

Julia Fish
Ten in One Gallery
1542 N. Damen, 60622
773/486-5820

A couple of years ago, Julia Fish was painting two-dimensional surfaces mapped onto the two-dimensional surface of canvas. A section of house siding or a window obscured with frost seemed to be presented not as representations of mundane details, but as idiosyncratic memories stuck in the mind's eye of the artist. Several of these paintings picture sections of bathroom tiles that kept reverberating for me, especially when staring at similar sections of actual bathroom tiles. Irregularities of a slightly skewed perspective in the tiles' progression, the stringent grid of mortar gently violated, almost as if a mildly hallucinatory episode was about to begin, subtly shifted my perception of Fish's referent, not only when I looked at the paintings, but when staring diligently at the real thing.

At her recent site-specific installation, it was as if Fish's referent had taken back the reins of its representation, and finally literalized the impending promised-but-never-delivered hallucination. The small octagonal tiles set in dainty dots of black on expanses of white that cover the gallery floor seemed to have completely run amok. The polite pattern of the grid was radically overpowered in a simple but meticulous way. Fish darkened a tile, one at a time, of each repetition of the pattern across the floor, until almost all of the white tiles

were obscured behind black, little dye-cut stickers: Fish's medium for this project.

The gallery was completely "empty" of any expected works of art, so there was no getting away from Fish's floor-bound intervention. But, even though I was familiar with her tile paintings and knew what to expect, there was a gut-wrenching realization that I had come not to partake of some artwork, but that the artwork was partaking of me. Before my mind could shift over to determining a logical explanation of Fish's system, my stomach went queasy and my inner ear's command of my balance seemed short-circuited. Though fine-art references to Carl Andre or Jackie Ferrara were easily bandied about, my reaction was more like one I had when getting too close to a recent Richard Serra giant, ship-like arrangement of thick, rusty steel plates leaning a little too askance. This did not create merely an intellectual shift in focus, but a bodily jolt.

As I walked through the gallery, the ebb and flow of tiles beneath my feet swelled to almost complete blackness, then retired toward the back room to an overall whiteness, almost scooting me along at the mercy of the space. These little octagonal tiles have always seemed somewhat exotic to me, alluding to the sturdiness of the European past adapted in Chicago a hundred years ago. To assert that the tiles may have their own memories of the millions of feet treading over them—activated by Fish's tampering—would bely either a breezy sentimentalism or a scary, haunted-house conspiracy theory. But still, I could not help but speculate on Fish's pact with those tiles. After submitting to such intense perusal for her moveable paintings, here the tiles were allowed to remain in situ, though still under her control. The vertiginous effect on the viewer must be the measure of Fish's contract with her subjects.

Kathryn Hixson is Editor of New Art Examiner.

Julia Fish
floor (floret), 1998. Color vinyl, with laminate surface and adhesive, die cut, and applied to tile floor. Ten in One Gallery, Chicago.

