

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Janet Fish and the Primacy of Perception

by [Patrick Neal](#) on March 10, 2014



Janet Fish, “Ice Cream Sundae” (2004), oil on canvas, 50 x 60 inches
(All images Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York).

Considering the art of the painter Janet Fish, who currently has works spanning fifteen years on display at DC Moore Gallery, I found myself pulling books off the shelf by the philosopher [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#). Fish’s work exemplifies the sort of “Primacy of Perception” that Merleau-Ponty espoused during his lifetime. A [phenomenologist](#), he wrote of an inextricable

connection between the body and the outside world where we simultaneously act and are acted upon. He saw perception tied to a primordial intuition that backgrounds our constant sensory absorption of the lifeworld or [Lebenswelt](#).

Ponty's famous essay "[Cezanne's Doubt](#)" considers the Post-Impressionist artist's distinct project of painting the landscape — an amalgamation of the artist's burgeoning ideas of fusing Impressionism with classicism that came out of an unfiltered coexistence with nature.



Janet Fish, "Provence" (1995), oil on linen, 50 x 50 inches.

Other Modernist painters working within the still life genre and relying on visual perception, would explore equivocations in size, distance, matter, memory, and the metaphysics of objects. More straightforward in her approach, Janet Fish, known for her effulgent still-life paintings, paints with a sharp focus, her objects solidly planted in front of us.

Fish's singular achievement is the depiction of light as a materializing force — particularly transparency in the form of colored glass. Over the years, she has explored the structural and expressive possibilities of spectral light on ordinary objects: blown glass, plastic bags and wrappers, flower petals, ribbon candy, gummy bears, fleshy fruits, etc. In fact, with their opulence and rich details, her works harken back even further to the excesses of [Golden Age Dutch still-life painting](#). A work in the show like “Provence” from 1995 is a vintage Fish still life — a pattern of rock candy, glassware, and clear plastic in predominant yellow and pink hues.



Janet Fish, “Autumn Dusk” (1990), oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches.

In delineating her still-life objects, Fish draws with the paint in such a direct way the viewer practically *feels* the artist transcribing what is in front of her; we experience the decisions as to how she organizes her compositions. It is exhilarating to witness the tangle of fall foliage branches in “Autumn Dusk” (1990) and the ravishing scarlet and phthalo palette. Even when she unloads an expanse of paint to lay down an area of sky, a descriptive linear mark is never far away. Fish considers her items carefully exploring their complementarity and thematic possibilities — you sense how she relates the grooves on a walnut’s shell to a cantaloupe skin or the rivulets and veins in a cabbage leaf.

In different works there is an all-over interconnectivity between the objects that acts to tell a story but is also mechanical, literally stitching together shadows or what is solid or see-through. In “Ingrid’s Clementine with Tulips” (1999), Fish makes the inspired decision to throw tulips across a table so that they fuse and flow with the colored yarns and pompoms spilling out of an open drawer below. In “Anderson’s Fairy Tales” (1999), she scatters puzzle pieces across a table leading the eye to travel around but also take up the theme of story time and children’s games. “Ice Cream Sundae” (2004) is a zigzag of shadows and crinkled cellophane where Fish

excavates the myriad surface rhythms; folded grooves in a crepe paper parasol, the rippled twirl of ice cream in a fluted sundae glass.



Janet Fish, "Ingrid's Clementine with Tulips" (1999), oil on canvas, 50 x 70 inches.

Fish enlarges her subject matter motifs so that the descriptive paint handling is front and center. The featured objects are always in a shallow space sitting on a grounded plane with a nearby perpendicular back wall making it is easy to locate and lock them in. In "Black Tray and Daffodils" (1995), the back wall's curtain leads into the underlying tablecloth and Fish is simultaneously looking across and hovering over the arrangement. Here, teacups, tray, and curtain are adorned with pastel flowers, easily mingling with a dish of taffy and vase of daffodils. Moving through the viscous paint that renders the abstract interplay of backlit, reflected and distorted light, the viewer absorbs Fish's physical construction of solid objects.



Janet Fish, "Black Tray and Daffodils" (1995), oil on linen, 50 x 60 inches.

Fish, along with the painter [William Bailey](#), are both important figures to come out of Yale School of Art having invigorated a long figurative tradition. And, at the moment, both artists have concurrent shows in Chelsea that include old and new works giving a snapshot of their careers. On the occasion of his show at Betty Cunningham, Bailey, in an interview published in the [Huffington Post](#), mentions a wealth of figurative painting being done by young artists, "at a time when painting is being viewed more and more as a niche activity" and "with little recognition among the museum curators and the galleries."



Janet Fish, "Andersen's Fairy Tales" (1999), oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches.

Reading this brought back sentiments I had around the Museum of Modern Art's [*Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*](#) exhibition in 1997. Glancing at the catalogue of that exhibit, the show began with a solid exploration of early 20th century still life, then opened up an increasingly elastic definition of the genre culminating in works by the usual cast of art stars (Warhol, Richter, Sherman). Paintings by Fish and Bailey were nowhere to be found despite still life having

occupied a central place in their lifelong bodies of work.

Seeing Fish's show at DC Moore is a reminder of such art world schisms. But there is also an alternative narrative that allows for advancements that build on long-standing traditions within painterly painting. In light of Fish's achievement, when formalism is often considered dispensable, I often wonder if one of the most radical things an artist can do in 2014 is make a still-life painting.

[Janet Fish: Panoply](#) continues at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 15.

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