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KRANNERT ART MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE OF LOUISE FISHMAN'S DRAWINGS AN UNEXPECTED MEMORIAL

by Jodi Heckel



Louise Fishman, "Bel Canto," 2014. Oil on linen. 74 x 88 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Louise Fishman

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — A retrospective at Krannert Art Museum of the late abstract artist Louise Fishman's works on paper will serve as an unexpected memorial to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign alumna. "A Question of Emphasis: Louise Fishman Drawing" opened Aug. 26, exactly one month after the artist's death. It is the first retrospective of Fishman's works on paper, spanning more than 50 years, and features many works of art that have never been shown.

"The exhibition serves as a very fitting memorial, even though it was not created with this intent. It brings together ideas that Louise Fishman had been working with across her entire career – in particular, the complex and important networks of friends, family and ideas that she cultivated so deeply," said Krannert Art Museum director Jon Seydl.

Fishman earned an MFA in painting and printmaking at the U. of I. in 1965. She is known for large-scale paintings that demonstrate a strong physicality in the manipulation of paint and sweeping brushstrokes, and for the feminist and queer perspectives reflected in her work. The School of Art and Design honored her with a distinguished alumni award in 2019.

"She was a highly successful abstract expressionist during a period when there were many changes in art trends. She had the courage to be herself in terms of her commitment to her work," said Alan Mette, the director of the School of Art and Design.

Mette said he was particularly interested in young women seeing successful female artists, and Fishman was generous with her time in visiting studios and talking with students.

Amy L. Powell, KAM's curator of modern and contemporary art, worked closely with Fishman and her spouse, Ingrid Nyeboe, in organizing the retrospective.

"Louise was an incredible student of the history of painting, and not just modern abstraction. She admired a broad range of artists, including Chaim Soutine, Duccio, Titian and Agnes Martin. The commitment and discipline in her work is so clear; it brings this real presence of her technique, of her attention. She is very present in the work in that way," Powell said.

The exhibition comprises more than 100 paintings and drawings, most of them from Fish-

man's archives. Also included are loans from the Jewish Museum in New York City, the JP-Morgan Chase Art Collection and private collectors. They cover a range of mediums, including collage, oil and wax, thread, acrylic text, ink, charcoal, printmaking, oil stick, watercolor and tempera paint.

Fishman's works on paper experiment with the various artistic processes she also used in her large-scale paintings, including grids, transfers and dedications. The works reference Fishman's Jewish, lesbian and feminist identities, and they reflect her social awareness and her study of Buddhism. Many are dedicated to women in her community of lesbian artists, writers, scholars, friends, lovers and her spouse.

Fishman was well known as a painter, but not for her drawings, Seydl said.

"Her drawings are truly a revelation," he said. "For many artists, drawings are preparatory to painting, but these are more personal, private and complex in a different way. Many aspects of her are manifested through her drawings, and they also are astonishing works of art."

The retrospective helps identify Fishman's place in art history, as well as examine how her work defies attempts to label her, Powell said.

"I'm hoping the show speaks to people who already love abstract art, but also anyone interested in how a woman takes on an entire history and field of activity, and not just changes it but shows us the stories we told about that activity – the sense that men dominated abstract expressionism – were never true," she said.

The exhibition is organized according to artistic processes that Fishman used.

"Transfers" features works that show evidence of contact. For example, Fishman sometimes placed tissue paper or tape on wet paint. During a visit to New Mexico in 1991, Fishman used rock shards and black ceramic stones to make rubbings when she was struggling to paint following a fire that destroyed her New York studio.

Fishman made a series of leporello books, which are bound in a way that allows the paper to unfold like an accordion. Fishman hand-mixed egg tempera paint for the vivid colors she used in the books, and she sometimes allowed the painted pages of the books to dry against one another.

Her series "Angry Women" are 30 paintings that pair the word "angry" with a first name, often of someone known to the artist. The first of these, "Angry Louise," expresses profound frustration and rage at society's oppression of women. Five of Fishman's "Angry Women" paintings are on view in the exhibition.

Fishman was fascinated with using a grid in her work to emphasize some areas of a painting or drawing. The "Grids" section of the exhibition includes "Bel Canto," one of three large-scale paintings included in the retrospective that uses the grid as its structure, but with a dynamic application of paint that makes it anything but rigid, Powell said.

"Curves" features another large-scale painting – "Blonde Ambition," which KAM acquired in 2019. With its minimalist structure and brilliant white gestures of paint on a dark background, the work refers to both Marilyn Monroe and Madonna.

"Flat Folds" features a series of oil and wax drawings that grew out of folded paper works Fishman had made earlier and a lithograph Fishman made while a graduate student at the U. of I. A 1977 interview with video artists Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, in which Fishman discusses her practice, brings the artist's voice into the gallery.

"Expressions" examines emotion and expressivity in Fishman's work. It includes paintings she made after watching the Twin Towers fall on 9/11 from her Manhattan studio. Fishman began painting by putting paper on her studio floor, rather than her usual way of working on the wall, to process the event's trauma. This section also includes painting with calligraphic elements, reflecting Fishman's study of Hebrew and Chinese writing, and a leporello book dedicated to the artist's spouse.

Powell will lead a guided tour of the exhibition Sept. 24 at 2 p.m. KAM will hold a public opening night reception Sept. 24 from 5-8 p.m. "A Question of Emphasis" runs through Feb. 26.