

TRAVELING IN LOUISE FISHMAN TERRAIN

by Suzan Frecon

As with all good paintings, those of Louise Fishman speak for themselves, powerfully. To realize painting as art sprang not only from her will to do so, but also from her strong background in the study of painting through actually making paintings, in depth, wholly, and steadfastly.

Fishman discovered her life's work as a young adult when she took her future in hand, and decided to study art-making, rather than following the vocation that her parents had chosen for her.

She actually began as a sculptor. This is sometimes deduced/suspected by viewers because of the substantial materiality and physicality of her paint. Nevertheless, early on, her work became rooted in her virtuoso handling of oil paint and hands-on essentials with which she built her paintings, little by little, pushing further into abstraction throughout the following decades. That's to say, her subsequent work began and was grounded in this strong base of knowledge, and skill with her materials. Furthermore, fields of knowledge seem to be connected and overlap, and I think her oeuvre contains some more invisible ingredients that stem from the compositional aspects of other art forms, such as music and literature, and particularly, poetry. We can find traces of these connections in her titles, which don't 'explain' the paintings, but add an extra edge.

Resolutely abstract, her compositions manifest in a timeless visual suspension. This does not happen accidentally, but rather through her lifelong search and skill. Again this reveals itself by looking at her work. She seeks out her compositions through the longer work of inventing them herself. There are no shortcuts, such as leaning on a flat pre-composed photograph.

Her overall compositions, and the spatial depths in them, blow a Gerhard Richter abstract painting right out of the competition. The same goes for her deeply-researched colours, nuances, virtuoso variables of paint material, and lights and darks – all orchestrated within the tableau – which take the viewer on a trip every which way. All of these elements could seem chaotic at first glance. But the longer one looks, the more they achieve their own spatial equilibrium, compelling the viewer to remain looking and looking some more, retaining in her or his consciousness these achievements of abstraction in painting-as-art.

Dense heavy impastos interweave with faint and delicate touches. One can perhaps think of musical dimensions while trying to describe them, from very loud, smashing crescendos, to the whisper finesse of a dribble or caress of paint, directly from her mind-passion-hand, applied with varied and unorthodox painting tools such as trowels, various painting knives, and many common implements found in hardware stores and on NYC's old Canal Street.

I've even seen paint- smeared brooms in her studio. Her small collection of unique paint-brushes, while not always useable, are cherished, and kept close to where she paints. This attachment to certain objects which seem to store energy within them – masterly striking African carved wood sculptures (she studied and drew from similar sculptures for hours in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Ethnology); Chinese Scholars' Rocks – extends to American milking stools and diminutive objects. As she says; "*things in miniature*". This close attention to things that are beautifully made seems to inform something about how she handles and shapes material into art – or sees the possibilities of doing so, even in very humble and small objects.

Painters see common denominators in artworks from very diverse cultures and eras, which resonate with the paths they are seeking to take in their own work. Fishman learned from many painters before her, such as Duccio, Titian, Soutine, Cézanne, Rouault, Mondrian, Pollock, Kline, and Mitchell. Chinese calligraphy was also a passionate interest during her formative years as a painter. She took all of it in, considered it, and now, in her intelligently gnarled and organic paint surfaces, she owns her resulting endeavors. As she says; "*If good painting is what you want to do, then good painting is what you must look at. Take what you want and leave the dreck*".

Fishman's paintings are courageous because they exist in areas very close to nothingness, or void. As an artist, Fishman could certainly, at times (as we all do), doubt their validity and lose her footing (again, as we all do). But she is willing to walk a dangerous line in order to arrive at a higher plane of abstraction. (One could say this as well about Pollock or Mitchell or Agnes Martin or Fred Sandback or Mary Knight Benson, or the abstract presence of a small wooden Songye sculpture.)

Also, it's not what you paint but how you paint. I think Fishman succeeds in taking out the 'what' and making successful works of art on the strength of 'how' alone. For example, the painter sees and learns from a work by Velázquez; painted long ago, and in a vastly different way. The truth of the beauty, and the accomplishment of the paint itself, illuminate and transport us, without leaning on, or needing a story or subject. The painting exists in how incredibly well it is painted; the apogee, so to speak, of painting.

Fishman also mentions Titian. When the painter had reached old age, his formidable knowledge of the practice of painting freed him to paint in a way that went beyond even his own virtuosity. To the viewer it seems like an explosion of expression that overwhelms and transports their emotions. One wonders how Titian had the energy to achieve this, especially given the huge scale of his paintings.

I think Fishman also must impart superhuman strength into her works. She must not have anything left in reserve when she is finished, as she seems to have emptied out her whole self into the canvas. A young painter once described her work as "*each painting seeming like a swan-song*". And looking at one of her paintings, one does feel that 'this one' must be the apex – the realisation of her search – only to discover a comparable power in the next one, and the one after that.

Kreisleriana, a late painting finished in 2015, is realised in an orchestration of multiple, intensely- colored, predominantly vertical streaks of paint composed in a horizontal format.

Its resolute, sweeping, columns of colour – pushed and scraped, and made up of fine lines as well as planes – strike me as almost fugue-like. One is compelled (and wafted) into the bright, saturated reds playing counterpoint to deeper, more-subtle earth reds, with a bright yellow worked precariously under and over; off-centre. A blue laid onto and into the left, is transparently layered and manipulated in tandem with warm-hued touches; lights are strategically integrated throughout the painting. A thinner vertical blue swi-pe cascades downward and clings against the right side. This lush and considered pageant, yet toughly three-dimensional due to the materiality of its paint, was built up with her unique repertoire of tools. Subtle spatial depths are imparted within and behind the semi-opaque, muscular-yet- delicate, concrete-yet-activated, viscous and substantial paint material. The predominant movement of the painting suggests verticality, with underpainting and over-painting interwoven within and without. But horizontal breaks in the verticals counteract this inclination, making the horizontal movement more unpredictable, asymmetrical, dissonant, and multidimensional. Every aspect contributes to the overall rhythms and anti-rhythms of the whole. All comprise its unity and compositional strength.

I find most paintings show their fullest visual potential in true uncompromising natural light. In a recent visit to Fishman's studio, I saw three paintings lit by northern light (painters usually prefer the clear and cool steadiness of northern light). This light, also refracted by the nearby Hudson River, raked obliquely across the surfaces of the paintings, emphasising the relief of their physical makeup and the paint's application. In this more organic setting, where Fishman arranges her paintings according to when and how they are created, rather than as an external curator might, it was a revelation to see how her painting technique supports and holds her compositions, allowing her to develop her works fearlessly and wildly into extreme and unfettered dimensions; the abstractions step further outward.

As we talked, Fishman sat in front of *Lament*, a dark, very recent painting, perhaps even still in progress. The northern light came from behind and beyond her, illuminating the painting's surface from a back and side angle, and casting her face in darkness. It shone over the shiny and matte reliefs of the paint material and composition. Soon, though I was still listening to her voice, my consciousness was taken over by this highly dramatic play of the ambiguity of the light and dark and material relief, bringing the integrity of the painting into a realm of ungraspable dimension. (I took a photo which I hope might aid with what I attempt to describe.)

On the other side of the room, with the light likewise raking it from the side but closer to this wall of north window light, the large *Les nuits d'été* (2016), was situated on an easel; bright yellow paint held in check by blacks and blues. Its paint application was fairly sparse overall, but dense where it was placed, so that there were many white areas of unpainted canvas visible, something that I often find suspect when done by other painters. Not so with Fishman (as with Cézanne). In this case I almost wanted to scream for her not to fill in the missing paint areas, so strong and compelling the entire realisation struck me as being. Fishman was still considering whether it was finished or not. I include an oblique and a straight- on image in an attempt to share what I was seeing. Fishman begins by making spontaneous paint marks that relate in some way to the shape and dimensions of the rectangle. These marks may or may not remain visible in the composition of the finished painting. She continues building from and upon them as she so deems, working outwards toward

the gaze of the viewer. Her paint is applied boldly and toughly, but loosely and gratifyingly, with a wide variety of paint densities and applications. It appears layered, as I said before, and as such, starts to “*come off the wall*” and into the space of the viewer, so that one is with the painting rather than just looking at it. The paint provides many seemingly changing dimensions. Each addition (or subtraction?) seems very much deliberated. And I imagine that she loses herself in the work, alone, without being conscious of the time passing, or the hours or days it takes to make the painting.

Sometimes when I see her work, and am stopped in my tracks, Cézanne comes to mind, because the reality of the painting is there before me. The paint makes it so: how the artist constructed the painting in all its dimensions. This was the case when I encountered her two paintings *Crossing the Rubicon* (2012), and *Ristretto* (2013), at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. The paintings were elementally concrete, yet escaped into intangibility. Only the paint remained, but that was the *it* (or something) that provided *all*.

I think of artist-painters as trying to achieve the ‘reality of the painting’, rather than as merely trying to depict something. Also I believe painters, Louise Fishman included, search to free the self from its own perimeters so that in turn, their paintings can go beyond the reach of the viewer. It is the ungraspable in a momentous work of art that makes it art. And there is no room for ambiguity. It is there, fixed in time, like a mountain, or a suspended star.