

HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS • WEEKEND

It's Okay Not to Be a Member of a Club

For Julia Fish, the ordinary is not banal, as it was for Andy Warhol and his followers, who seek out the sensational rather than stop to examine the small sensation.

By John Yau May 30, 2020



Julia Fish, "Lumine II – NorthWest [Parhelion]" (2009), oil on canvas, 38 x 43 inches
(photo by Tom Van Eynde, courtesy the artist)

CHICAGO — In the early 1990s, the painter Julia Fish and the sculptor Richard Rezac moved into a two-story brick storefront designed by Theodore Steuben and built in 1922. Done in the vernacular style, the house sits on a lot big enough to have a garden, and Fish's studio, in the back.

Shortly after moving into the building, Fish began examining her physical circumstances, from the hexagonal tiles of the entryway that connects the house to the world outside, to the rooms beyond the second, or interior, door, and to the building's siding. These elements, along with specific rooms, windows, and ceilings with their light fixtures, became the subjects of precise, sensuous paintings and works on paper that continue into the present.

In her scrutiny, Fish often contemplated the materiality of a specific area in the house together with the ambient, evanescent light — the melding of the seemingly unchangeable and the constantly changing. Her act of prolonged looking seemed to approach the mystical without ever losing sight of the material world. I am thinking of Sol LeWitt, who wrote: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."

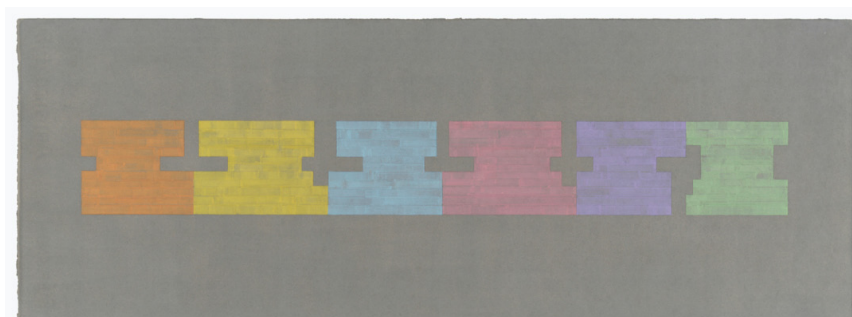


Julia Fish, "Threshold, North [spectrum : blue]" (2009–2010), oil on canvas, 23 x 34 inches
(photo by Tom Van Eynde; Collection of DePaul Art Museum, gift of Ann and Gilbert H. Kinney)

Fish is a conceptual painter whose work arises out of direct observation of her physical environment. For all of the stability of the physical house, she never bypasses the averments of time and light. Rather, they coincide, with unpredictable interactions between the palpable and momentary. At the same time, in mapping the house, and focusing on the light on the ceiling and floor, as she does in a number of works, Fish is responding to places we seldom stop to contemplate, as if to ask: is life only about destination, about climbing the right ladder and receiving the proper kind of attention? Is that the measure we should use when looking at art? Or can it be a kind of looking where everything else begins to fall away?

What distinguishes Fish's scrutiny, and really sets it squarely in a territory all her own, is that everything she is looking at — the milky, marble, hexagonal tiles in the front foyer, to the second floor windows, to the siding — has become, as Judith Russi Kirshner wrote in her astute essay, "Picture Windows" (1995), "unhinged from their referents, to become inexplicable."

The referents can become incomprehensible because Fish's attention to surface, pattern, texture and light, as well as her transformation of them into sign, diagram, and spectral light, pushes her work out of the pictorial into the realm of abstraction. She will make an exact 1:1 drawing of hexagonal tiles, which we might read as variation on a grid drawing, but it isn't. Rather, the drawings derived from the tiles are all-over works based on direct observation — Jackson Pollock and geometric abstraction combined and stood on their head.



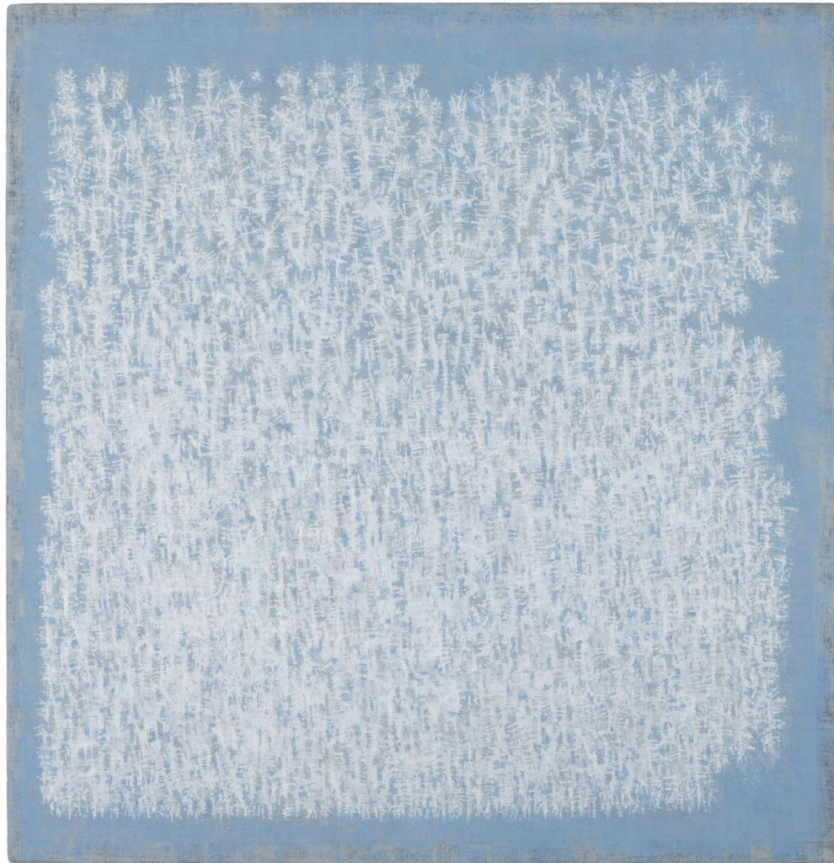
Julia Fish, "Study for Threshold – Plan : [las meninas] [spectrum : east to west over grey]" (2018), gouache on paper, 11 x 30 inches
(photo by Tom Van Eynde, courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York)

Often, I have been pleasingly baffled by Fish's paintings, no matter how rooted they are in ordinary, physical circumstances. There is something unfathomable about them, representing a state of seeing we don't honor enough in this goal-oriented, materially excessive, selfie-driven society. The rigorousness of her examination, flawlessly merged with her sensitivity to nuance, is as mysterious, inevitable, and eye-opening as the solutions that Piet Mondrian arrived at in his paintings.

At the same time, if Mondrian's geometry is about the vertical and horizontal world, the dynamic and the static, Fish's work is about mapping the material conditions of unavoidable change. Here is what she wrote to the Art Institute of Chicago, when the museum expressed interest in acquiring her painting, "Frost" (1992):

This was the first canvas and leading (conceptual + visual) image to what became a sequence of twelve varied 'window' paintings / images at 'actual size' [...]. The 'border' element references the interior frame/edge of the metallic storm window, visible through the glass. This transitional edge became a carrier for tints/shades/lights/color in nearly all of the 'window' paintings [...].

By linking "conceptual" and "visual " — applying abstract thinking to everyday circumstances — Fish collapses the long-held fiction that painters paint and conceptual artists think. This hierarchical construct is, to put it bluntly, one of the stupidest critical tropes to gain traction in the art world.



Julia Fish, "Frost" (1992), oil on canvas; 28 x 27 inches
(photo by Tom Van Eynde; Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Eloise W. Martin Legacy Fund)

Fish has put her painting and drawing skills in service of her seeing and thinking. This is not something she was taught but something that she had to teach herself because her consciousness of the subject demanded it. While her subject has been the house she has inhabited for nearly three decades, her approach has varied, from gouaches made with solid bars of color, to pencil drawings of tiles, to subtly colored paintings where the tooth of the linen support is visible. Different experiences require different responses. For all of the consistency in Fish's work, it is predicated on precise, refined distinctions.

One reason I have been thinking a lot about Fish's work is because I recently received the catalogue, *Julia Fish: Bound by Spectrum*, published on the occasion of her 10-year survey (2009-2019) at the DePaul Art Museum (September 12, 2019–February 23, 2020), curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, with essays by Widholm, Kate Nesin, Colm Tóibín, and Dan Wheeler.

I have written about Fish's work on two previous occasions, but looking through the catalogue, I was once again struck by what she chose not to put into her work. There are no references to mass media or pop culture — that is to say, evidence of experiences that we supposedly all share. For Fish, the ordinary is not banal, as it was for Andy Warhol and his followers, who seek out the sensational rather than stop to examine the small sensation. I find Fish's choices comforting because I don't feel the need to be up on what is in or hip, and that it's okay not to be a member of a club.



Julia Fish, "Siding" (1994), oil on canvas, 44 x 42 inches
(photo by Tom Van Eynde; Private Collection)

At the same time, paradoxically, as the curator Hamza Walker once wrote about Fish in his essay, "The Joy of Looking" (Renaissance Society, 1996):

For Fish, whose humble subject matter is derived from her immediate surroundings, the exclusion of the everyday is unthinkable.

Fish's work shares something with Thomas Nozkowski's modestly scaled, untitled abstract paintings, which were based on personal experience — a point that makes sense only if you interpret the idea of personal experience "in the broadest possible way," as he told me in an interview (*Brooklyn Rail*, November 2010). This is how he further elucidated that thought:

Consciousness is complicated. What's interesting? What do you want to think about and how do you want to think about it? How hard do you want to think about it?

In her insightful essay, "Bound by Spectrum: Measuring Color, Light, and Time at 1614 North Hermitage," Widholm writes about the sources of Fish's ongoing series *Threshold* (2009-present), which is about the consciousness of "passing from one room to another." According to Widholm, one of the inspirations came from Fish's time in Italy, where she immersed herself in the work of the Venetian architect, Carlo Scarpa (1906–1978), whose work Nozkowski also closely studied.

The following quotation is from Sergio Los's monograph, *Carlo Scarpa* (Taschen, 1994), which Widholm cites from Fish's studio notes:

Scarpa was always meticulous about the thresholds. The theme of crossing over from one place to another was for him an inexhaustible source of invention.

The questions that Fish raises, which seem particularly crucial in this period of lockdown, but really have much larger implications, are: how far does any one of us have to go in order to cross the threshold from one space (or world) to another? What does it mean to pay attention to what is underfoot, to our passage in the familiar, ever-changing spaces of everyday life? How does invention differ from production?

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