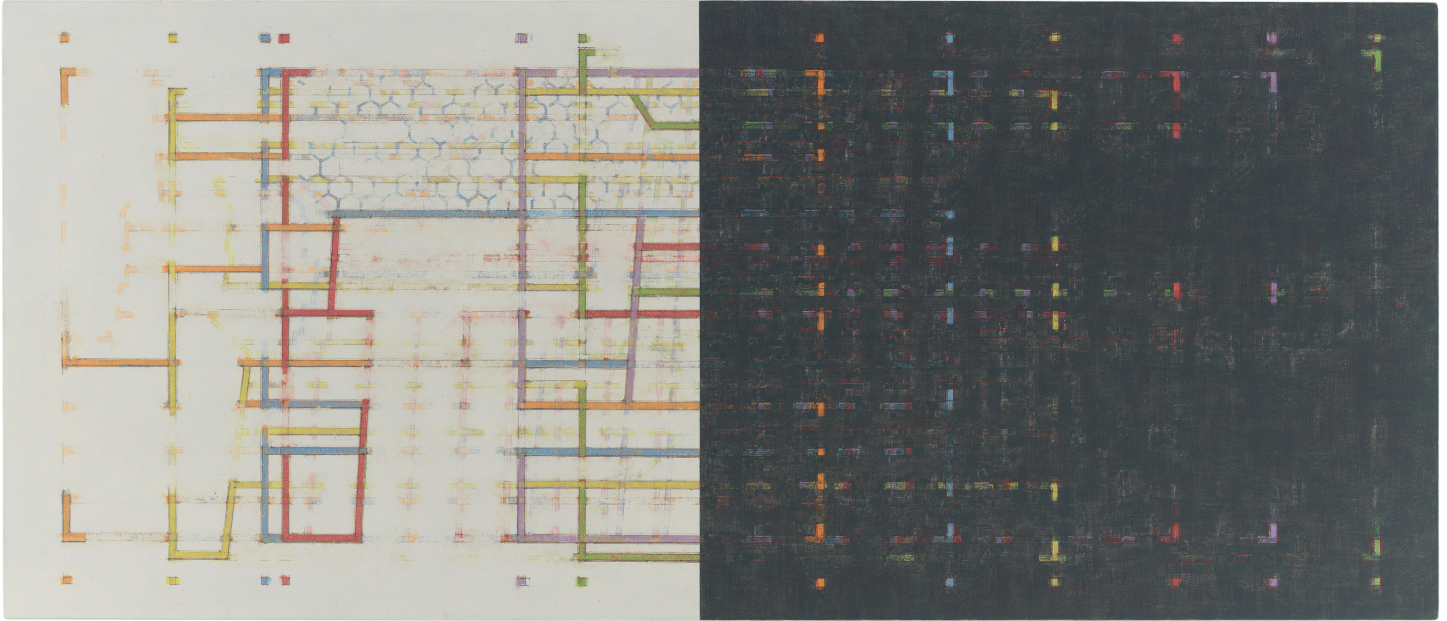


Reviews /

Finding a Home in the Layered Abstractions of Julia Fish

BY ALEX JEN
10 MAR 2020

At the DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, the artist's methodical excavation of her own home results in deeply evocative paintings



Julia Fish, *Threshold – Matrix : equinox [spectrum : east to west]*, 2016–17. Oil on canvas.
Courtesy: the artist and Collection of James Rondeau and Igor DaCosta; photograph: Tom Van Eynde

Last summer, as I was about to leave my grandmother's home in Taiwan, I photographed every room before the sun set. Knowing it might be a long time before I returned, I was desperate to record those spaces so I could revisit them, even an ocean away. The frame of the camera forced me to look closer, impressing the house's colours and textures on my mind.

The surfaces of Julia Fish's paintings are similarly tactile distillations of memory: at 'bound by spectrum', her survey exhibition at DePaul Art Museum, I lost myself in their stippled and blotted layers, which Fish uses to represent her home. For 40 years, the artist has translated the momentary effects of nature on architecture: frost on a window, first light through a doorway. In the last decade, she has focused on the interstitial spaces of the 1922 Chicago two-flat storefront she shares with sculptor Richard Rezac. In 2009, Fish assigned a rearranged colour spectrum of orange, yellow, blue, red, violet and green to six thresholds in her home, based on the intensity of light each received. This subjective, self-imposed framework for painting reminds me of a yearning for structure and analysis when description, however poetic, just doesn't seem to cut it anymore. The irony is that Fish's orderly paintings become overwhelmingly emotional in her repeated weaving of colour and texture.



Julia Fish, *Threshold, North [spectrum : blue]*, 2009–10, oil on canvas.

Courtesy: the artist and Collection of DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney; photograph: Tom Van Eynde

Befitting its title, 'bound by spectrum' is a compact exhibition. *Threshold, North [spectrum : blue]* (2009–10), a downward view of floorboards abutting hexagonal tiles, opens the show. The painting's lower half is so heavily crosshatched it appears like rough burlap, while the painted tiles above have an almost waxy sheen. Each work in the 'Threshold' series (2009–ongoing) predominantly features its assigned colour (here, powder blue) but also every other hue in the spectrum, in varying shades; in *Threshold, North*, for instance, chartreuse, salmon and lilac appear like colourful grout between the tiles. Bracketing the left side of the canvas is the negative shape of a doorjamb, doubled but extended on the other side such that it loses its definition and recedes into background, isolating the threshold as a pried-up, floating fragment. The dimensional play recalls Sol LeWitt's photographic cut-outs of 1970s New York and Florence.

The show's largest gallery features paintings from Fish's other series: 'Lumine' (2009–ongoing), 'Matrix' and 'Plan' (both 2014–ongoing). Looking becomes a kind of sifting here, as partial outlines of previous 'Thresholds' works reveal themselves. In *Lumine IV: asunder [twilight]* (2017), Fish precisely effaces her own painting, grey materializing in patches that resemble gauze pulled over one's eyes. Striated lines of carmine peer through this topcoat, making it difficult to distinguish figure from ground. Similarly, in *Threshold — Matrix: equinox [spectrum: east to west]* (2016–17), a scaffolding of creamy orange executed in faint, restrained strokes has been overlaid with stark tones of beige and coal that split the canvas in half.



Julia Fish, 'bound by spectrum', 2019, exhibition view, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago.
Photograph: DePaul Art Museum

Fish's paintings are full of information, but don't need to be parsed to be felt. It's surprising how, as I studied them, I came to care about a home I'd never known. Such is Fish's artistry: painting the specific abstractly enough to leave room for a wide range of personal evocations. Recently, while FaceTiming with my grandmother, I asked her to show me the cerulean tiles at the entrance to her dining room, cracked from 40 years of tread. Some years ago, she had the depression filled with concrete and coloured it in herself with a blue marker pen. Her hand clearly shows: a gesture of care for one's home and all its imperfections that Fish would surely understand.

ALEX JEN

Alex Jen is a writer and curator based in Chicago

First published in Issue 210

April 2020 © FRIEZE 2020

<https://frieze.com/article/finding-home-layered-abstractions-julia-fish>