

## Arts

## Shore thing



They may look like your Mediterranean holiday snaps, but the photographs in a new show capture more than just happy memories.

By **Jane Hughes**

**A**s an American holidaying in St-Tropez in the 1980s, the artist Eric Fischl was both shocked and amused at the way nudity was turned into a public event on the town's sundrenched beaches. "People were interacting socially and yet they were naked. I was mesmerised by their apparent lack of self-consciousness (although some would argue that the whole scene was self-conscious)," he says. "In the face of such hedonism there is always a conflict with the puritanical, and what I saw made me re-think my own conditioned response."

It didn't take long, however, for Fischl – a painter who uses photographs in place of sketches as the source for his work – to take out his camera and start snapping.

The resulting images – of tanned, well-oiled characters stretched out on sun loungers, striding across the sand and, most strikingly, watching and observing each other – feature in a group exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, in London. Mediterranean: Between Reality and Utopia explores ideas and images of a region that has fascinated photographers ever since the camera was invented.

For the curator, Lisa Le Feuvre, Fischl's work is interesting because it reveals how beach culture involves an abandoning of the normal rules of etiquette: "People stare more and wear less – and flesh become objectified and anonymous," she says. "Beach holidays change our awareness of personal space; we get a little too close to each other and a little more voyeuristic."

While Fischl's painterly eye is evident in the way his images are framed, his photographs have a gaudy, polaroid quality about them. The sea seems almost too blue, the beach, clogged with red sun umbrellas, almost too bleached. Yet, insists Fischl, although he used a high-colour printing technique, this is how things looked; "bright, fanciful, clashing and luminous".

Interestingly, when he returned to St-Tropez years later, he says the only people who were naked were women with breast implants. Back in the 1980s, though, what struck him was a code of behaviour that seemed to follow gender lines. "Women, when nude, stayed put on their mattresses. Men, when nude, would strut the beach, cock o' the walk style. Those men were invariably German. It was the first time I discovered that you could see the relationship the body has to the soul. The beach was where all of the pressures and expectations of the external world seemed to interact with internal desires and fears. Discomfort with the self was expressed physically in how people inhabited their bodies," he explains.

Born in 1948 and a chronicler of the



Sun, sea and sand (clockwise from above): 'Untitled' by Julie Ganz

domestic dramas of American suburbia, Fischl found the body language of his St-Tropez beach subjects so fascinating that he later went on to use them as an ensemble cast of actors in his painting. It was, he says, easy to stick them into situations where nakedness was unexpected or inappropriate.

Throughout the exhibition, there is an al-





n, from 'Temps Libre' (2002); two untitled works by Eric Fischl, from 'St-Tropez Portfolio' (1982-88); 'Tamarin, August 1959' by Eric Kessels, from 'In Almost Every Picture' (1959)

most involuntary emphasis on the quality of Mediterranean light and the ways in which people leave their mark on the landscape. Photography has always turned real experiences into idealised memory, and the work another of the photographers in this exhibition, Julie Ganzin, is a contemplation of people in places where holidays are inscribed into the landscape.

Ganzin, who grew up in Marseilles and started to photograph people in leisure landscapes during the 1990s, returns to sites depicted by early photographers, including the beaches below the town of Amalfi and at Lago Albano in Italy and the rocky coves of the Var in the South of France.

For Ganzin, these photographs are "generic images of happy days and shared

memories". "Sometimes people seem to know the place I have photographed, to remember that time, and to have almost the same picture in their family album," she says. "Of course, it is not the same at all, because I use a tripod and it takes me a long time to set up and frame a particular scene, but I enjoy making the allusion."

What truly impresses Ganzin, though, is

how hard people work to "catch a little bit of joy and happiness during that special part of their lives that is leisure time".

*Mediterranean: Between Reality and Utopia*, The Photographers' Gallery, Great Newport Street, London WC2 (020-7831 1772; [www.photonet.org](http://www.photonet.org)) to 3 October