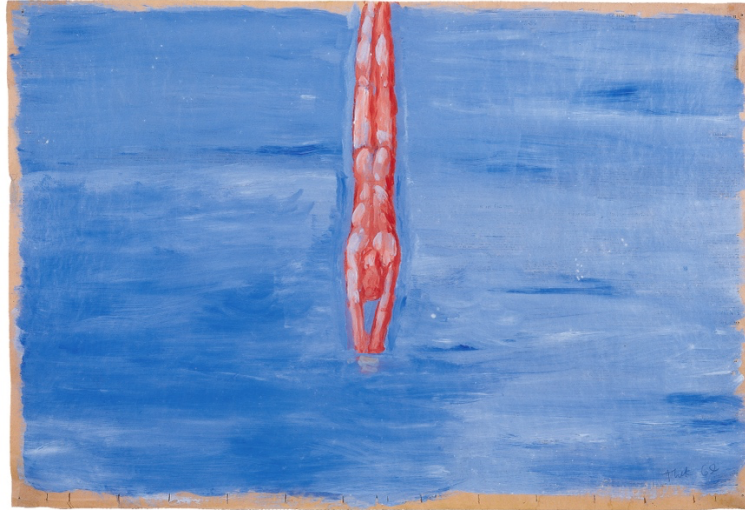


The NEW YORK Sun

John Cheever's Enigmatic 'The Swimmer' Inspires a Cool New Summer Exhibit at The FLAG Art Foundation

By David Hiroshi Jager
June 7, 2024



"The Swimmer," a short story by John Cheever first published in the *New Yorker* in 1964, is the inspiration for this cool new summer exhibit at The FLAG Art Foundation. The brittle "party's over" tone of Cheever's minor masterpiece carries over into two stories of pool- and water-inspired imagery. More than thirty artists, including Ed Ruscha, Paul Thek, Cynthia Talmadge, and Robert Gober, contribute to this enigmatic show. The allure of the backyard pool and often dark symbolism inherent in water sets the tone.

We might all simply be thinking about pools in the June heat, but larger resonances are also present here. The cinematic shot of a swimmer, either pushing off alone, afloat, or even face down is a visual touchstone that resonates throughout North American culture. Signifiers of privilege and wealth, pools provide moments of theatrical social display or solitary sensual enjoyment. Entered alone, they afford moments of intensely private, even existential reckoning.

Each artist in the show explores these aspects of the backyard pool, with its frisson of luxury, glamor and illicit sensuality. *Powerless Structures*, 1998 by Elmgreen & Dragset, consists of two heaps of Levi's and Calvin Klein underwear lying on the floor.

The structure is powerless, we can guess, because both participants are naked. A homoerotic skinny dip is taking place in a well-off backyard, somewhere, and we are left with the evidence. It's a moment of pure Bret Easton Ellis, in other words. Other works in this show follow in this vein of voyeurism and witness. We are allowed into people's backyards and by extension, their psyches.

Ed Ruscha's famous pool series, one of the most exhaustive studies of backyard pools ever undertaken, figures prominently for this reason. His series of photographs show him at the height of his exacting formalism, as if László Moholy-Nagy were behind the lens. Except that his framing is bit looser, lending drama to what would otherwise be exercises in pure style. The placid turquoise eye of each pool gazes unblinking at the sky, framed by sandstone and concrete, yet odd details- such a plant, hose or brightly colored label-set you off balance and pull you in.

The iconic Ruscha series inspires other artists in the show, such as Amy Park's exacting watercolor recreation of the same. Her studies humanize Ruscha's pristine original, and as such other idiosyncrasies of his composition stick

out. Park's Los Angeles is softer and more ramshackle than Ruscha's. Conrad Bakker also addresses the Ruscha series, repainting it in book form, a sort of Meta variation that nonetheless maintains the precision of the original. Altogether, however, these works reinforce the truism that Los Angeles expresses its opulence not through ornamentation, but through a hard, sleek modernist line.

Once the West Coast mood is established, the show continues as variations on a theme. Paul Thek's precisely centered figure seen from above, in "diver" is more geometric line than figure, beautifully contrasted as it is in red and blue. It is nevertheless the embodiment of the pool as a fantasy of luxury and self-mastery.

Ludovic Nkoth also shows us a solitary swimmer in a surlier frame of mind, as a man who battles the water and wins. Once again, the show focuses on the private and deeply psychological moments that swimming can bring us to.



Other photographs are also telling. Most remarkable is Deanna Templeton's silver gelatin print of a male nude, *Ed. Huntington Beach, CA*. The prone figure, elongated and shown from the back, just below his shoulders, floats sideways on the pool's bottom. Headless and curiously inert, it brings up all manner of involuntary associations and noirish intrigue.

Like the show, Cheever's enigmatic story is a master class in pared-down, occluded narrative. The reader follows the slim protagonist Neddy Merrill as he sets out to 'swim the county', meaning every swimming pool belonging to his wealthy neighbors and friends in the area. As Merrill freestyles his way across the pools of his baffled and increasingly hostile hosts, bits of his past resurface. It becomes clear Merrill is no longer the beloved golden boy of the jet set he imagines himself to be. He is a divorced man who has lost his house and custody of his daughters, a man who is now stumbling from pool to pool towards his empty former house, his mind shattered by alcohol and loss.

Choosing the story as a point of departure for the show turned out to be a clever gambit. The resonances of Cheever's story, a story addressed to a well-off generation adrift in the vagaries of personal loss, politics and war, are powerful. It turns out the backyard pool, as the symbolic trifecta of privilege, social display and personal reckoning, is a good metaphor for a larger, and apparently persistent, American dysphoria.

Paul Thek. *Untitled*, 1969. Synthetic polymer on newspaper, 26 1/8 x 36 1/4 inches (66.4 x 92.1 cm). Courtesy Jonathan W. Anderson, the Estate of Paul Thek, Pace Gallery, Galerie Buchholz, and Mai 36 Galerie.

Ed Ruscha. *POOL #8, from the Pools Series*, 1968/1997. Color photograph on Kodak Ektacolor paper; cut edges. 20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm) A.P. Courtesy the Artist and Gagosian.