

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Beverly Fishman: "Pills, Protest, and Piracy"

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Beverly Fishman. *Untitled (Opioid Addiction)*, 2016. Urethane paint on wood; 62 x 62 x 2 inches.  
Photo: PD Rearick. Courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation.

Last month, boats of artists docked at the Venice Biennale to protest the Guggenheim's questionable global labor practices. Like pirates, the Occupy-inspired syndicalists established a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), what artist-activist (and *Brooklyn Rail* contributor) Hakim Bey suggests is a spontaneous social community of resistance. But in the late 19th century, long before the theorization of such performative zones, the Neo-Impressionists pursued similar ends through formalist means, tying together color theory, new discoveries on optical physics, and anarcho-communist politics. Today, that earlier anarchic aesthetic is enjoying a resurgence, particularly noticeable in the recent pill paintings by Beverly Fishman.

Fishman's acidic paintings of bestselling prescription drugs act formally as protest art, rebranding Big Pharma, the pharmacracy, and the so-called "therapeutic state" that dominates late capitalist society. A "data pirate," Fishman mines the Internet to appropriate pill iconography (the shapes,

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forms, and scoring patterns of pills), which she uses to fabricate medium- and large-scale panel reliefs. Fishman then industrially applies discordant chemical pigments, which are polished to a reflective sheen when dry. Whereas Signac, Seurat, and Pissarro saw “optical mixing” as a metaphor for a harmonious anarchist society, Fishman draws on her extensive color training at Yale to achieve semantic dissonance: by culture jamming, Fishman tampers with the highly stylized corporate identities integrated into pill design. There is no nature here, and no natural order that can be controlled through science and technology. Instead, the resulting paintings subvert the assumptions of reliability that biotech firms want us to associate with their medicines. The colors range from the sickly to the manic to the ecstatic, bringing to light the intense side-effects that so many medical treatments produce.

Simultaneously, paintings like “Untitled (Opioid Addiction)” (2015) and “Untitled (Depression)” (2015) indict the global art institutions within which Fishman exhibits. Their minimal forms masquerade as post-painterly abstraction and hard-edge painting, styles that despotically lord over modern art collections. By doing so, they rehearse the modern ambitions for both autonomy and vanguardism, but by anchoring those forms in culturally specific medical technologies, the paintings refute any of those late-Modern, transhistorical claims. Modernist presence is thus always infected in Fishman’s work, suffused with a postmodernist critique of the logo, the advertising icon, and spectacular society in general.

The historically specific pharmaceutical references also bring Fishman’s works into a diagnostic relationship with the psychology of the contemporary art industry. For example, the drug names themselves divulge several behavioral disorders that afflict art-going glitterati. Her portfolio, replete with antidepressants, antipsychotics, anxiolytics, and mood stabilizers, points to the stereotypical syndromes that mark the art world: histrionic displays (the Met Gala), narcissistic fantasies (Biesenbach’s Instagram), antisocial attacks (art criticism), even borderline or bipolar swings (studio practice). While Fishman critiques multiple art industry constituents, she must deal with the widespread distrust in the efficacy of that protest. After all, as Alexander Alberro contends, the art industry is cunning enough “both to withstand and to incorporate even the most trenchant of critiques.”

Fishman avoids that pitfall. Her punk-inspired colorization incites a phenomenal confusion and an immediatism that recruits spectators as temporary aesthetic collaborators. Through the live perception of her works, spectators attain what Hakim Bey describes as “an extreme awareness of *immediacy*, as well as the mastery of some direct means of implementing this awareness as play, immediately (at once) and immediately (without mediation).” She attains this immediacy through carefully calibrated techniques: the high-gloss finish of the paintings reflects the spectator’s image into the brightly colored geometries, offering a chance for embodied play akin to the funhouse mirror. This effect is heightened by the fluorescent halos cast on the gallery wall, as the beveled edges are painted to create auras that vibrate and hover. Finally, like a more outrageous extension of Albers’s color theory, Fishman often includes within the same painting hues that differ so slightly that they cause a visceral perceptual flux in the eye of the beholder. Much like their Neo-Impressionist predecessors, these paintings use color as event—a place where the body and society are formed. But unlike Signac and his crew, Fishman does not use

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abstraction to signify a better citizen and commonwealth to come. Instead, Fishman insists that contemporary painting remains a viable arena for protest and dismantling: a site where one can pursue a phenomenology of our contemporary medicalized and industrialized condition.



Beverly Fishman, "Untitled (Opioid Addiction)" (2015). Urethane paint on wood, 60 x 60 x 2 1/4".

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