

# ARTCRITICAL

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### TENDERNESS, FURY, AND JOY: LOUISE FISHMAN (1939–2021)

by Rebecca Allan



Louise Fishman, *For There She Was*, 1988. Oil on linen, 76-1/4 x 82 inches. Collection of Romita Shetty and Hasser Ahmad.

Louise Fishman, the preeminent American painter, died on July 26th at the age of 82 with Ingrid Nyeboe, her spouse, at her side.

Born in 1939 in Philadelphia, Fishman translated her life experiences into radiant, muscular works of art. The highly personal abstract style that she evolved was born of her physical power, intellect, and engagement with art history.

In her youth she had been a competitive athlete, which helped shape her gestural idiom. She was both the daughter and niece of practicing artists, Gertrude Fisher-Fishman (1916-2013) and Razel Kapustin (1908-1968) respectively, both of whom studied at The Barnes Foundation, then in Merion, Pennsylvania. Fishman was steeped in the works of such European modernists as Matisse, Cézanne, and Soutine through catalogues from the Barnes in her mother's library.

Fishman loved music of all genres and could often be seen in a rapt state, sitting beside Ingrid, her beloved, at performances. She became a part of my life several years ago through our mutual friend, pianist Idith Meshulam, who performed music by my spouse, Laura Kaminsky at a concert at Tenri Cultural Institute in 2013. Louise was deeply moved, and this became the catalyst for a few special gatherings and conversations that we treasure. Her absence is going to have a profound impact on those who treasured her alto speaking voice, radiant smile, and the depth of expression in her eyes that made everyone feel that they were clearly seen and heard.

Though in her mature paintings she employed tools such as drywall knives and trowels, Fishman's command of the traditional materials and techniques of oil painting came through her academic training at the Philadelphia College of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Tyler School of Fine Arts, and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where in 1965 she completed her MFA before heading to New York City in her Nash Rambler.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, she confronted gender discrimination in the art world,

and further isolation as a lesbian. Working as a proofreader and editor, she painted at night and on the weekends and became involved in the feminist and queer activist movements. As if to destroy the influence of the male-dominated art power structure, she cut her canvases apart, reworking them into small sculptures that incorporated stitching, dying and weaving. She experimented with liquid rubber, inspired by Eva Hesse's 1971 memorial exhibition in work at the School of Visual Arts.

In 1973, curator Marcia Tucker included Fishman's work in the Whitney Biennial. Exhilarated by this professional recognition, she was nevertheless ambivalent about this inclusion, when it was not extended to other women artists in her life. Her *Angry Women* Paintings of that year were an expression of self-awareness, unleashed in a series of 30 text-based works, inscribed with the names of her heroines and friends in bold letters obscured by drips and slashes.

A 1988 visit to the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Terezín had a profound impact on Fishman who transformed her grief into a series titled *Remembrance and Renewal*. Fishman mixed silt collected from the Pond of Ashes at Auschwitz into her paint in elegiac works that embodied her belief in painting's capacity to reflect psychological and physical states of being.

*For There She Was* (1998), one of my favorite works, is a darkly shimmering painting whose title is taken from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The relationship between two characters who metaphorically merge into one comes to mind, as every color becomes another. With interlocking passages of blue, gray-violet, and black shot through with cadmium red and burnt sienna, Fishman painted a vibrating field that evokes a Chinese garden at dusk. The artist was a collector of Chinese scholar's rocks, and farm stools. She was sustained by her Buddhist practice as well as the years that she spent walking the landscape surrounding her old farmhouse in upstate New York.

In the last few years, Fishman enjoyed long-overdue recognition, including publications and solo exhibitions at Vielmetter, Los Angeles; Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, and Karma, New York, and retrospective exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia and the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College. We can expect more exhibitions and research to examine her unique contribution to the language of gestural abstraction, one that fuses, in her unique way, elements of tenderness, fury, and joy.