

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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To Live and To Paint

BY LYLE REXER

AND THERE SHE WAS. ALL AROUND ME, PRESENT AS a smile, a grimace, a voice, a touch. The picture said so — *FOR THERE SHE WAS, 1998* — a magnificent painting about memory and identity without being “about” any of those things. But who was she? And how, when I came to look for her, would I find her when there was so much of her, too much, even. The sense of her would come only in a gathering of impressions, a sifting and sorting, a recollection of what happened when we were together through the pictures and continued to happen. And of course, she would already have moved on, and everything I sensed and thought would have to be revised, effaced, scratched out, painted over the next time.

Not to be confusing: The only Louise Fishman I know is the Louise Fishman created by these pictures and the others I remember of hers. I know she is about sixty, which means her past is longer than her future, and that’s all I need to know because her paintings give me the contours of that past, as it is taken up, revised, criticized and transcended. In other words, I take as a starting point the strange remark of Novalis about objects coming to perceive themselves through their subjects. Pictures paint the artist in the process of attempting to seize an ungraspable immediacy, the passing and irrecoverable. When I search for Louise Fishman, it is a progress I am

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trying to intuit, in which individual works are less important than an evolution, and moments replace monuments. To write about this means not placing alongside the pictures a something to which they are compared, some *terminus ad quem*, model, analogy, ideal. To write about them is to try to let them be. It is to know the person I am with, so that the best I can say at any moment (picture) is "This was she."

THAT'S NOT SO EASY. ONE REVIEWER NOTED about an exhibition of work just two years ago that it seemed like a group show, Fishman unedited and uncertain, or rather at a point of stasis. These 12 mostly large canvases won't entirely banish that sense because they mark returns and reengagements. But their force is forward, courageous. Some are lyrical, some reflective, some attack the paint with both hands and any tool available, some arrest activity with a flat calligraphic stroke. I keep in mind what Lisa Liebman wrote about Fishman's doleful, reticent geometries of a decade ago, that "they are not a fixed point of arrival." That's life! And what I find so moving about this exhibition is the evidence that painting is cognate with living. Wisdom lies in how much you can embrace and unite at any moment.

FOR THERE SHE WAS expresses this with a fullness the other paintings don't match. They have other connections to make, other energies to rekindle. I like the gummy red and blue impasto of *ROSA CHINENSIS*, 1998 because it's so much one kind of experience, unshadowed even when it turns to mud. Or I like the small *MUSCLE OF MIRACLE*, 1998 tucked in a gallery cul de sac, because it's ghostly and because it makes a connection between the calligraphic stroke and action painter's attack. No sign can be arbitrary when it is mediated through the body and the hand. Miracle of muscle!

FOR THERE SHE WAS knows all this and more. Its whole mottled and complicated blue-and-gray surface acknowledges Fishman's perennial practice of ecological effacement. Paint is laid down, scraped back, flattened and reapplied. You want to peer through the deposits, past the depredations of time and experience, to some original perception, but you find yourself caught up in the visual interplay of past and present, the persistence of a background red, intricate and beautiful as the lichen on the wall of a Japanese temple. But that was then and that's not where the action is. The action is on the surface, the black stroke, the sweep of blue. In the here and now, the

controlled and the accidental meet, the willed and the fortuitous collide, the living and the dead shake hands.

An attempt to recover a primal energy, a decisive, direct and unrestricted action of the body is what I find as the reason for these pictures. There are so many layers of action and retraction in a life and career that freedom seems almost an impossibility, yet it is sought in these paintings again and again. Fishman has offered us a sign of the will to live and paint in *FOR THERE SHE WAS*. Marking the canvas are several thick dollops of black pigment, unmarked by the palette knife. This is the original condition of a painting. It is a desecration of uniform, undifferentiated space, yet also immediately full of potential. The hand is engaged. It's too late to turn back. This is what she does. This is where she starts.

Louise Fishman at Cheim & Reid Gallery runs through November 14.

CHEIM & REID