

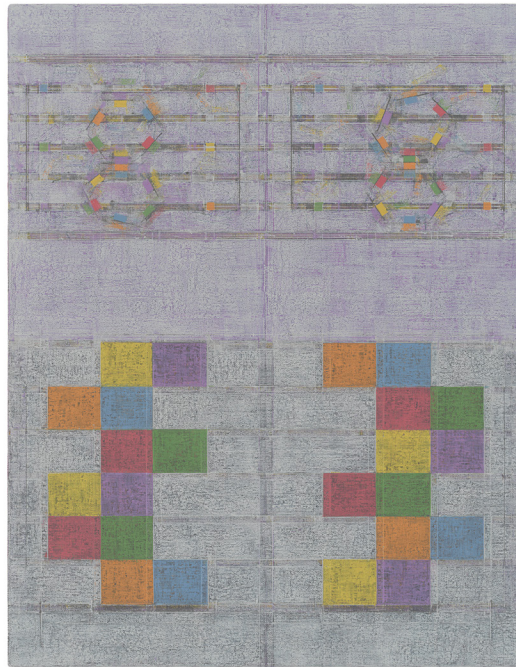
HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS • REVIEWS

Julia Fish's Architectural Abstractions Are Joyful Enigmas

Fish's artworks elude every attempt to enclose them in language, and they resist explanation. They become something only a painting can be.

By John Yau March 23, 2022



Julia Fish, "Score for Threshold, NorthWest - One [spectrum in violet]" (2020-2022), oil on canvas, 23 x 18 inches
(all images courtesy the Artist and David Nolan Gallery)

I did not begin following Julia Fish's work until after she and her husband, the sculptor Richard Rezac, moved into a two-story brick storefront on Hermitage Street in Chicago, designed by Theodore Steuben and built in 1922. In 1992, Fish began contemplating the particulars of her physical environment — her home and studio — starting with the milky white hexagonal tiles in the entryway, which connected the house to both the building's interior and the outside world, to here and there. Fish's acts of slow, concentrated looking, and of reflecting upon what she has seen — whether it is the aura of the light extending beyond its hexagonal glass fixture or the building's siding — became recurring themes in her work. What has changed in it is the relationship between the paint and the references.

In her early work, in which she responded to the tiles in her entryway, Fish would make a drawing based on a one-to-one relationship. Over time, she began transforming her perceptions of surface, pattern, texture, light, detail, and structure into abstract signs, diagrams, and spectral light, resulting in a synthesis of geometry and evanescence. It is one thing to scrutinize the surface of a wall, but it is a very different gambit to invite the viewer to do the same by slowly teasing the painting's surface into a sensuously detailed skin, which appears to softly glow. Fish's paintings make me want to press my nose up against them.



Julia Fish, "Threshold – score for six Plans : [chambered spectrum : east to west] : for E C N" (2017-19),
oil on canvas, 30 x 70 inches

Let it be said that Fish's interest in the phenomenological and perceptual has elevated the work into an altogether abstract domain, as rigorous, unexpected, and thorough as the late paintings of Piet Mondrian. And just as viewers cannot deduce why he made the decisions that he made, Fish's paintings, works on paper, and interventions into architecture produce that same feeling of inevitability. Yet, even as I make this comparison I have to stress that Mondrian believed he had attained a universal vocabulary, whereas Fish's vocabulary, for all its geometry and spectral color, is rooted in everyday experiences, vernacular architecture, and her sensitivity to time's passing. What their work does share is an ironclad logic that leads to the inexplicable. And that mystery fills my experience of their work with an inimitable joy, at once aesthetic and visceral.

By now it should be clear why I spent part of a Saturday afternoon at *Julia Fish: Threshold/s with Hearth: recent paintings and a site intervention* at David Nolan Gallery (March 10-April 16, 2022), where I quickly realized that no matter how long I looked at each painting much more remained to see. There is something complex, nuanced, and inexhaustible about Fish's paintings. The intellect that brings these works to fruition is unlike that of anyone else.

Looking at the exhibition, I get the sense that some of Fish's recent paintings mirror or respond to other works she's made, and that she is letting the logic of her work lead her into unexpected places and possibilities. In "Studio Threshold with Hermitage Threshold Plans [east to west], "(2018, 2020, 2021-22), which measures 12 by 120 inches, the faintly visible shapes and forms that Fish had rubbed out before applying another layer of thin paint conveyed a feeling of being unmoored, even within a deeply familiar environment. I am sure that the artist could tell me exactly why she painted rows of ghostly squares, whose red and violet edges are embedded in the white ground, but that won't diminish the haunting impact of their apparitional presence.

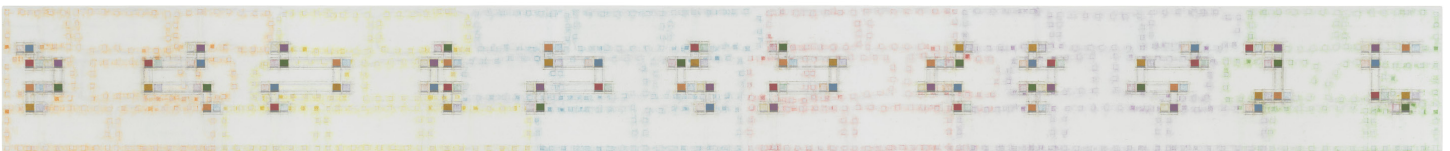
The exhibition space is perfect for Fish's paintings: a room in a 1902 building in an Upper East Side neighborhood known as Carnegie Hill, a block from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A large white fireplace gives the room a domestic feel. For "Hearth: 24 East 81st Street with Hermitage spectrum [thresholds: west to east to west]" (2022, oil on cherry wood), Fish placed equally-sized slats of wood on the floor around the fireplace, painted in the six colors of the "hermitage spectrum," which refers to the colors of the thresholds separating one area and another.



Julia Fish, "Hearth : 24 East 81st Street with Hermitage spectrum [thresholds : west to east to west]" (2022),
oil enamel on cherry wood, 11 x 80 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches

I found myself standing on the opposite side of the room, looking at "Threshold – score for six Plans [chambered spectrum : east to west] : for E C N" (2017-19), which measures 30 by 70 inches, and is the only work on its wall. Along the painting's bottom edge are six evenly spaced pairs of "chords stacks," composed of staggered squares in six colors. A horizontal row of paired bracket-like shapes spans the middle of the painting. These seem to suggest a threshold; the largest pair, placed on the far right, indicates the primary entrance into what I presume is Fish's house. Along the top are many small shapes in various colors, floating on a series of parallel lines across the painting.

The three sections, and the vertical orientation of the brackets, which echo the "chord stacks," reminded me of Classical Greek architecture, and the division of the entablature (or continuous lintel) of a building supported by columns. Each horizontal arrangement of similar forms can be read as the counterpart of the architrave, frieze, and cornice. The shape of the canvas evokes an architectural form, such as a frieze. At the same time, as the title suggests, Fish sees the work as a "score," a series of musical notations that theoretically could be played. At one point, George Crumb's musical scores came to mind.



Julia Fish, "Studio Threshold with Hermitage Threshold Plans [east to west]" (2018, 2020, 2021-22),
oil on canvas, 12 x 120 inches

By citing the orientation of the sources in the work's title, Fish reminded me of the Chinese practice of feng shui, which literally means "wind-water." It is the practice of geomancy, which claims to harness the universe's energy forces to harmonically align individuals with their surrounding environment. It is a belief that speaks to the desire to control one's habitat.

Knowing there is a logic that determines Fish's decisions in no way diminishes her works or makes them seem contrived. In fact, I felt just the opposite as I marveled at each of the paintings, which were so solid, entrancing, and enigmatic. This is why I think Fish is a contemporary master and one of the great artists of our generation (we were both born in 1950). No matter how long you look at her paintings, drawings, and architectural interventions, or how much you know about the sources, the art always subsumes its inspirations, its circumstance, and the rules she uses to guide her choices. They elude every attempt to enclose them in language, and they resist explanation. They become something only a painting can be.

Julia Fish: Threshold/s with Hearth: recent paintings and a site intervention *continues at David Nolan Gallery (24 East 81st Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through April 16. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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