

REVIEWS

Janet Fish

DC MOORE

“The light would be through everything and energy through everything,” Janet Fish declared in 1988, and this is indeed what we find in her wondrous works: Light suffuses each of the nineteen still lifes that were on view in this exhibition, all made over the ten-year period between 1968 and 1978, which proved to be formative for the artist.

The illumination is rapturous, immersive, mystical: It suffuses the transparent glass jars in *Stuffed Peppers*, 1970, and penetrates the wrapped transparent plastic in *Box of Peaches*, 1972. Energized by light, these everyday things are brought to dramatic life.

Physics tells us that light is electromagnetic radiation to which the eye reacts: Fish’s eye is electrified by it. As her work reminds us, all the colors of the rainbow are latent in pure white light, and her paintings of glasses of water come close to conveying such light—materializing its immateriality, as it were. Glass and water dematerialize so as to materialize pure illumination. It is as if light and substance are interchangeable, all one mysterious substance.

Importantly, Fish is acutely conscious of color. In *Maud’s Glasses*, 1976, both glass and water are alive with a heavenly sky blue. The liquid in *Windex Bottles*, 1971–72, is even more sublimely blue—certainly bluer than the cleaning fluid usually is. The pears in *Untitled (Two Packages of Pears)*, 1969, and the apples in *Box of Four Red Apples*, 1969–70, are wrapped so tightly in thin plastic

that their colors seem imprinted on, even embedded in, this substance. It is as though the plastic was the wax in which objects leave an impression, to refer to the metaphor Aristotle used to explain perception. Fish, after all, is a master of perception, of what has been called “creative apperception,” perception in which the perceiver becomes inseparable from the perceived, having invested her being spontaneously and totally in it.

Importantly, Fish’s still lifes eschew photorealistic verisimilitude. In fact, there is an ingenious, oddly meticulous and controlled gestural spontaneity and freshness in the work, a self-expressivity that makes them more spellbinding. Some are also oddly Abstract Expressionist, with constructions and connotations of colors and shapes, the fruit and vegetables sometimes “expressionistically” set in agitated motion by the distorting mirror of the plastic.

Remarking that still-life painting is “as much painting *life* as anything else . . . because it’s not dead,” Fish again and again depicts the water and fruits of life—grapes as well as peaches and peppers—and, poignantly, flowers. In the pastel *Daisies*, 1973, we find two blossoms in a red-tinted glass. It is set on a pale sky-blue table with a grass-green background, all of it flooded with light, suggesting the triumph of life over death—her things can never die. The humble hard facts of secular life are softened, almost mystically melted, transubstantiated into sacred objects.

—Donald Kuspit



Janet Fish, *Windex Bottles*, 1971–72, oil on linen, 49½ × 29¾".