

# LOUISE FISHMAN

PRESTEL, NEW YORK, 2016.

## GETTING SMALL WITH LOUISE FISHMAN

Ingrid Schaffner in conversation with Louise Fishman

*This conversation was held at Louise Fishman's New York studio on June 29, 2015, in advance of the exhibition Paper Louise Tiny Fishman Rock that will be held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, April 29 -August 14, 2016.*

INGRID SCHAFFNER: The three essays in this book make meaty narrative of your major work, in part by drawing extensively on past interviews and conversations. That gives us permission to take this conversation off road, to poke around some lesser-known aspects of your painting, your Philadelphia roots, and your feminist and queer politics. Let's follow the lead of the Institute of Contemporary Art exhibition. Conceived independently from – and running in tandem with – the Neuberger Museum of Art's fifty-year survey, the ICA's *Paper Louise Tiny Fishman Rock* will be more like a studio visit: a chance to see bodies of work that until now have been a mostly private part of your practice.

The installation will present a selection of sketchbooks, miniature paintings, and small sculptures. Not much bigger than two by three inches, the miniatures are as completely realized as full-breadth canvases. The sculptures, some cast in bronze from plaster models, the bulk constructed largely from found objects, are so elemental in form and substance they appear almost geologic. And the books, which are filled with mediums and modes of mark making, burst with narrative drive like Amazon comics rendered abstract. There will also be some very early works, including a self-portrait as a blonde boxer.

Though surprisingly unlike the large-scale, abstract and gestural paintings for which you are known, these small-scale paintings and sculptural objects are deeply telling distillations of the intimacy and intensity, emotion and physicality, you pack into all of your work. So, Louise, let's get small.

LOUISE FISHMAN: The gloves are off.

INGRID: I want to start by focusing on your early feminist circle by way of a small painting: *Angry Ti-Grace*. From the *Angry Paintings*, that are as raw as screams on paper, this work is named for the radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson, who was also ICA's unofficial first director. And from what I have researched of the museum's founding history, Ti-Grace had plenty to be angry about! Working as an administrator in the Fine Arts department, she pretty much single-handedly organized ICA's inaugural exhibition in 1963, the first museum survey of the work of Clyfford Still, a big boy of Abstract Expressionism and curmudgeon. He wrote threatening to cancel the show if the catalogue included Atkinson's (very good) essay on his work, because he basically considered her a secretary. Indeed, it was only after she left the job that a full-time director was appointed, a man named Sam Green. Louise, how did you know Ti-Grace Atkinson and her anger?

LOUISE: I didn't know her personally, but she was the best spokesperson for the women's movement and she was 100 percent behind the lesbians. Ti-Grace was the one who was teaching us, even though we presented her with the revolution.

When she spoke, we got very quiet and really paid attention. We would go off to weekend meetings, seminars, whatever, and everyone would be screaming and yelling because there were all these factions in the women's movement – the lesbians, the socialists, the conservative “feminists,” the woman-identified women. Everybody was having trouble. People were taking off their clothes. I remember Rita Mae Brown wandering around taking her shirt off – she was so gorgeous – and everybody was like *oh, I wanna do that*, but nobody else had that body.

INGRID: It sounds like a very angry and ecstatic time. You've spoken about Jill Johnston – Angry Jill – in similar terms, as an orator for lesbians.

LOUISE: It was a very powerful moment. We all knew we were revolutionaries in a way that had not happened in Western history. Jill and Ti-Grace were both outside of the fury of the movement, but they were the brains.

Jill had a column in *The Village Voice* called “Dance Journal,” which I followed from the very beginning because I was interested in dance. When I first came to New York I accidentally walked into a concert by Yvonne Rainer and immediately fell in love with her, her dance, her ideas; she inspired me in every possible way. Jill originally was a dancer with José Limón's studio, but she began writing dance criticism for the *Voice* in 1959. She wrote about Happenings when no one else was. Jill had the ability to touch everything and to say really interesting things. Then the language started shifting: no punctuation, all lowercase, she just started taking tremendous liberties. She became an artist. Everybody was fascinated. Then, of course, she came out in her column, the first person to do so in the media.

INGRID: Jill's archive is managed by her widow, Ingrid Nyeboe, to whom you have been married since 2012. Is there an emblematic “Angry Jill” for you?

LOUISE: I met Jill at several of the little weekend conferences that a group of us who were involved in the movement had at a country house that Hill had bought. She was with Jane O'Wyatt at the time. It was New Year's Eve and I was in a sleeping bag with Esther Newton. Esther had already written *Mother Camp* – the first book on drag queens – terrific book; she later wrote an anthropological study of Cherry Grove. We're still friends. Her partner is Holly Hughes now. Back then, our relationship was on the rocks. Midnight came, everybody was excited. I reached over to kiss Esther and she moved her head away. *POW!* I hit her in the face with my fist. I don't usually hit anybody, but it was New Year's. Everybody kisses everybody. And Jill looked at me and said, “I knew there was more to this relationship than a VW bug,” which is what Esther drove.

INGRID: It sounds like you shocked yourself, Angry Louise. Another woman from the series is the writer Bertha Harris. You are a character in her novel *Lover*.

LOUISE: I was *Lover*. Bertha took an apartment so she could write her novel about having an affair with me in it. We were separated when the book was published, in 1976. Bertha had run off with Charlotte Bunch to Sagaris, the feminist/lesbian think tank. But later, when we were friends again and the book was republished by New York University Press as an important work of lesbian fiction, Bertha wrote a long dedication to me.

INGRID: Angry women are passionate women.

LOUISE: Oh my god, yes. But I was one of the few visual artists in a group of mostly academics and writers. They all kept journals, and I started keeping a journal because I wanted to write, too. The Angry Paintings come out of that desire, using language in a scribbling

sort of way.

INGRID: They also break an abstract painter's taboo against words on canvas. There's a strong narrative to the triumphantly feminist title of *Victory Garden of the Amazon Queen*, one of your abstract paintings on four small pieces of unstretched linen. It looks like a little quilt.

LOUISE: The title refers to the Victory Gardens my parents' generation grew during the war; that painting was in the 1973 Whitney Biennial. The first time Marcia Tucker came for a studio visit was in 1971, and I talked with her about being a lesbian and about my politics and feminism. Apparently I reduced her to tears. Marcia, who may have been going through her own political conversion, didn't include me in the Biennial that year, but for the following Biennial she selected the Amazon Queen Paintings.

INGRID: So, it was your victory.

LOUISE: Using words and bringing narrative into the titles were attempts to communicate in a way that I felt abstract painting was not communicating to the women who were my closest allies and friends.

At a certain point I had to separate from the women's movement and the feminist artists group for which Lucy Lippard was a spokesperson. It seemed like all that these hundreds of women wanted to talk about was their careers and how they couldn't get any shows. After I said I was a lesbian, no one responded, I felt invisible. They were apolitical, really. After a summer of consciousness-raising sessions in 1969 with Carol Gooden, Patsy Norvell, Trisha Brown, and me, I helped form another group with Patsy and artists Harmony Hammond and Sarah Draney, and the anthropologist Elizabeth Weatherford. We went to each other's studios and talked about our work, the problems we were having being women artists, and how to move on, or not. It was very formal consciousness-raising. We accomplished a lot.

INGRID: Is that when you began to question scale in your work?

LOUISE: Franz Kline and Willem de Koonig were big for me – Joan Mitchell too. Then Minimalism came along and I was looking at Sol LeWitt and making hard-edge grid paintings. The group encouraged me to see that everything I was doing as a painter – in terms of scale, gesture, and even using stretched canvas and a paintbrush – was male, and this was problematic. I always hated women's work – growing up first a tomboy, then an athlete, I never sewed. But I wanted to destroy what I had done. So I cut up my paintings and stitched them back together in a woven grid. That was my attempt at making a connection to women's work and craft [laughs]; I even bought a book on stitching and knotting techniques. The scale was small. Some I stained in the bathroom sink. Then I started putting the cut-up canvas paintings in baggies and tacking them to the wall.

INGRID: Were you looking at Eva Hesse's work?

LOUISE: I met Eva Hesse at the Cooper-Hewitt Decorative Arts Library in the Cooper Union building, where I worked. When Eva was attending the Cooper Union she had had my job, and she was close friends with the librarian, Edith Adams. When Eva told me she was going to cut her hair, I told her I'm going to cut mine, too. She didn't say she had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. It wasn't until the memorial show at the School of Visual Arts that I really saw her work. I started using liquid rubber in part as an homage to Eva, but also out of a sense of permission. Her work and my women's group both made me feel like I could do

anything I wanted. I may not get to show it, but I can make it. I can make what I want, even paintings on stretched canvas, if I wanted to.

INGRID: Before we move ahead, let's go back to when you were small, Louise. I can see from this childhood drawing you were already interested in the grid.

LOUISE: That was done in the early forties when I was around six. The format comes from food coupons. The little figures are the brothers and sisters I would have liked to have had. Each kid has a name: "Fishman," "Fisher," or "Fisherman," because I thought that anyone whose name had the word "fish" in it was a relative of mine. (My mother's maiden name was Fisher.) When my shrink looked at this drawing she pointed to one child called "Jerry," that had no arms and said, "I think that's your brother."

INGRID: Philadelphia looms large in your life, making for one of many good reasons for doing this show with you at ICA. You were born, raised, and trained as an artist in Philadelphia. Since you moved to New York in 1965 there had been several exhibitions here keeping steady tabs on your new developments. In 1992 three simultaneous shows were held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (organized by the incomparable curator and art historian Judith Stein) and the two galleries at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, where you received your BFA and BS in Education. More recently, in 2012 there was the exhibition at the Woodmere Art Museum, *Generations: Louise Fishman, Gertrude Fisher-Fishman, and Razel Kapustin*, honoring a local legacy of women artists. Your aunt, Razel Kapustin, was a professional artist who studied with David Alfaro Siqueiros in New York and was very important role model for you. Your mother, Gertrude Fisher-Fishman, was a dedicated painter who showed frequently in Philadelphia and Florida. She availed herself of the many opportunities Philadelphia offers its artists, from classes at the Barnes Foundation to membership in the Print, Sketch, and Pen and Pencil Clubs. Both Razel and Gertrude were, I might surmise, Angry Women.

LOUISE: My mother was excited by anything artistic. She loved the Gilded Cage, Philadelphia's first bohemian coffee-house, where artists and writers – maybe a few queers – drank Earl Grey Tea and espressos. Once, she took me along with her to a drawing class at The Print Club, and I was totally disinterested. I was a serious athlete, playing competitively on the Haverford High School girl's basketball team. But the instructor said, "Louise, why don't you do a drawing?" He put a board on an easel and gave me a pencil; they had a nude model, which I'd never been around before. I did a drawing and thought, that looks pretty good. Everybody in the class came over and went *WOW*. My mother, I thought my mother was going to have a heart attack. She was showing me what she was doing and suddenly I became the center of it. That was the first time that happened: I thought, *oh, I can draw*.

INGRID: At ICA last year, a group exhibition of artist's emotionally charged correspondence, organized by the queer and feminist art initiative Ridykeulous, included your small five-part *Letter to My Mother about Painting* (1972-73). It sounds like your mother opened up the field of art to you, yet this painting looks murderous.

LOUISE: I know exactly where that anger came from. When I got that painting into the Whitney Biennial, I thought *look how long it took me to get around to doing this*. I had struggled for years to make sure my mother didn't think I was going to be an artist. Even though making art is all I wanted to do and did, I did not want to succeed and I fought every way I could. In a rage, I went to the studio on Mercer Street and put up a piece of paper and wrote "Angry Louise!"

It was so upsetting, I had to turn the paper to face the wall. Then I thought, I'm going to make one for Esther, with whom I was living. So, I made *Angry Esther*. Then I made one for my friend the writer Bertha Harris. I made ones for all of the women in my group, then all the people important to me, like Ti-Grace. Every one of them who came to my studio and saw her painting was really upset. It was as if I'd gotten inside and exposed this anger with which we all identified. They were portraits, somehow, the Angry Paintings, and they had so much power.

INGRID: It's significant, then, what a relatively small and contained body of work it is. Like a powder keg, the Angry Paintings liberated you to pick up a *knife* and start painting again. I'm thinking of that series from the mid-seventies, in which the paint is slathered on disks of Masonite with a blade, then incised. There's even razor blades embedded in the bruise-blue impasto surface of one of them. These works are sculptural as objects, but your painting in general, it gestures, are full of slashing strokes and cutting physicality. Are you a latent sculptor, Louise?

LOUISE: I would say so. I've had crises at various moments, like in the 1908s when I did that portrait of myself as a man. I was in my studio on Eighteenth Street and across the street was a chain factor. And it struck me, *what is it I'm doing?* This is not meaningful. Chains have a function. Painting doesn't do anything. It sounds a little bizarre, but I wanted something from my work that was much more concrete.

INGRID: I was interested to come across a trove of early ceramics. Stoneware slab work, not thrown but folded and paddled into vessel forms.

LOUISE: I was very fortunate when I was at Tyler to study with Rudy Staffel. Learning to use a kick wheel is really hard, which is maybe why I loved doing it, because it was so athletic – all that kicking. Rudy would put his hand gently over yours to show you what kind of weight to use.

INGRID: It's nice you can still feel his hand. Though your ceramics, I must say, are the antithesis of Rudy Staffel's porcelain "light-catchers."

LOUISE: In graduate school at the University of Illinois, there was a good ceramics teacher and I did mostly hand-built pieces. The desire to move into three-dimensional form has always been there. Early on, I did some woodcarving and a lot of modeling from life in plasticine. One time, when I was studying at the Fleisher Art Memorial, a teacher came over and while he was talking to me – he was nervous – he was touching the clay. "Get your hands off my sculpture," I said. Apparently the faculty had a meeting about me, the woman in the white turtleneck sweater, and how difficult I was. I could be nasty. I remember walking into a jazz bar in Philadelphia to see Nina Simone and saying hello to some people I knew; they later told me how much I scared them. Really I was just so anxious. I wanted to be Giacometti and that wasn't going to happen. I couldn't afford the materials or the space. I could afford to paint in my parent's basement and that's what I did.

INGRID: When you started painting on canvas again in the late 1970s, how did you approach scale?

LOUISE: Like you said, with a knife! I never used a brush or added any medium. It was very gradual working my way back to oil paint and linen, actually.

INGRID: So the paint itself was slab-like?

LOUISE: Yes, and the work was modest in scale. Then I went to the MacDowell Colony in July 1980 and returned with all of these really little paintings, based in scale on the predella panels of Duccio's *Maestà* altarpieces, which I saw on my first trip to Italy, in 1979. That was the first time I worked on small paintings. It was also my first time using a curved mark since my student years; up to this point, I was using only horizontal and vertical elements. The miniature paintings that I did thirty years later come out of finding these stunningly small stretched canvases at an art supply store in Berlin, where I was having a show in 2008.

INGRID: What is the relationship between the miniatures and your large paintings?

LOUISE: No matter the size, I think of my works as experiments in scale. I'm always aware of what's happening on the canvas relative to my hands, my arms, my fingers, the stretch of my whole body. There's an athleticism in that, but I also have an interest in diminutive things that are smaller than they're supposed to be.

INGRID: Small things do convey a sense of compression – being squeezed down in size – that is certainly physical. But there is the relationship between the miniature and the conceptual, as is so perfectly contained by Marcel Duchamp's "*Museum in a Suitcase.*" Likewise, your tiny paintings appear ready-made to exist in the mind's eye, as objects of contemplation. Speaking of Duchamp, let's talk about the explosion in a slat factory – as one wag called his *Nude Descending a Staircase* – that is this stack of painted strips on cardboard and other materials.

LOUISE: First let me say how important it was growing up in Philadelphia and seeing Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* in the same museum as Rogier van der Weyden's monumental crucifixion with the mourning virgin, Cézanne's bathers, and the work of Mondrian, Rouault, Soutine. As students, we used to climb on Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*. Even before the women's movement, art gave me a sense of freedom and permission that anything was possible. I wasn't imprisoned. And even though I've remained a painter – one who adores paint and the tradition of painting – I think there is the potential to do anything.

The "slats" are from the monoprints I made with Susan Oehme at her print studio in Colorado. They are the plates: scraps of cardboard, mat board, wood, and sandpaper that she had around that I painted and we sent through the press. When the plates turned out to be as interesting as the prints, I kept them.

INGRID: Some are very tiny, just shards and slivers. Together they read like an index of painting, mark making, drawing, pigments, and materials that is both astonishingly replete and generative.

LOUISE: It was a terrifically productive moment. I had just begun a relationship with Ingrid Nyeboe. At the end of the two weeks, Susan said, "Louise, you must be in love." She had never seen anyone make so much work.

INGRID: Your work strongly conveys a sense of ethics, in the value of labor, in thrift, in being resourceful, scrappy. Nothing appears to go to waste.

LOUISE: I have paintings on sandpaper that started with scraping down the surface of a canvas and then working back into the sandpaper. I've done the same thing with paper towels. I'm always paying attention to process and scouting for new materials. I used to get a lot of interesting stuff to paint on – squares of Bakelite and rubber, those Masonite circles – on

Canal Street.

INGRID: I'm impressed by the carpet samples. They are such unappealing objects to begin with, yet you've transformed them into such beautifully tactile little paintings that manage to draw extra power by appearing to be messed-up carpet samples only partially redeemed by art.

LOUISE: I made those when I was in residence at Dartmouth College for two months and ran out of linen. But it's true, I would paint on almost anything, including myself if that were viable.

INGRID: Let's talk about the leporellos: such an arcane name for a book with accordion-folded pages. Apparently it was a popular Victorian form of binding for tourist souvenir panoramas.

LOUISE: I still have a leporello guide to Giotto's frescoes in Padua that I bought the first time I went to Italy, in 1979, when I saw the Duccios and realized that I wanted to paint small.

What inspired me to use the leporello form to paint in was learning about a Japanese tradition of carrying these books like passports to be marked at Buddhist pilgrimage sites. I made my first one in 1992, after I got back from New Mexico; it has to do with Agnes Martin and scale. I had gone to Galisteo, where she was at the time, because I had the horrible crisis of a fire in my studio. My partner Betsy Crowell and I rented Harmony Hammond's house, and I was a mess.

A couple of remarkable days were spent with Agnes in her studio not saying anything. She sat in her rocking chair and looked at me every once in a while. And I thought, *what's going on here? Oh, she's meditating. I know how to do that.* So I went into my breath and did my meditation. I watched Agnes and listened to her, later, when she showed me drawings and pulled out paintings and talked about her dealer and whatever else artists talk about. It was clear that the work was a meditation for Agnes, a path, and that I could quiet myself down.

Having a fire in your studio is one of the most unHINGING experiences an artist can have; everything falls apart. When we got back to upstate New York I started making these books that suddenly made perfect sense. There were little grids and bigger grids, rubbings and blottings. I got interested in transferring the image from one side of the page to the other, because these books can be used in different directions and don't really have a front or back, beginning or end.

INGRID: I'm thinking about your feminist journaling and how these books relate to your early interest in writing. They read in such an interesting way, because they're so episodic. Serene passages of watercolor drawing are interrupted by seismic eruptions of oil paint, metal staples, and built-up accretions of paper and various media. They're contained, yet volatile; they don't want to be closed—or opened! This one is a crucible of painting so gooey that the pages are protesting as we pull them apart.

LOUISE: I never make drawings for paintings. So I've been surprised at how many ideas that seem to appear on canvas as if from nowhere can actually be found in these little books from years earlier.

INGRID: So we're sitting in your studio with these very sculptural books in front of us, surrounded by objects. Louise, you're a collector.

LOUISE: It started with Chinese scholar's rocks. In 1985 I saw an exhibition at the China Institute, curated by John Hay – I still have the catalogue, *Kennels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art* – and my mind was blown. Because not only were these rock formations extraordinary, but their bases had been carved to correspond to their contours. It was the most beautiful melding of one object into another – in total respect of the rock.

So I started learning about scholar's rocks. It never occurred to me that I could own one. But Bernard Lennon, my dealer at the time, knew the sculptor Richard Rosenblum, who was based in Boston and had an incredible rock collection. He told me about a couple of guys who had stands at the flea markets and little antique centers that used to be all over New York. And I started buying, spending \$25 or \$90 for these beautiful rocks.

INGRID: Aptly, I see a discipline, a form of study. It's very specific what you collect. Besides the scholar's rocks here in the studio, you are a collector of African sculptures, American milking stools, and Venetian glass.

LOUISE: I don't know how disciplined you would consider my collecting if you knew how much stuff I have at home! But they're objects to draw, subjects to study and just have around for their impact. With the African art, which I first started looking at in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, what I became interested in were these small-scale pieces, mostly bronzes, some so small I couldn't believe it. There was one African dealer, also at the flea market, who was educating me. Some of what I bought may not have been authentic. It didn't matter. This one piece looks like it has a certain amount of weight, and when you hold it, it's like a feather. That idea amazes me.

INGRID: What special appeal do the other collections have?

LOUISE: The three-legged stools are for milking, but the rest are all work stools. They have all taken on the shape and wear of individual use and work over time. I used to get them at auctions in upstate New York for \$5 or \$10, but now the antique pickers bid up the prices too high for me to be interested in continuing to collect them. I began collecting the glass after Ingrid and I started spending time in Venice. We may have gone to Murano, but I wasn't that interested until I saw this beautiful piece at a flea market. It was 100 euros, which seemed like a hell of a lot of money, but I bought it. Then I started reading catalogues and found out the period I was interested in was the 1930s to the 1950s. I've gotten a lot of exquisite glass on eBay.

INGRID: Again, there's something about weight: this tiny Carlo Scarpa glass bowl is incredibly heavy.

LOUISE: There are iron filings in the glass, which can contain all kinds of odd materials, like glitter. I've recently made paintings and watercolors inspired by *Spuma de Mare*, a technique that Ercole Barovier invented for getting something decorative to happen inside the glass that makes it look like foam churning up from the sea.

INGRID: That's another correspondence with your work, the elemental nature of these objects. I always feel close to the substance of your materials: the minerality of oil paint, for instance, the malachite of malachite green. On another studio visit you showed me the mortar and pestle you used in 1988 to pulverize the soil you collected at the Pond of Living Ashes at Birkenau for your *Remembrance and Renewal* paintings.



LOUISE: I think all of that has everything to be with being a Jew. My family were Ashkenazim and they were Talmudic scholars. When I was studying Yiddish I went to a lot of old movies. I remember identifying so intensely with this silent film about the golem – the creature made from clay – brought to life to protect the Jews of Prague. Being an American didn't make any difference. I still had that desire for something supernatural that could protect us, protect me.

INGRID: Is that, in part, what painting does: protect you? I'm thinking less about the golem and more about your anger as a material, one that has never been fully transformed by alchemy or anything supernatural, but rather, has been annealed by your art. To anneal is to burn, to make a substance stronger by making it softer, less brittle. To be in your studio now: it's the work that's on fire, not you!

LOUISE: Yes, I am happy being benign Louise. I'm allowing myself much more freedom in the studio. I would have never been allowed all that white space of the canvas to be there before. I wanted to give everything a lot of richness, but this is a different story. Now it's about giving reign to what paint does on its own. And I do think there's something magical about painting. Something is *made* out of paint, aside from the purpose it gives my life. You know, I stopped painting to have this knew replacement and I have no idea what's going to happen when I get back to work. I mean, it's a complete mystery.