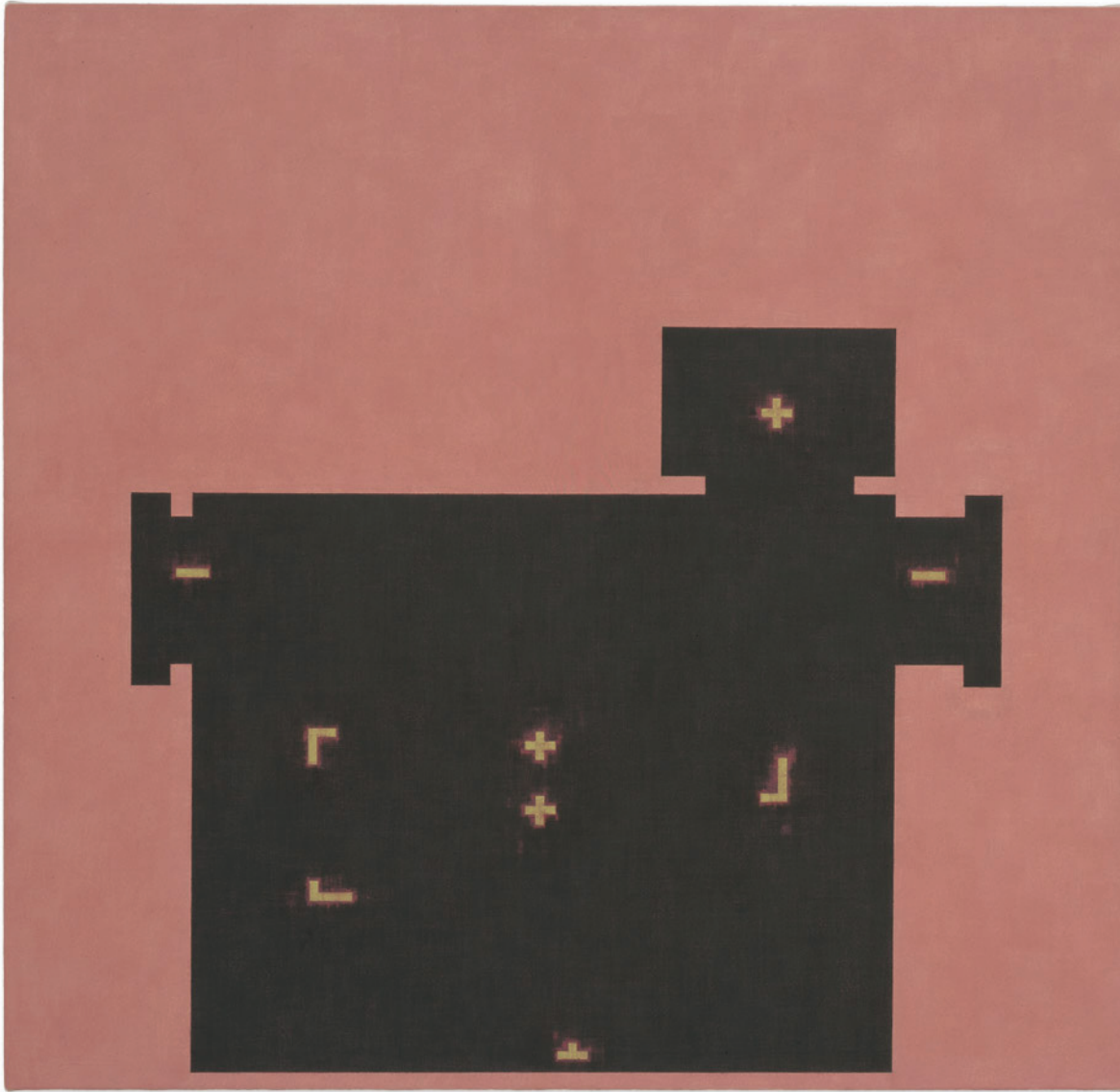


# The Bewildering Beauty of the Ordinary

by **John Yau** on April 19, 2015

**HYPERALLERGIC**  
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents



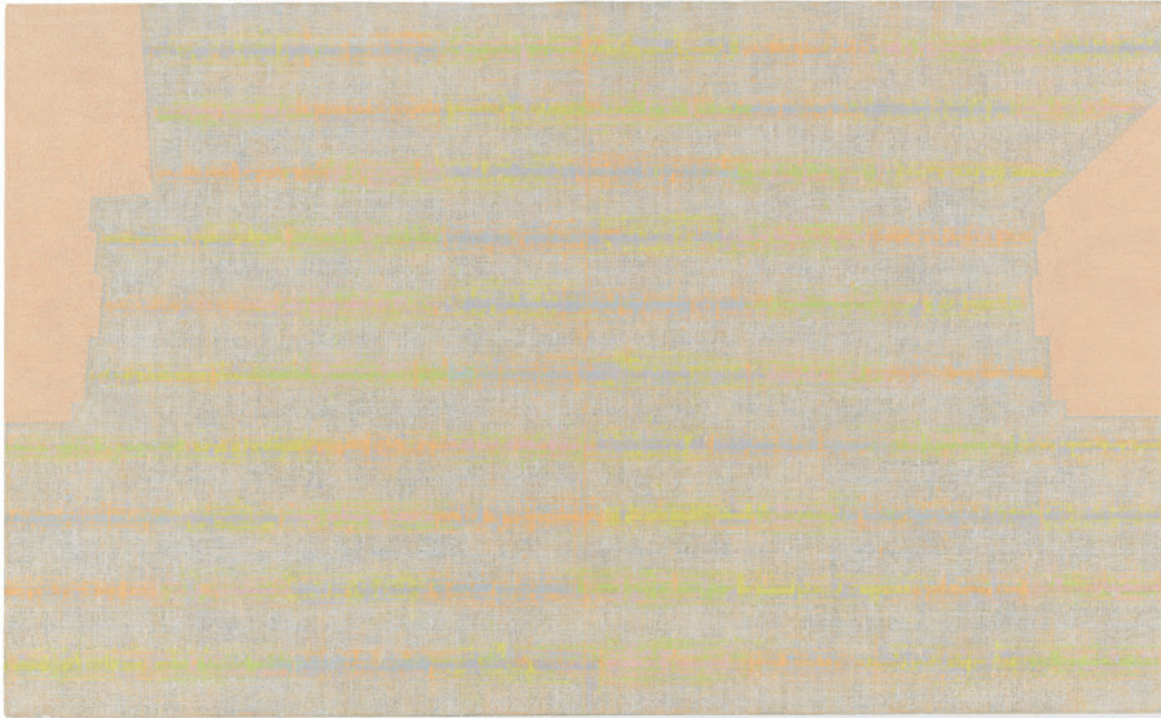
Julia Fish, “Living Rooms : NorthWest — One, with lights, action” (2003–05), oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 33 3/4 inches (all images courtesy David Nolan Gallery)

I urge viewers not to miss the rare opportunity to linger over Julia Fish’s paintings and drawings, which were last exhibited in New York in 2005. A group of recent works can be seen in *Julia Fish: Threshold*, currently on display at David Nolan Gallery (March 19–April 25, 2015).

The exhibition’s title, “Threshold,” is the name of a series the artist began in 2009. It is part of a larger, ongoing investigation that she started in the early 1990s, shortly after moving into a building that is both her home and studio. The building, from the tiled entryway that connects to the world outside, to the rooms beyond the second or interior door, became the focus of her work. She is an observational painter whose attention to surface, pattern, texture and light lifts her works into the realm of abstraction.

In her insightful catalogue essay, “Picture Windows,” published on the occasion of the exhibition *Julia Fish: Selected Paintings and Drawings, 1985–1995* at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (January 14–February 25, 1996), the art historian Judith Russi Kirshner said it best:

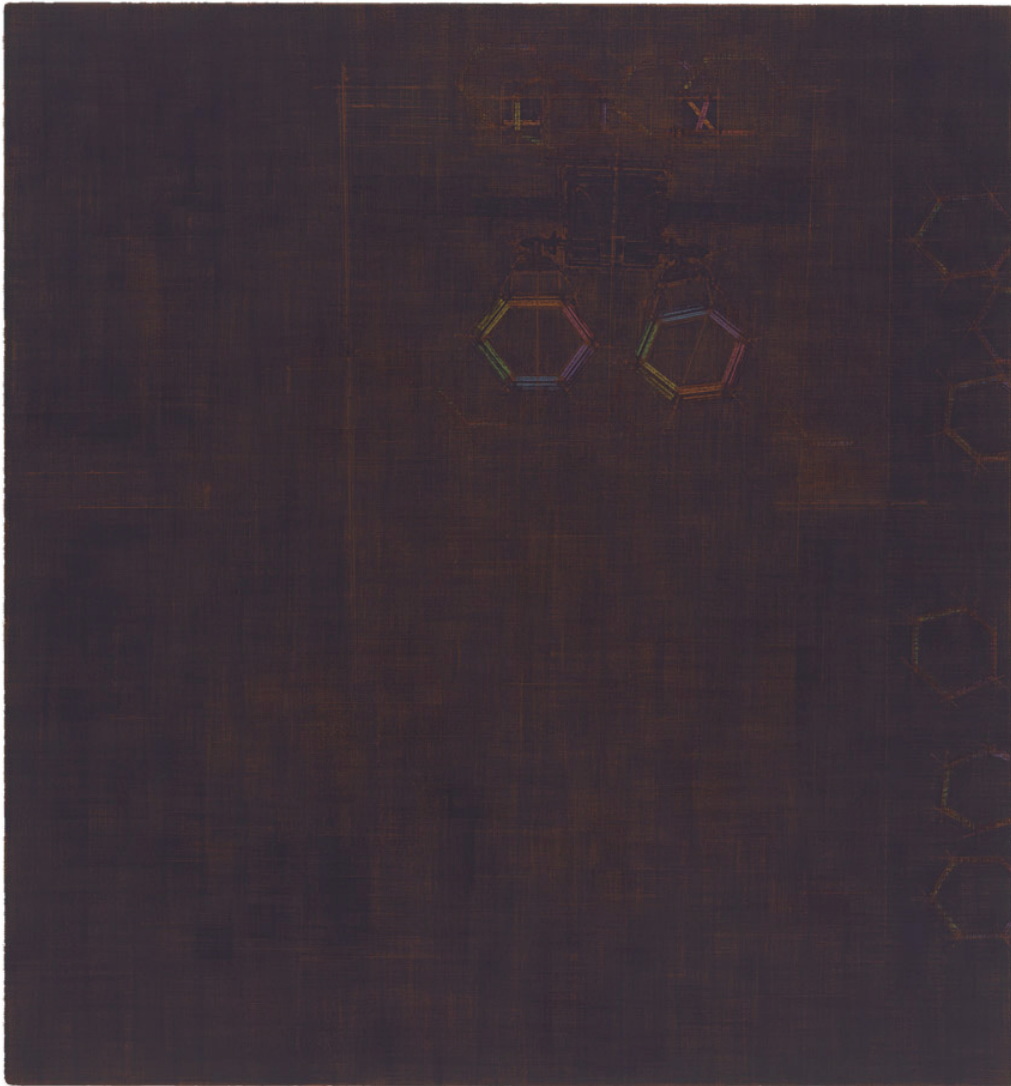
For the five years since she moved to the studio and house whose windows, walls, and floors most often constitute her views, Fish has explored myriad ways to contain an enormity of pictorial possibilities. Her close focus allows her subjects to become unhinged from their referents, to become inexplicable. [...] This studio, this location, has become a source of what I believe is her most challenging and unyielding work. Literally grounded and emotionally centered, her subjects are no longer fleeting recollections of distant geographies or repeated walks past familiar terrain. Instead, she paints what she sees every day, over and over again, inhabiting her views and containing herself at home, in her garden.



Julia Fish, "Threshold, SouthEast — Two [spectrum : orange with grey ]" (2010-2011, 2014),  
oil on canvas, 23 x 38 inches

Kirshner gets to the heart of Fish's paintings when she advances that the artist's "close focus allows her subjects to become unhinged from their referents, to become inexplicable." I would further advance that in reaching the "inexplicable," Fish exposes most realism as a devolution into a style, demonstrating that close looking — which she shares with such artists as Dan Douke, Peter Dreher, Catherine Murphy and Sylvia Plimack-Mangold — can supersede style (or branding) and become both an examination and a translation of attention. It is this quality of scrutiny — of looking with such focused intensity that the commonplace things in the world become mysterious — that I find compelling. Fish is able to revisit the familiar in paint so that it moves closer to its original state of incomprehensibility.

As the title "Threshold" conveys, the paintings focus on an entry point. That can mean something physical (the sill or entrance to a house or room), or perceptual (a state of intense visual stimulation that begins to produce a new effect). Even when I know what I am looking at when I am in front of one of her paintings, I find myself bewildered, unsure if in fact I am correct. It is an instability that many people find unsettling, but they shouldn't in the realm of art.



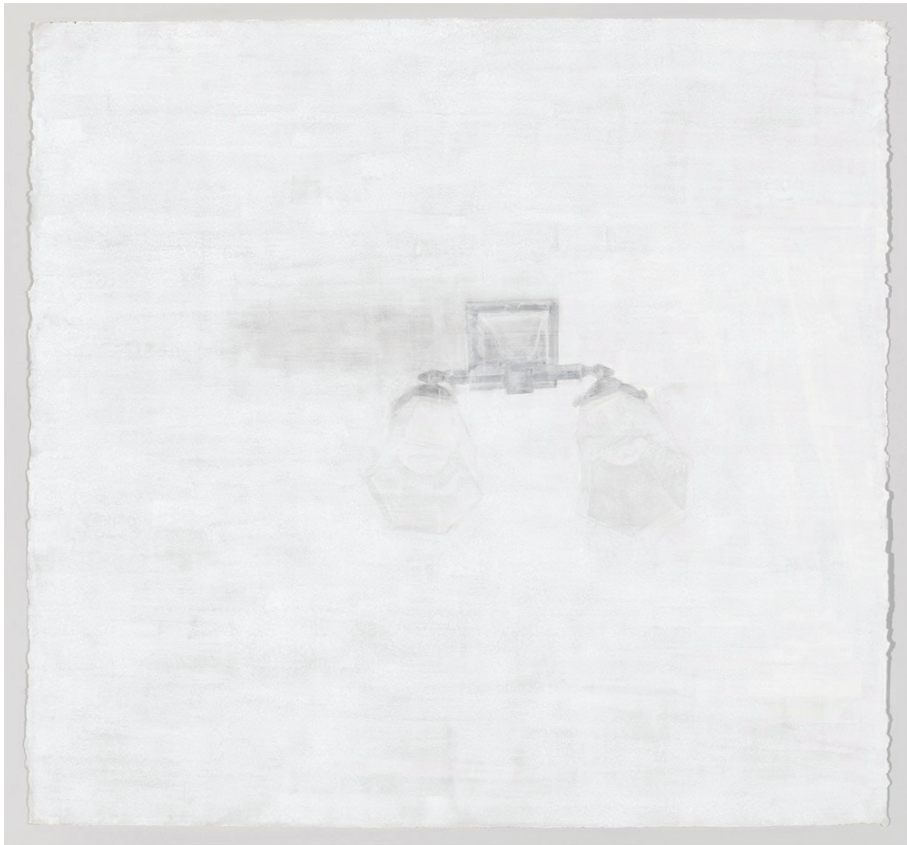
Julia Fish, "Lumine III – NorthWest [ Parhelion ]" (2014-2015), oil on canvas, 29 x 27 inches

Take the painting "Lumine III – Northwest [Parhelion]" (2014–15), for example. It is based on a double-headed light fixture attached to the ceiling above the painter's bed. Two prominent hexagons, which float against the dark, many-layered ground, are echoed by slightly fainter hexagons dispersed along the painting's right edge. Each bar of the two hexagons is done in semi-transparent bands of red, yellow or blue.

The longer you look at "Lumine III – Northwest [Parhelion]," the more details come into focus. The experience is akin your eyes to a dark room until things, however indistinct, become visible, faintly illuminated by the light from somewhere that is entering the room.

At the same time, I am sure that Fish recognizes that the hexagon, which is also the shape of the tile she documented in an earlier painting, "Floor" (1993), is the basic structure of every honeycomb built by bees. Moreover, as Alan Lightman has pointed out, the hexagon is one of three figures with equal sides that can fit together on a flat surface without leaving any gaps, the other two being squares and equilateral triangles. For bees, the hexagon has a major advantage over the other two. In 36 BCE, the Roman Marcus Terentius Varro was right when he conjectured that the bees used a hexagon to build their hives because it had the smallest perimeter.



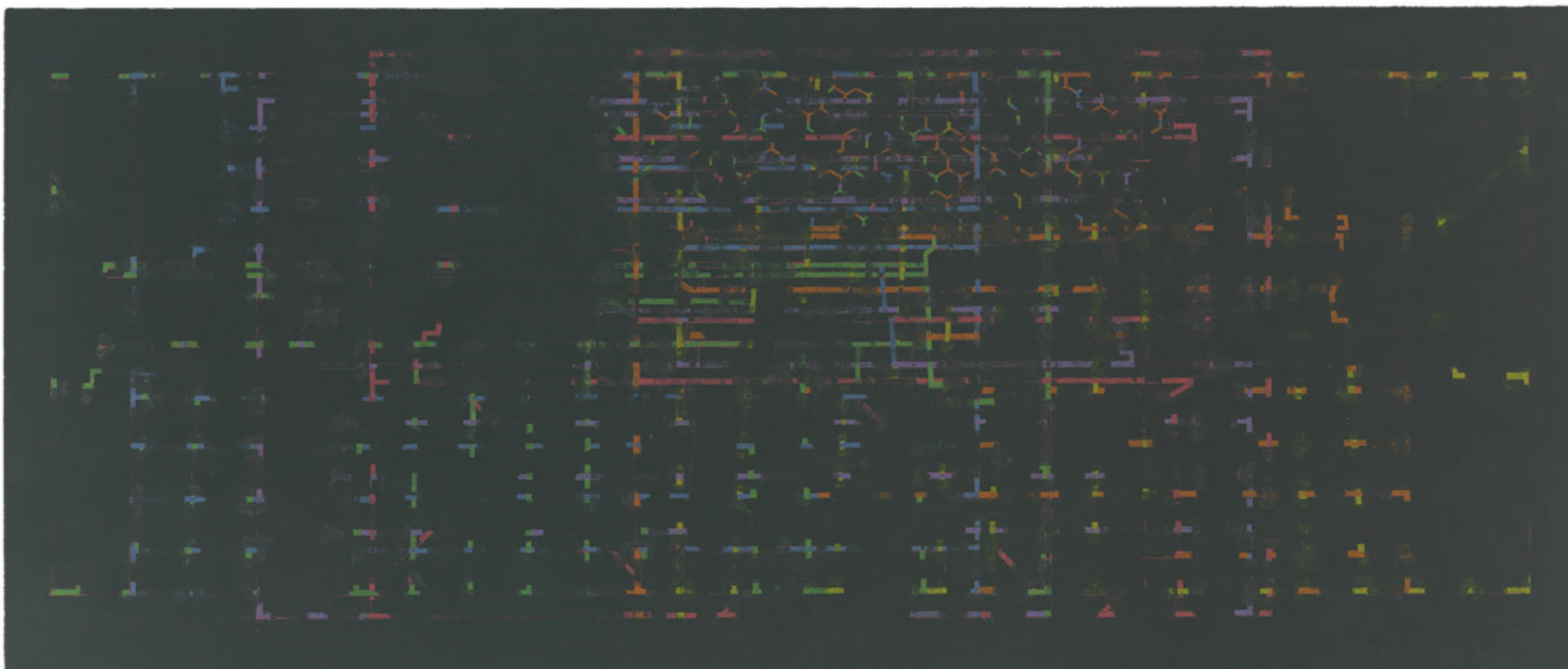


Julia Fish, "Study for Lumine II" (2009), gouache on paper, 20 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches

Only by prolonged looking do you become aware of how masterful Fish is in coaxing paint to evoke something as ephemeral as a light fixture seen in the dark or the striations of light seen on a floor connecting one part of the house to another. In each of the paintings in the gallery's front room, the artist seems to be registering the dispersal of light — from relatively strong to quite faint — across a ceiling or floor.

It seems to me that "Lumine III – Northwest [Parhelion]" can be taken as one threshold or entrance into this exhibition, particularly with regard to the two largest paintings, "Threshold – Matrix : Fragments [spectrum with grey]" (2014–15) and "Threshold – Matrix : harbour [spectrum : transposed] / for E and L" (2014–15), both 30 x 70 inches. At the same time, what I find so compelling about Fish's work is that I don't feel as if I need to know its background or source material in order to immerse myself in the paintings and the way they are painted. Hermetic as her work might initially strike the first-time viewer, they exist on the opposite end of the spectrum from Anselm Kiefer, whose work is always about how much he knows, about being willfully obscure as a way to impress the viewer. Fish isn't trying to prove she is superior to her audience, which is a rather boring, macho goal, after all.

Focused on literally what is literally underfoot in the world that surrounds each and everyone one of us, Fish's close-focused paintings suggest that we might not be seeing the wondrousness that is everywhere in our lives. In her work, seeing and concentration have become indistinguishable.



Julia Fish, "Threshold — Matrix : harbour [ spectrum : transposed ] / for E and L" (2014–15), transfer chalk and oil on canvas, 30 x 70 inches

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*Julia Fish: Threshold* continues at David Nolan Gallery (527 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 25.

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