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## LOUISE FISHMAN: LANGUAGE LESSONS

by Nancy Princenthal

Drawing in part on the spare geometries of Minimalism, the graphic elegance of the Hebrew alphabet, and the domestic art of hand sewing, Louise Fishman early on developed a form of abstraction that can be said to operate like language. Alternately structural, metaphorical, and literal, the linguistic features of Fishman's paintings contribute to a flexible idiom that is deeply personal-and widely, gloriously resonant.

Having experimented widely, Fishman arrived, by the mid-1960s, at a series of hard-edged shapes and patterns that included checkerboards and plaids. An untitled water-color of 1968, for instance, features horizontal and vertical stripes of varied colors woven into a loose Tattersall pattern, its points of intersection luminous and semitransparent. The artist's touch is apparent in this textile-like composition, and the rich colors are idiosyncratically complicated, but the format is coolly impersonal. That would soon change. By the end of the decade, Fishman was cutting up her own grid-based paintings, as well as canvases she dyed in the kitchen sink, and assembling the small squares into hand-stitched paintings that reflected the influence of the then-rising feminist movement, into which she had entered with enthusiasm.

David Deitcher writes that the stitched-together canvases combine "an act of symbolic self-mutilation (tearing apart her own paintings)" with a foray into techniques newly promoted by women artists, and argues that these paintings relate "to fellow Redstockings member Patricia Mainardi's 1970 polemic, 'The Politics of Housework.'" But far from promoting techniques that have traditionally been identified as feminine, Mainardi's essay, which is very funny (and still all too apt), calls housework what it is-repetitive, time-consuming, boring, and unpleasant-and tartly observes the many ways men avoid it. She left it to others to transform domestic chores, and related crafts, from signs of constraint into emblems of pride. In a 1973 article called "Household Images in Art," first published in Ms. magazine, Lucy R. Lippard discussed the overturning of taboos by women artists, and noted that "Female techniques' like sewing, weaving, knitting, [and] ceramics," which had long been avoided, were now being embraced. If Fishman's cut-and-stitched paintings reflected this shift, their embrace was decidedly wary; in the spirit of Mainardi's essay, Fishman's sewing exercises are plainly effortful and stubbornly, proudly untidy. An untitled painting of 1971 comprises strips of cloth that have been painted in dour shades of gray and dark blue and marked with short, vertical strokes of white chalk, then bound together with string. Another such painting is hung loosely from a row of grommets, like an old coat. In several other works, the cloth has uneven borders. In almost all, threads dangle, and there is throughout a feeling of rough handling. A reluctant seamstress-she later said, "I spent my life avoiding sewing and anything else that had to do with 'women's tasks'"-Fishman turned hand-stitching toward a transformation of the grid from a paradigm of minimalist painting into a statement of hard-fought resistance to its heavily male authority.

Along with an expression of female identity, there can be seen, in these regularly stitched and ruled fields (particularly those drawn on with chalk) an additional, implicit element: a line of text that seems to run beneath the surface, not quite linguistic but nonetheless

organized like handwriting. This textual association is reinforced by other works of the same period in which the cut-up canvases are stitched and stapled into canvas books. And by 1972, Fishman had moved from incipient to manifest text. *Letter to My Mother about Painting* is a five-part work in which each component is two-sided, bearing the title's words within heavily marked fields. The same year, she painted two versions of *Louise 5 Times*, watercolor drawings in which she repeats her first name in tidy rows. These works suggest an obstinate child sent to the black-board-or, perhaps, an insubordinate student of Bruce Nauman, countering the two attenuated signatures he rendered as neon signs, in the late 1960s, with her own, hand-drawn and inky dark.

If anger is only implicit in these last works, it is inescapable in Fishman's most extensive body of word-based compositions, the thirty *Angry Paintings* she made in 1973. Created in acrylic on paper and seemingly bigger than their fairly modest dimensions (each is twenty-six by forty inches), they name lesbian novelists and poets, social and cultural critics, a few painters, and, notably, the artist herself, each subject qualified by the same emotion. The titular words of *Angry Louise* are roughly scrawled on a neutral patch of ground and hounded on all sides by thickly applied, blood-red slashes of paint. In other examples, the words—most lettered in screaming caps—are inscribed in several layers and surrounded by furious brushwork, the palette in some cases grim and in others jubilant. The letters of "angry" in *Angry Djuna* (for Djuna Barnes) grow in size, and the "Y" is explosive, but more like fireworks than gunfire. In *Angry Gertrude*, the words are nearly buried in a thicket of brushstrokes, many of them green, which supports the impression of a prickly hedge: a reference, perhaps, to Gertrude Stein's notoriously thorny prose (although this work also refers to Fishman's mother, Gertrude). In *Angry Jill*, the words are shoved into the painting's upper left quadrant, harried by a scrum of brushstrokes going every which way, anarchic and somehow ruefully funny, like Jill Johnston's writing. On the other hand, *Angry Radclyffe Hall*, which also shouts "Angry Lesbian" and "Lesbian Fury," is a clarion call suitable for carrying aloft in a street demonstration. The words "Well of Loneliness," which refer to Hall's landmark 1928 novel of lesbian love, judged obscene at the time of its writing, appear in this painting only to be crossed out: solitary and isolated no more, Fishman and her friends were speaking up, in force.

"I was very angry for most of my early life," Fishman recalled twenty-five years later. But these word-based paintings were more than expressions of personal rage; they were impelled by her friendships in the women's movement, which at first were largely with writers rather than painters. "In 1973 I was doing calligraphic paintings," she has said, "writing on unstretched canvas. I was trying to mimic my friends," who were all "writers, anthropologists, and other kinds of academics. They formed writing groups... I left so excluded that I started making marks—as if I were drawing fake writing." But it seems clear, too, that at this moment of newly aroused awareness of the grip of patriarchy and—although the women's movement was a little slow to embrace this message—homophobia, only plain words would do to give full voice to Fishman's ire.

While fully formed words entered Fishman's work (and receded from it) mainly for topical reasons, the connection between language and picture-making has been a sustained concern—and not hers alone. It is not for nothing that we speak of "reading" a painting, even, or especially, when it is abstract. In the period when Fishman's work was developing, a number of artists had been exploring this conjunction. Jasper Johns's gridded alphabets, which reconcile pictorial to linguistic structure; Robert Indiana's sign paintings, which constituted a kind of supergraphics using found poetry; and the cascades of cursive writing in Cy Twombly's big canvases were all at hand, although none offer precise precedents for Fishman's approach. Her active ambivalence toward language is perhaps most consonant with that of poet Henri Michaux, who wrote: "If I am set on taking the way of lines rather

than of words, it's in order to enter into relation with what is most precious to me, most true, most withdrawn, most 'mine.' ... Written things are never impoverished or rustic enough." This belief that words are too replete with fixed meaning, too settled and full to be useful for visual artists, accords with Fishman's. Although "writing is one of the ways thought becomes phenomenal," as philosopher Vilem Flusser writes, there are other "gestures" by means of which thinking can be articulated (to use Flusser's phrase). In Fishman's work, it can be said that the written gesture cedes ground to the visual without vacating the field entirely.

Although she has made no word-based paintings since 1973, the enduring presence of language in Fishman's work is connected to several kinds of writing. "In retrospect, I've always had an interest in calligraphy, starting with Hebrew, a language that I didn't understand," she has said. Of course, Hebrew was compelling not just for its visual form, but also for the history, culture, and religion it represents. Raised in a Conservative Jewish family by parents from Orthodox backgrounds (her father, who taught in a yeshiva, was the son of a Talmudic scholar), Fishman attended synagogue regularly as a child. Her work's first explicit acknowledgment of Judaism is in titles for paintings of the late 1970s, a period when she read Holocaust literature extensively, along with other related material, including Yiddish writing in translation. In *Ashkenazi* (1978), the grid returns, this time more as an emblem than a structure; expressionistic brushwork, both scumbled and scribbly, and iconic colors—red, white, blue, and black—describe and activate rectangles that stride forth as independent figures. By contrast, the two tumbling circular forms in *Go/em* (1981) seem inescapably organic. Heavily drawn in black, they are both internally subdivided, like fetal cells: we sense that, as with the Golem of Jewish mystical tradition, mere matter is becoming animate, though whether it is to be a living being or a spoken word isn't yet clear.

In 1987 Fishman moved to a farmhouse in rural upstate New York, and natural references flourished. *Stand of Beech* is more grid than grove, but the whiteness of beech bark seems to glow in the deeply shaded ground; *Headwaters* is a smaller canvas whose cataract of colors spills over patches of stony gray. But the bucolic influence was countered by a spring 1988 trip to Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest, during which Fishman visited Auschwitz and Terezín. Later that year, following her return, she created nineteen paintings named for components of the Pass-over Seder plate. *Bitter Herb* (for the Seder, the herb is commonly horseradish, eaten to remember the bitterness of slavery) is a large (sixty-five by forty-five-inch) painting, simple and commanding, organized by horizontal bands of dark green, blue, and gray. *Karpas #4* (the title refers to an herb or a vegetable, generally parsley, dipped in salt water for similar reasons) is a more modest composition, in chalky blue against saline gray, held lightly in place by the ghost of a grid. *Haggadah* is named for the handbook that guides participants through the Seder, telling the Passover story in prose, song, and prayer. This painting's central, branching form—an open book?—spreads its wings over the smallish canvas, casting it in cool, dark shadow.

Together, these paintings suggest the lineaments of ritual held in place by narrative—by a history heard so early and often that, like a song popular in one's childhood, it is learned before its meaning is understood, much less examined. Fishman's Seder paintings put that examination, undertaken in adulthood, into the context of a centuries-old process of inquiry. "While the series refers directly to her experience of visiting the camps, and therefore to a specific Jewish experience, the Jewishness of Fishman's paintings in general is more ineffable, constituting a kind of visual cognate of Talmudic disputation," Faye Hirsch writes. The dialogic, amicably contentious nature of such scholarship, deeply familiar to Fishman, structures these paintings not just as interrogations of cultural history, but also as spirited engagements with the tenets of modernist abstraction, which likewise have been endlessly and productively debated without ever being resolved.

By the late nineties, Fishman was using linear gestures that alluded not only to calligraphy of several varieties but also, as Hirsch writes, "to Chinese scholars' rocks of the kind she collects, with their fluid shapes, holes, and concavities that, as she sees it, can almost look like writing"; the artist was influenced as well by Bradley Walker Tomlin and, especially, Mark Tobey, who was himself inspired by Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. It is relevant, too, that earlier in the decade Fishman, heading West following a devastating 1990 studio fire, had met with Agnes Martin in Galisteo, New Mexico. Martin's grids of the sixties, and the horizontal and vertical bands of the following decades, were understood by Fishman—whose involvement with Zen Buddhism dates to the 1970s—as a form of meditation. Indeed, Martin was deeply engaged with various Eastern and other mystical spiritual practices; a writer's hand can also be seen in the penciled lines that run throughout her work. In spite of Martin's protests, most observers have made a further connection between her abstractions and the natural world. "The work of Agnes Martin," Melissa E. Feldman observes, "renewed Fishman's interest in the grid, but as a breathing system as opposed to a minimalist vise." Feldman further describes Fishman's use of the grid as " 'organic' in that it represents repetition and continuity found in nature, a waterfall or the rings of a tree, for example." A similar approach to the grid, and a similar resolution of the linear with the calligraphic, were put forward in the late eighties by Brice Marden, whose *Cold Mountain Series* (1988-91) is inspired by the T'ang-dynasty poet Han Shan. Though their meandering, linear organization refers, Marden says, to the meditative wandering of Zen monks, these paintings also can be seen as descendants of his early grids.

By the 1990s, Fishman, too, had stretched the grid almost beyond recognition. But following her trip to New Mexico she returned to its more familiar form in earnest. In *Valles Marineris*, which is named for a system of canyons on Mars, heavy, black strokes, patient as bandaging, define a rectilinear network whose internal squares are scraped to the canvas—the painting's flinty substrate. The fragments of a grid that appear in *Burnt Bridges* suggest an almost architectural scaffold, and also the strokes of a system of signage. Big and commanding (it is ninety inches high), *Blonde Ambition* (1995) deploys bold, curving marks that seem bent to the use of not only verbal signs but also of body language. Against a matte black ground, the heavy, slightly gritty strokes of bright white in this painting have the sweep of road markings—they were applied with rollers—and suggest a figure on stage under spotlights: it is possible to see arms stretched wide, a head thrown back. The muscularity of *Blonde Ambition* can be attributed in part to a concert of the same name by Madonna, which Fishman had seen before making this painting, and to Marilyn Monroe, who had long been an inspiration to Madonna, and to Fishman as well.

No such figurative associations are invited by *The Art of Losing*, in which a freshet of cold blue at right gleams amid the dark, heavy contours that structure the canvas. Some straight and others bent, these contours again suggest rudimentary letterforms, and also a maze: we are invited to trace—to read—the composition's passages and blockages as a wordless narrative. In *Moon and Movies* and, especially, *Green in the Body*, there are similar passages, these less congested; the latter painting offers a palette of greens, some lit up by juicy yellow, that powerfully evoke the upward, sun-seeking inclination of springtime growth. And written language remains a reference point, sometimes plainly stated. *Longhand* names the cursive penmanship that is its motor: against a dark ground, white brushstrokes dance upward through the big, vertical canvas with whiplash speed.

In other paintings of the late nineties and since, linear structure abates; the imperative of these works is that of the paint and its application, and of unbounded color. Again referring to the landscape (and, perhaps, to the work of Joan Mitchell, which has been a sustained source of inspiration), such paintings as *April* and *The Sunrise Ruby* reveal the character of

the brush-hairy, flexible, vestigially animal-as well as of the artist's hand. Fishman's more recent works continue to speak of material and process; The blades of knives and the teeth of trowels, along with the resilience and weave of the linen or canvas support and the saturation of the paint's pigment, are all given voice. Colors sing, strokes dance. Lately, air and light, as well as high-keyed palettes and glorious complications of deliberate gesture and barely controlled accident, have set the canvases in joyous motion.

The freedom of these recent paintings is grounded in a discipline long since internalized. When she was a teenager, Fishman was a competitive athlete. "I pitched hardball on the boys' team and I played varsity basketball in high school for four years," she recalls. "Playing sports was the only time I felt at home...It wasn't until I started going to art school in 1956 that there was anything remotely as interesting to me as playing ball." It isn't the rigors of training and competition that she remembers; instead, she says, "painting gave me the same feeling of tremendous freedom I had experienced playing ball." That freedom is of a particular kind: It is born of immersion in an activity-and a language-that is bounded, rule-driven, in some ways arbitrary, and profoundly satisfying once absorbed and mastered. It allows for a kind of expression independent of words. "In sports I didn't have to explain myself. And in art I didn't have to unless I used figurative art and content," Fishman observes. That is to say, abstraction, like sports, offers a kind of linguistic community-a community of understanding that can be as satisfying as those organized around faith, or other forms of identity: gender, culture, profession, age. It is a language for expressing things that are unsayable any other way. Few artists have put it to use with greater fluency.