

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

## OCTOBER 5, 2017

Louise Fishman

by Jan Avgikos



Louise Fishman, MONONGAHELA, 2017. Oil on linen, 66 x 55 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

The exhibition of new paintings by Louise Fishman sent me looking back through her previous catalogues. She's been painting for more than fifty years. Are the paintings getting even better? And if so, by what criteria might we take their measure? Undoubtedly, her new paintings qualify as "late work." The term brings to mind Cézanne's pixelated paintings of Mt. St. Victoire, or Monet's delirious Giverny paintings, or Renoir's last paintings of splendidly rotund nudes luxuriating in lush vegetation. Each artist worked in isolation and, in effect, worked outside of time. Their "milieu" long gone, there was no "movement" to contain the ferocious energy of their late work or the longevity of their practices, yet they persevered. Experimental, fluent, urgent, informed—the defining qualities of "late work" suggest an enviable freedom that doesn't come easily, if at all.

Similarly, Fishman's late works eat time. They revel in action painting at its most expansive, expressive register, without the slightest acknowledgement that their iconic gestural style might be seen as anachronistic. Forget that Abstract-Expressionism fell out of favor eons ago and has been subjugated to waves of negation. Fishman never gave up her affinity with it. Indeed, as a young painter she probably saw herself as "one of them." Kline, Mitchell, de Kooning—they permissioned an almost athletic engagement with the surface of painting, and their influence is palpable in this exhibition. Forget that Ab-Ex did not mesh with the agenda of early feminism, the nascent movement with which Fishman was involved from the time she arrived in NYC in 1965. Ultimately, she found a "third way" through the polemics of oppositional camps and culture wars that characterized the New York art world then as now.

While Ab-Ex was roundly dismissed by feminists as male-centric—Fishman struggled to accommodate her multiple artistic persuasions—it was her language, not simply an option to exercise. She re-tooled the bold gestural language of abstraction by contaminating it with expressions of her own personal experience. It was a gut job that involved switching out the “seminal” masculine ground of Ab-Ex for the experiences of a lesbian.

In the hands of much younger painters, action painting is filtered through decades of post-modern resistance and survives largely as a quotation de- vice, whether or not irony and negation are part of the picture. That’s their burden. Not so Fishman’s generation, which includes Brice Marden and Mary Heilman. Theirs is not a struggle with authenticity. Fishman’s grasp of a painterly language that was both mythologized and discredited, and that she intuitively identified with, has sustained her life’s work. Today, her abstract paintings, in the context of contemporary art and culture, are defiant. She owns the legacy now, and it’s hers to extend.

Her new “late work,” full of speed and muscular energy, can be ebullient or can take on the daily activity of grappling with the weight of life and death. A dominant organizing principle in many of the paintings consists of a broad vertical swipe or “zip” squeegeed down the center of the canvas, as if she were throwing down the gauntlet to herself. There it is in *Apotheosis*, *Cadence*, and *Arrows of Emotion*, all 2017. In *One Foot in the River* (2016), a broad central swipe holds forth in blue-green and black. The painting literally zings with black staccato marks that air-kiss the surface, skipping and skidding along, and tentatively touch down on a white field that’s lightly littered with a bare suggestion of a loose grid composed of translucent marks and gestures. Amplifying the geometry and the plaid washes enfolded with broad gestural marks, right angle intersections and diagonals are illuminated with shades of blue-green, chartreuse, and emerald.

Another approach favors loose, blurry grids. *A Little Ramble* (2017), an open- weave plaid reverie of blues and greens smeared and smoothed into a loose grid, shimmers with see-through atmospheric qualities. Equally rich atmospheric dazzle in *Piano Nobile* (2017), with plenty of white ground beaming through rust, red and blue paint striations pulled across the canvas in a grid-like fashion. Here and elsewhere, the naturalistic world is a ready source for the paintings’ sensualities. Throughout the suite of works, color is keyed up to near hallucinatory intensity. Many visual and coloristic references to water and light invite us into a realm that promises bucolic pleasure.

*Coda Di Rospo* (2017) achieves a lyrical, pastoral affect with vertical brush- strokes crisscrossing double horizontals that gracefully fence the surface and rhythmically pulse from grey to taupe to rose. Not so with *My Guernica* (2017), among the most aggressive and arresting of her paintings and by far the darkest in temperament. Less Picasso and much more Goyaesque, the broad, dominant black and red strokes vigorously snuff out any light that might emanate from it. Chop it up, lay it down, scrape it off, make the mark, dribble, scribble, harder, harder. The emotional intensity is palpable. For all the reflective engagements these paintings support, they might be seen as functional meditation fields. Certainly, there’s ample theatricality in Fishman’s paintings to tip the experience of these paintings into a deeply personal realm.

We owe Fishman a lot. Over the course of more than half a century painting in NYC, she’s legitimately laid claim to more idioms of abstraction than any other painter. She’s adamant in her embrace of gestural abstraction and its potential to achieve affective ends—no negation, no apologies. Yes, she has achieved “legacy” status in her own right, on her own terms. Are these paintings even better than before? Her confidence and dexterity as a

painter are fully on display and result, no matter the temperament of the work, in a profound sense of stability and reflective depth. That's been there for decades, but what's different this time around is that there is something so undeniably "right" about these paintings for the times we live in. They take on doubt but don't dispel it. They convey a sense of freedom and restraint, acknowledging contingency and precarity at every turn. However we might choose to respond to and understand the experiences that foreground this work, Fishman's paintings are radiantly relevant to our times.