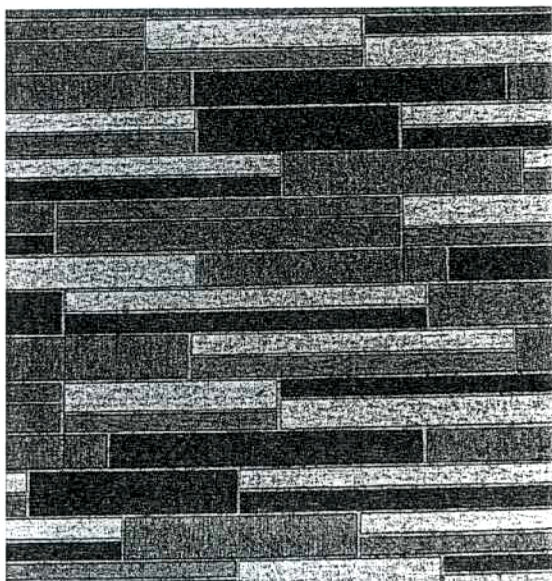


JULIA FISH

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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In painting, any representation of a subject is by nature an abstraction of it, thus rendering "Abstract" and "Representational" perhaps the two most useless words in the vocabulary of the medium. Julia Fish could be credited with revealing these supposed antonyms to be even more synonymous than ever. Her paintings are neither windows that lure the viewer into an altered visual space, nor objects that assert their rectangular presence on the gallery walls. Rather, they are traces of everyday experience, of subjects and surfaces seen, remembered, painted, and seen again.



Julia Fish

Siding, 1994

Oil on canvas,
29" x 27"

Photo courtesy of
The Renaissance Society.

These paintings strike me as incredibly honest—not because they slavishly document every nuanced actuality of their subjects (they don't), but because they so faithfully record the process of looking, seeing, and painting. It is a process that requires time, patience. Fish reveals the act of looking at a subject—be it a tree, a sky, a window, a floor—to a degree seldom realized unless you are painting or drawing it: looking at it until you have really seen it, then looking some more—not at the subject in nature, but at its evolving image on the canvas. There are no tricks in these paintings; no one's eye is being fooled, no illusions are being cast. We know *Floor* is a floor, *Vines Wall* is a vine-covered wall, *Cumulous* is a partly cloudy sky. But specificity is entirely absent. These images depict no particular time of day, no particular light source, no particular mood. It is not so much that the images seem stripped of these things as that they seem layered with them, each picture piled with perhaps a year's worth of varying light, emotion, activity.

The things I most admire about Fish's paintings—the honesty, the consideration, the beauty, the revelation of the process of looking and painting—are heightened in the most recent works. While the earliest works in this ten-year selection are of subjects from nature (trees, sky, ice, rain), the newest works apply the same processes to far more banal, urban subjects: a green asphalt-shingle roof in *Roof Window*, tacky fake brick in *Siding*. Surprisingly, with these mundane subjects Fish achieves an even greater balance of specificity and essence, a more perfect recreation of the experience of looking at something over time, than she did with the inherently more transcendental natural subjects of the earlier works. As proof, we have *5811 South Ellis*, which takes as its subject the stone wall of the building directly outside the Renaissance Society's windows. The painting is hung opposite the window that frames its subject, so viewers may look back and forth from the painting to its inspiration, but cannot see both at once. Out the window, one sees the wall at a certain moment, cast in certain light, in a certain situation. On the gallery wall, one sees it at all times, in all situations. It's a very different way of seeing. —Ann Wiens