive hot dog in *Our Changing Diet*; and the *Wizard Sleeve*, the "prolific truck stop T-shirts" that are created by someone mystically called "The Mountain."<sup>5</sup> The Mountain's T-shirt designs can be found nearly everywhere and usually feature illustrations of beautifully rendered animals, yet Fish's emphasis focuses on the element of kitsch.

Completing this journey of struggle, Fish creates a mural that chases some of the darkest storms. The five sections of the mural are titled: *Everything Is Going to Be OK?*, *Loved Ones Lost*, *Health Wealth*, *Slow Decline*, and *Hurricane Isabell*. The section *Everything is Going to Be OK?* is defined by two pairs of hands; the strong hands grasp at what is between them and the smaller hands reach out for more. These are the hands of greed that have sunk the economy and threaten the welfare of the two figures who, in spite of the horrendous storm, sit patiently waiting it out. *Loved Ones Lost* is not your average criticism of war. This section looks at the different reasons people join the armed forces and its most painful element—the casualties of war and its effects on families all over the world. *Health Wealth* portrays cunning fox characters that work with little conscience, feeding their own greed in an industry that should inherently serve the welfare of its people. The top half of *Slow Decline* shows a dapper fellow pulling his empty pockets inside-out to reveal someone who was once well-to-do but now uses his hat to panhandle for a bit of change.

The final part of the mural cannot be seen head-on from the gallery space. In order to see the final image *Hurricane Isabell*, one must walk through these various storms. Above the umbrella peers a young woman with butterfly wings; they are fragile yet extend beyond the width of the umbrella. The caterpillar is the

umbrella handle, and though delicate itself, it holds the umbrella firmly. Both hold on with little to protect them. In this way, this final image can be seen as the most personal struggle, one that encompasses the struggle of love. It is this ultimate individual struggle that transcends the large systems in place; it was the community of everyday heroes that helped those buried in Ground Zero after September 11, 2001. It was not the FEMA trailers that helped support community after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005; it was people from all over the nation who opened up their homes and grassroots organizations that helped rebuild new homes. The struggles following these disasters are still too present; they reveal hardships that are beyond personal ones and point to systemic flaws. Through the use of imagery, Fish poses a significant question as to what the landscape of America is meant to look like because of and in spite of these oncoming storms. Could the spirit of the animals, machines, and humans ever present in Fish's work elevate us to overcome the industrial machines, the hierarchy of breeds, and the arrogance of humans?

