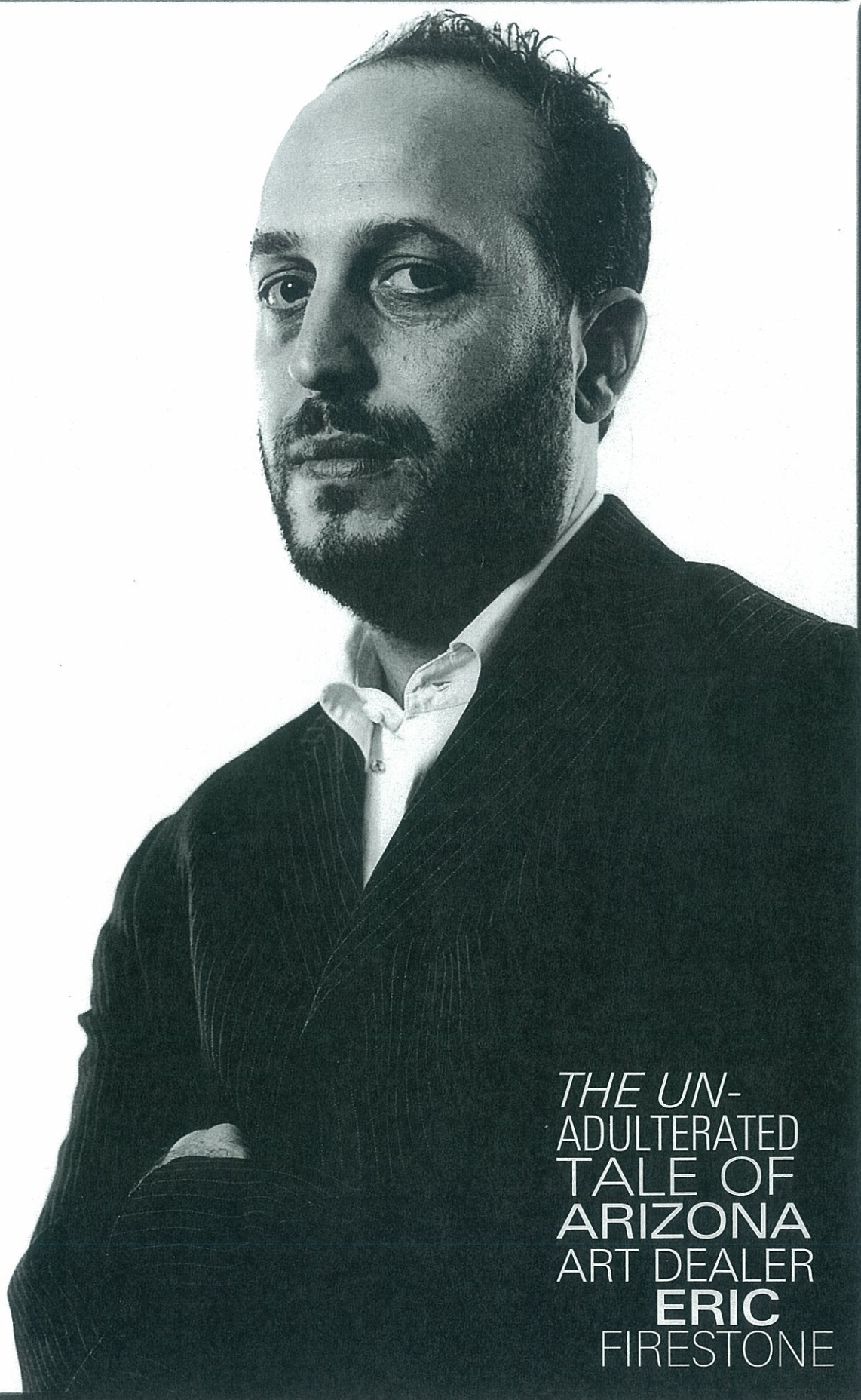


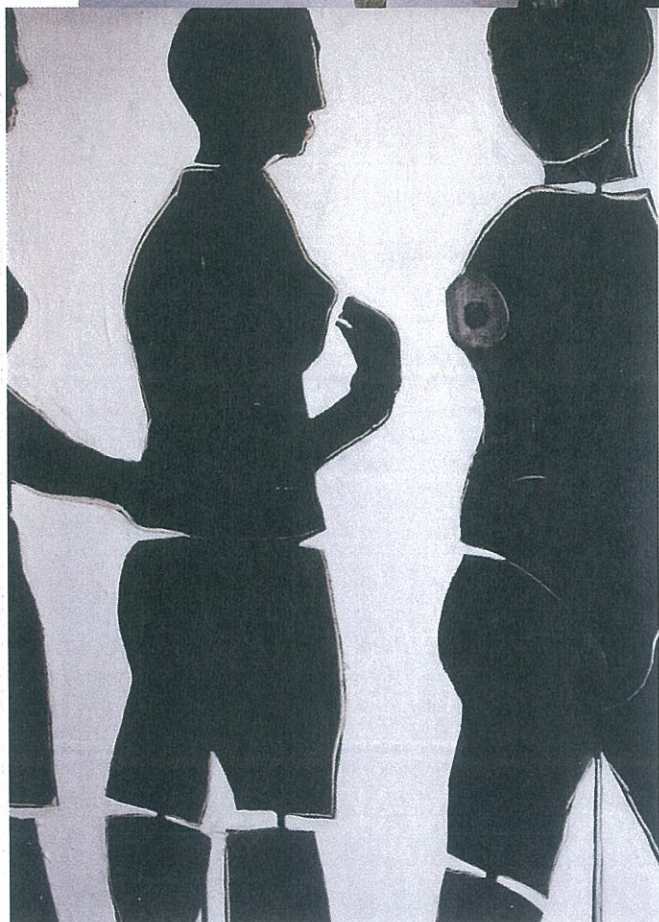
BY AMY ABRAMS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON NEWKIRK



THE UN-
ADULTERATED
TALE OF
ARIZONA
ART DEALER
ERIC
FIRESTONE



Clockwise from left: *Marguerite*, 2006, by Michael Cajero, from a recent show; upstairs, *Save*, circa 1971, by Jorge Fick, is placed above a Gottschalk chair; Enrique Montenegro's *Mannequins*, 1965, is part of the current show.



ERIC FIRESTONE IS EATING lunch at his desk, glued to the flat screen. You know the type—works eight days a week but says he's never worked a day in his life. He's hopelessly consumed with the chase ... finding "really good art," then buying and selling it. While most equate the art world with glamour—chic parties, see-and-be-seen art shows, champagne—the art business, to Firestone, is a business. To stay on top of the market, you have to live it, breathe it. It's not exactly glamorous—long hours, high risks, deep pockets—but as Eric Firestone says, "it's damn exciting."

"I cut my teeth early," says the 36-year-old of his career path, opening his first gallery, in Tucson, at the age of 21. That takes nerve—investing in art, then hanging shows month after month, going public with your convictions. But Firestone has the coveted trait of any dealer worth their salt: instinct. He recognizes art that breaks new ground, art that's been overlooked. He thrives on defending the undiscovered, the unpopular. Here's a guy with a huge heart following his bliss, but one that's shrewd, fierce,

and unwavering. Maybe that's why people seem drawn to him. Because Firestone lives the life we all dream of—one that mixes business with pleasure.

If you're plugged into Tucson's art scene, you know that he eventually became the preeminent dealer of Arts and Crafts furniture in the West. He also sold the paintings of seldom-praised early Arizona artists who lived in, worked in, or traveled through the state. He still has the gallery there, but six months ago he opened another in Scottsdale, because he needed a "more visible" space, something "on the front lines."

Here, he joins a growing presence of contemporary galleries, many along North Marshall Way (where he set up shop, next to Lisa Sette Gallery), that add a hefty dose of zing to this *tchotchky*-driven part of town. Having a place like Eric Firestone Gallery makes you feel less sheepish (among the art crowd at least) about identifying yourself with the Southwest instead of the East Coast.

These days, he's showing the work of American Modernists (with a focus on the Southwest),

In addition to the works of American Modernists, furnishings (like this Woodward dining set, circa 1970, and Max Gottschalk chairs), are scooped up by collectors and designers for homes, urban lofts, and condos. Right: The entrance to Firestone Gallery is discreetly tucked back from Marshall Way.



and some Minimalist and Abstract Expressionist works. The current show features a Firestone "find," Enrique Montenegro (1917-2003), who harnesses the power of composition and color found in abstraction to create figures, often isolated (and alienated), in contemporary settings such as parking lots, pedestrian footpaths, and shopping centers. The Chilean-born Montenegro was featured in a 1957 *Life* magazine story, alongside his friend and colleague, Richard Deibenkorn. The selected paintings in the show highlight a series that Montenegro began at that time (and continued until the end of his life) and treat the viewer to a vigorous play between abstraction and realism.

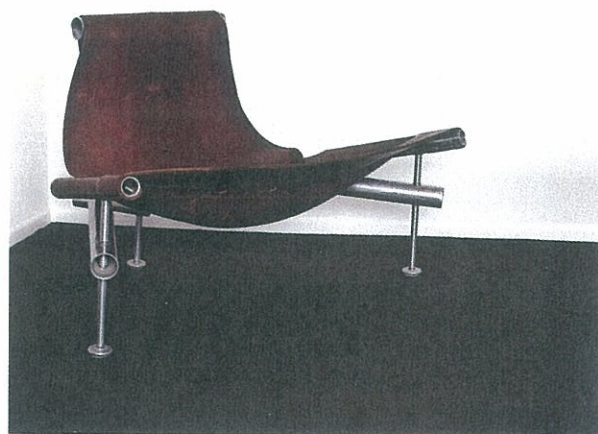
Firestone's most recent show featured the work of Tucson's Michael Cajero, who "recycles" old cardboard and computer paper into art, creating startlingly potent figures, as well as animals (including dogs so menacing you can almost hear their snarl). This is dark work that references vast facets of history, myth, and art. It comments on the often-heartbreaking human condition, but with subtle wit. Not many dealers in Scottsdale would be willing to show this kind of work,

but Firestone knew it was needed to get the buzz going about his endeavor. Previous exhibitions have showcased the work of Jorge Fick, Douglas Denniston, and Paul Harris. One by one, his shows are building momentum, just like Firestone himself.

Once he signed for the 4,000 square-foot space, he stripped the gallery to its bare bones, removing walls and uncovering the concrete floor. Now, the gallery has a hip feel reminiscent of New York's Chelsea Art District. Think understated class, just the medicine we need in town.

He even took care to build a high partition around the reception desk, "to eliminate the intimidation factor," he says, "for folks who come in to browse ... They don't need someone peering the whole time."

There's an upstairs, too, where Firestone displays paintings, sculptures, and his collection of Max Gottschalk furniture. A raised patio is barely furnished but seems inviting enough. After my tour through the space, Firestone takes a seat upstairs and steadies his rapt gaze on a vibrant painting. His face breaks into a shy smile. He says, simply, "Pretty wonderful, eh?" ■



CURRENT SHOW

Enrique Montenegro, *American Modernist: Selected Paintings* through April 26.

**More: Eric Firestone Gallery,
4142 N. Marshall Way
480.990.1037**

www.ericfirestonegallery.com