PAINTING'S PLACE

Keyed to her home in a former Chicago storefront, Julia Fish's abstractions offer a profound meditation on their lineage in 20th-century modernism.

Opposite top, Julia Fish: *Threshold, North [spectrum: blue]*, 2009-10, oil on canvas, 23 by 34 inches. All images courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago.

Bottom, *Threshold, Southwest—Two [spectrum: green]*, 2009-10, oil on canvas, 25 by 42 inches.

by Molly Warnock

THE DAY I VISIT Julia Fish's studio, in Chicago's Wicker Park, three new paintings hang on the walls. Together they constitute half of Fish's series-in-progress, called "Thresholds"; three more, completed earlier and constituting a rather discrete group of their own (one blonder in tonality, if clearly related), were included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. Upon first glance, the works are curiously inscrutable. Their basic structure is clear enough: each shows a pair of irregular shapes in bright sorbet hues set against a mostly gray field. The color of the flat, collagelike elements (Fish, I soon learn, calls them "bracket shapes") varies from painting to painting, from orange to violet to pink, and so does the internal articulation of the field, from horizontal bands to vertical stripes to a combination of the two topped by cropped, repeating diamonds. But what are these shapes, what are these fields?

Tacked on the wall to the right of the painting with pink shapes are three black-and-white photographs that turn out to reveal a partial answer. The overall compositions in these otherwise unassuming photos rhyme with those of the canvases nearby; only here the bands reveal grain, and the diamonds both form a kind of checkerboard and appear covered in light and dark flecks—the familiar found geometries and patterns of floorboards and linoleum. Most telling, to either side in one of the photos, the stepped silhouettes are shown to bound sharply foreshortened volumes. These "thresholds," one realizes, are in fact doorways, and the stepped shapes doorjambs.

In their attachment to some decidedly mundane surfaces of the real, these paintings are emblematic of a practice Fish herself sums up as "archival" in nature. For more than 20 years, the artist has been making paintings based on motifs and structures derived from the 90-year-old former storefront on North Hermitage Avenue where she has lived since the early 1990s with her partner, the sculptor Richard Rezac, and behind which her studio occupies a converted garage. (For nearly the same period, since 1989, Fish has taught painting in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago.) Nonetheless, it is equally typical of her work that the paintings should conjure other, less easily localizable thresholds, a term that itself straddles the literal and the metaphorical. One such threshold, as Fish is the first to insist, is the shifting, uncertain line between abstraction and reference. These deceptively simple paintings also betray clear debts to the received vocabularies of 20th-century abstraction: Mondrian's lozenge paintings, and Stella's and perhaps Noland's stripe paintings, are among the closest precedents, with Tuttle's objects and Kelly's shaped canvases

COMING SOON Julia Fish will be included in "Homebodies," a summer group show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

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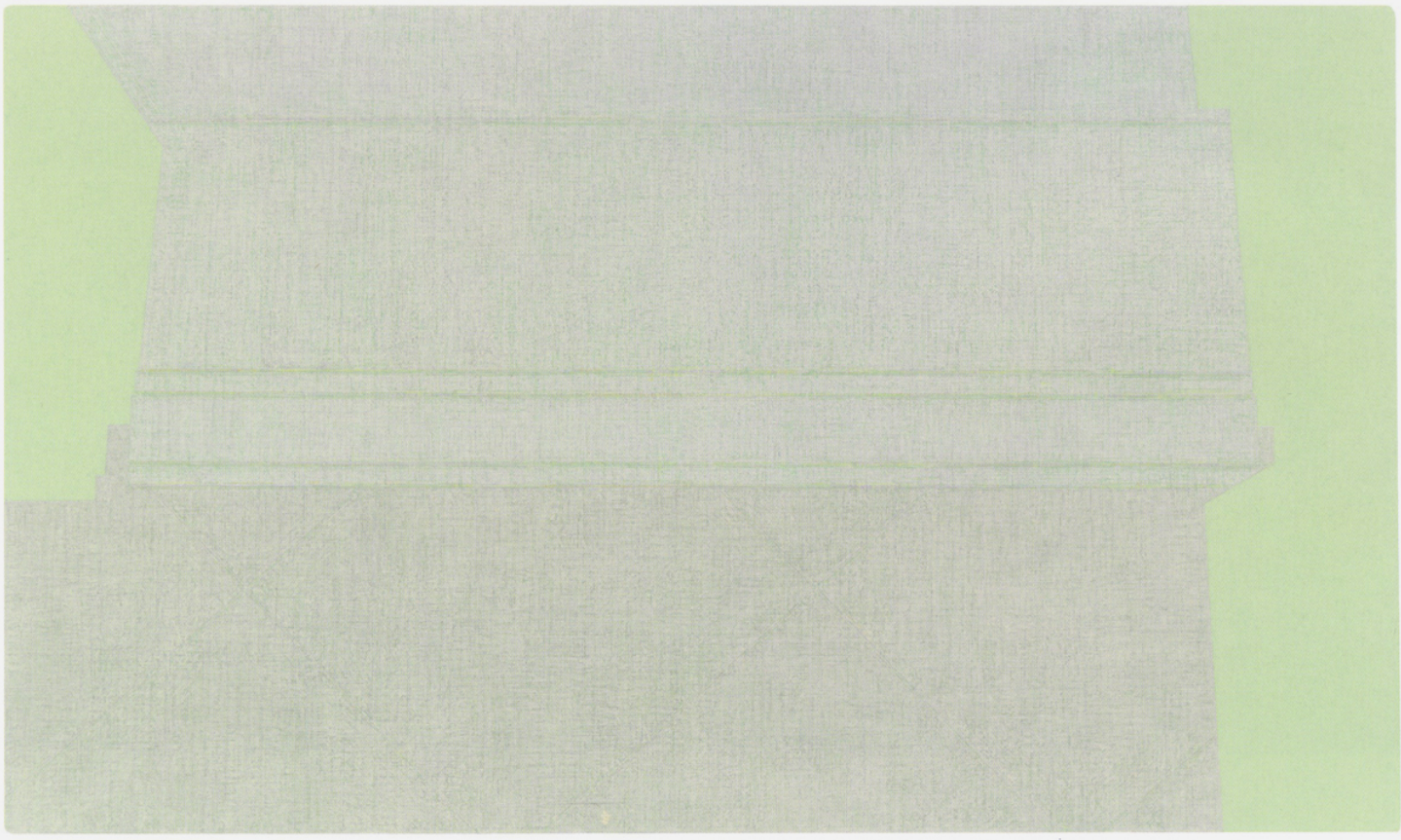


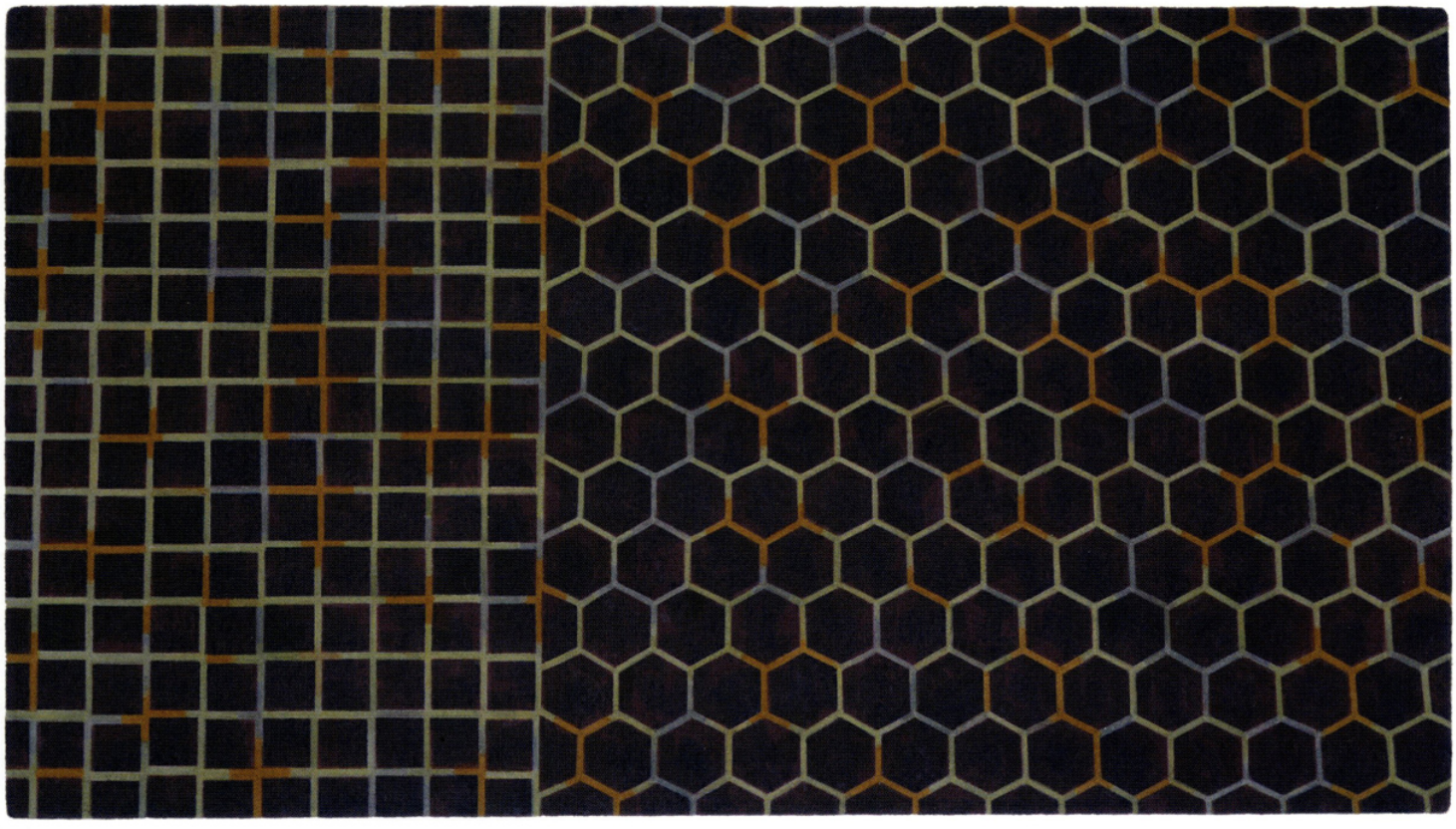
not far off. The question, for any beholder of Fish's work, is how to understand those debts.

One possible answer is that those debts are themselves on the order of an attempted reinvestment, a sustained testing and reordering of the strategies and tropes of modernist abstraction against the claims of what Fish calls "the everyday." This commitment is not a matter of notionally quotidian materials: she uses oil paints, not house paints, and remains within the tradition of the stretched rectangular canvas. Rather, it has to do with a certain stance to which Fish aspires: one of willed presentness or active attentiveness to the most seemingly ordinary trappings and settings of daily life, as embodied in the found patterns and configurations of her domestic environment. Rooted in the sense that nothing is less obvious than the ordinary—or, indeed, that "homeliness" is far from given—Fish's work can at times appear positively uncanny, both in its displacement of and fixation on her found subjects and in its subtle estrangement of certain formal paradigms of 20th-century painting. Closer examination nonetheless makes clear that such estrangement is but a means to an end: a way of refreshing vision, and thus enabling new and more reflective relations to her pictorial means and motifs alike. Inflected by Minimalism, but never quite minimalist, Fish's subjects invite allegorical readings, her subjects serving not simply to archive the house but also to figure the complex and contingent position of painting today.

"Embedment"

The term "embedment" is one I take directly from Fish, who uses it repeatedly in conversation about her work. Central to her thinking about the "Thresholds," the idea appears to have found an early, emblematic focus already in Fish's first sustained series related to the North Hermitage house: 13 canvases (and many more drawings) collectively titled "Entry" (1997-2001). A key painting from that series hangs in the studio alongside the current works in progress, and helped pave the way for them both formally and philosophically.

The "Entry" paintings do several key things. First, and somewhat roughly put, they show Fish offering a specific version—but also correction—of modernist abstraction's undoing of the traditional distinction between figure and ground. Much of her work of this time privileges motifs tending toward the repetitive and the allover: bricks, shingles, linoleum or ceramic tiles. Such motifs suggest a de-hierarchizing impulse in which every element matters equally, an impetus shared as well by Mondrian, Noland and Stella, to cite just those painters to whom I compared Fish earlier. But the found-mosaic motif of the "Entry" paintings also does something else: it conjures a mode of construction that has less to do with covering a notionally separable surface than with embedding units in a matrix.



Entry [Fragment One] Negative, 1998, oil on canvas, 11½ by 20½ inches.

This association is reinforced by Fish's account of her painting practice, which she casts as a matter of alternately "building up" and "pressing in" multiple paint layers. What she seems to want, in so working, is for the paint to appear embedded in the resulting surface like, say, tiles in mastic. Method and motif appear inextricable. Also worth noting, in this connection, is the attention lavished throughout "Entry" on the depicted grout: increasingly multicolored and lively as the series progresses, this is the detail where Fish departs most obviously from fidelity to her source, as if celebrating grout's ability to bind elements laterally, and the way it makes a surface of thickness.

That the allover grounds throughout the "Entry" group are based on a *floor*—one more of many implicit puns in Fish's practice—points toward a further aspect of "Entry" that the later "Thresholds" extend and radicalize. Fish's subjects effectively ground her painting not in any metaphysical essence—"painting itself"—but in the multiple, banal and often makeshift-seeming interior "grounds" of her everyday environment. (Her painting, we might say, keeps one foot perpetually "outside" itself.) The floor of "Entry," for example, is offered in part as "a floor like so many others, surprisingly common in houses and storefronts built during the early part of [the 20th] century"[1]; and the basic motifs of the later "Thresholds" are, if anything, even more ubiquitous. Nonetheless, her attentive remaking of these motifs betrays an intense fascination with the structural irregularities peculiar to each: the staggered joins of horizontal and vertical planks; the varying thicknesses of the planks themselves; the minutely exact cropping of hand-laid tiles, made to follow the most irregular border or fill the narrowest crevice; and most strikingly perhaps, the surprisingly differentiated silhouettes of the doorjambs.

Finally, and no less crucially, "Entry" seeks to put its ground beneath our feet. Fish is adamant about not wanting her works to appear simply as inert architectural fragments or bits of pattern, seeking instead to activate them visually. So, for example, throughout the "Entry" series and the "Thresholds" alike, each work has built into it subtle suggestions of an embodied and mobile gaze: the horizontals and verticals of the depicted patterns never quite square with the framing edges of the canvas, and the motifs are at times subtly foreshortened. Fish claims no particular stake in illusionism, seeing it "as a means to something else," and here it might be said to function primarily as a way of inscribing her motifs within acts of perception. For the beholder, too, such effects result in a sense of bodily implication—indeed, and increasingly in the "Thresholds," of physical displacement through space.

Adjacency

This leads us to another key figure in Fish's work, "adjacency," which first comes to the fore in her second major group after "Entry," the 10 "Living Rooms," of 2001-05. Fish has described these paintings as "floating out into plan"—pulling back from particular surfaces of the home so as to survey its overall layout. Working, now, not from photographs or tracings but from a blueprint, Fish devoted herself to painting the configurations of interior rooms, one per canvas, each depicted with what she in a contemporary note describes as "the threshold space(s) to any adjoining room or passageway."[2] Depicted in a deep pine green and set into larger fields of a flat but suggestively fleshy pink, the spaces are shown at 1:7 scale, their orientations signaled by the relation of the whole to one of two edges: closer to the upper edge for a southern-facing room, nearer the bottom for a northern-facing room.

Where "Entry" at once prolonged and displaced the modernist interest in the ground of painting, the "Living Rooms" transform from within the idea of the modernist series. Fish does this by building adjacency into each canvas, as if contiguity could no longer be a merely contingent fact about these paintings but had necessarily to become a condition actively assumed within each. Fish's choice of subject proves strategically crucial to this end. Depicting a room, each canvas is also analogized *to* a room: a place defined by its communication with other spaces, and whose "threshold space(s) to any adjoining room or passageway" are therefore integral to its structure. One moves from one room/canvas to the next, trying to make sense of their mutual but interrupted relations within the nested wholes of house and series.

That new emphasis is further enhanced, formally, by the emphatic flatness of each individual canvas. With their truing of forms to the framing rectangle, diagrammatic configurations and use of flat color fields (an aspect reprised in the bracket shapes in the "Thresholds"), the "Living Rooms" deploy a range of venerable and familiar strategies by which modernist painting since Cubism has—to speak like the critic Clement Greenberg—declared the literal flatness of the support. The effect is of a thoroughgoing refusal of projection: there is, ironically, no "living room" here that the beholder might imaginatively occupy. (In reading Fish's title as at least partly ironic, I take it as well as an oblique and possibly unintentional allusion to Greenberg's well-known ruminations on "homeless representation."[3])

Nonetheless, and as these remarks have begun already to suggest, Fish's adjacency is not the sheer order of Minimalist objects arranged—as Donald Judd so famously put it—"one thing after another." Each of Fish's "Living Rooms" reveals a highly particular structure, intriguingly crenellated and asymmetrical; and each is adorned with a range of +, -, L- and T-shaped symbols denoting not just specific features but particular aspects of Fish's own experience within that space (to wit: artificial light sources, movements across thresholds, activities within rooms or at the thresholds, and natural light entering from windows), as if to insist that each room is used or at any rate navigated in a different way. Likewise, each seems to demand a specific reckoning—indeed, a decipher-

ing—from the beholder, a part of whose engagement with the work depends, precisely, on his making sense of that structure.

Another word about the symbols. Critic Terry R. Myers has linked them convincingly to Mondrian's plus-and-minus pictures of 1913-17.[4] Just as importantly, they might be seen as working actively *against* the paintings' closure effects, their overall squeezing-out of illusionistic depth in favor of a new tautness of surface. Where the latter feature can appear to shut the beholder out, these minute and surprisingly incandescent figures (Myers describes them as "set into the painting almost like jewels") no less insistently draw one in, inviting a closer look and at least momentarily halting passage to the next work. They are, as it were, lights left on for us—tiny flares suggesting that one slow down and stay awhile.

Exposure

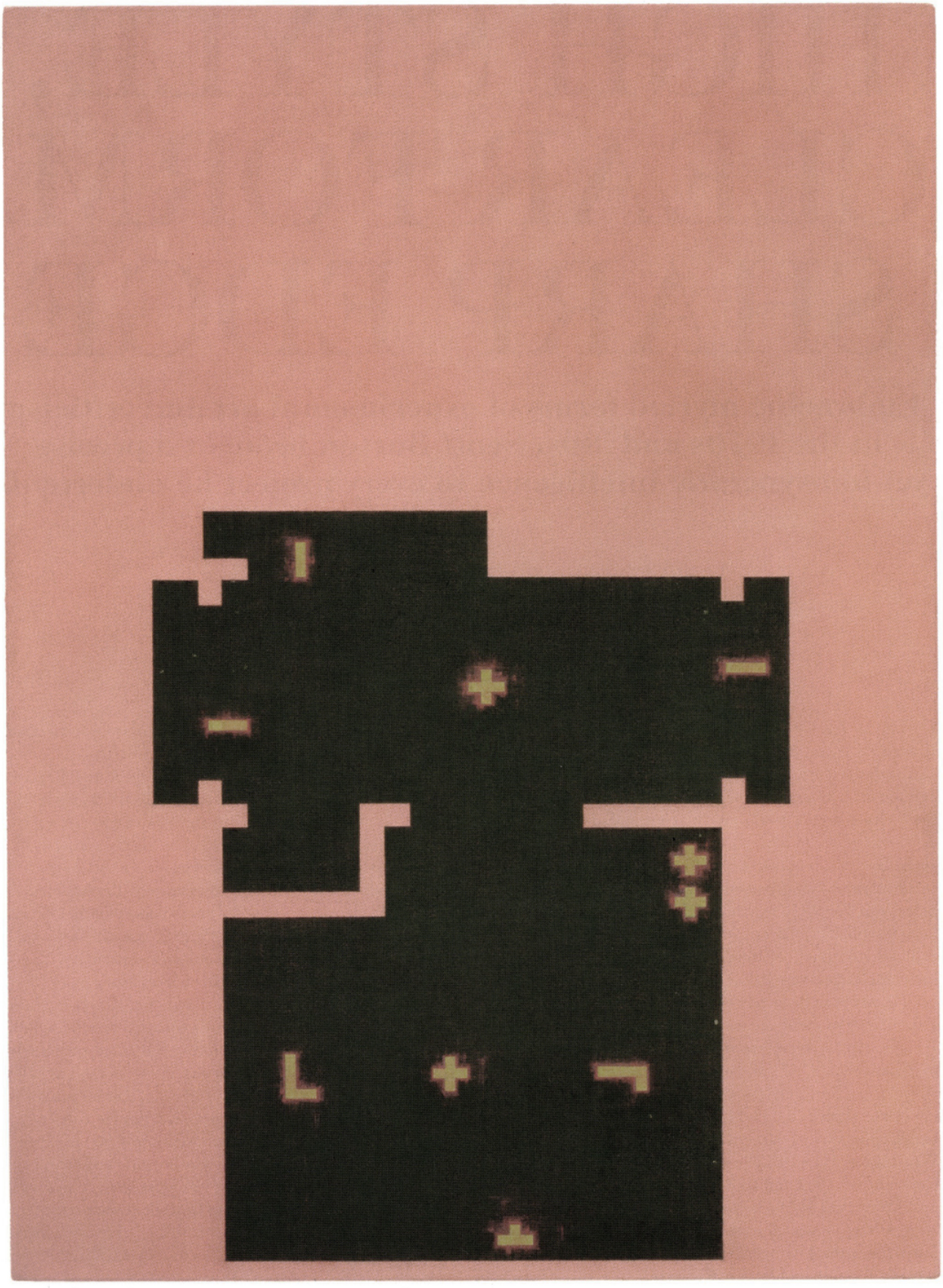
The last figure I want to explore—and which returns us to the "Thresholds"—I associate with the very first work Fish showed me, not in her studio but en route to it, in her living room. Completed in 2009, *Lumine II, Northwest (Parhelion)* is in part a reworking of a 17th-century painting by Jacob Elbfas (itself believed to be a copy of a 16th-century original, now lost, by Urban Målare) in Stockholm, a postcard of which Fish keeps taped to a studio wall. Known simply as the *Parhelion*, Elbfas's painting depicts the sudden, fleeting appearance, one April morning in 1535, of a scattering of sun halos—luminous circles and arcs—in the Stockholm sky. Fish has translated the atmospheric event into her domestic idiom, substituting a double-headed light fixture (located in her bedroom) for the sun. This appears suspended and as if casting an elongated shadow within an otherwise gray field in which the only other event is a row of hexagonal halos, each side depicted in a different color of the spectrum, which appears roughly one third of the way up from the bottom edge. More halos originally were scattered throughout the field and painted over subsequently; many are still visible as slightly upraised outlines.[5]

Something of an "oddball image" within Fish's oeuvre, because unsupported by any larger painting group, *Lumine II* nonetheless is a painting about which she claims to have been thinking a great deal recently, and without which the "Thresholds" likely would not exist—or would exist quite differently. Looked at from the perspective of those later works, it might be seen as playing upon modernist tropes of enlightenment, lucidity and—perhaps most infamously—"opticality" in ways that go to the heart of Fish's present vision of her enterprise. Crucially, the painting does this in a way that also gathers up anew the ideas of embedment and adjacency.

One of the most striking of Fish's translations, after the displacement of sun as light fixture, concerns her choice of a fixture that is itself double. It is not just that the halos are "beside" this fixture (figuratively if not in fact—"*parhelion*" meaning beside the sun, next to it); this fixture is also, as it were primordially, one thing beside another. The tidy row of repeating if variously rotated hexagons, so different from the canvas-spanning and mutually bisecting arcs of the Stockholm painting, only reinforces that effect—and so underscores Fish's association, familiar from the "Living Rooms," of painting's flatness with matters of adjacency and contiguity. But just as the most striking of those hexagons appear stamped *on* the surface, closer examination also reveals otherwise invisible hexagons we then understand as literally embedded (indeed materially encrusted) *in* that surface. That these hexagons so insistently recall the tiles of "Entry"—a point Fish says dawned on her only in the course of prolonged work on the painting—further associates them with ideas of embedment. What has changed is the persistence with which the two effects—adjacency and embedment—jostle each other mutually, demanding as they do the painting be read both as surface and as thickness, divided between illusion (immaterial halos) and the most insistent materiality (encrusted shapes). For Fish, painting appears in both lights, and each light is also a darkening or obscuring of what the other shows. Foregoing transparency, *Lumine II* suggests a more difficult vision of painting's exposure as always predicated upon a constitutive reserve.

The "Thresholds" begin here. Like *Lumine II*, and far more than the "Entry" or "Living Room" works, they play upon a tension between the subtle illusionism of the central motifs and the emphatic re-marking of the surface by the unmodulated bracket shapes. But they pick up as well on ideas of division and displacement arguably implied in that earlier painting's multiple, hexagonal spectra, each pair of bracket shapes drawing upon one of the six colors of the earlier *parhelia* (thus the limitation of the series to six paintings). The diffraction and dispersal of light in the spectrum is therefore refigured as a dispersal of *Lumine II* in this new series. As if color were a mark of light's appearing always already divided, impure, in the world of finite and particular things. Like painting. ○

1. Julia Fish, "Entry—Fragments" (1999), www.juliafish.com.
2. Cited in Terry R. Myers, "Painting as House and Home," *Julia Fish: Living Rooms*, exh. cat., New York, Anthony Grant Gallery, 2005, n.p.
3. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," 1962. This is the same essay in which Greenberg notoriously declares that "the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and . . . the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one"—a statement often cited as having helped set the stage for Minimalism. John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 131-32.
4. Myers, "Painting as House and Home," n.p.
5. Many of the features just noted—from the domestic light source to the gray field to the encaustic-like quality of Fish's ground with its embedded, repeating halos—recall the art of Jasper Johns, a key figure for Fish (as well as the inspiration for Greenberg's ruminations on "homeless representation"). A closer examination of Fish's relationship to Johns begs for more sustained treatment and could be the subject of another essay.



Living Rooms: North—Two, with lights, action, 2003-05, oil on canvas, 32½ by 23¾ inches.