



"Beverly Fishman: Color-Coding Big Pharma"

By Zachary Small

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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.

From the pillbox, Beverly Fishman chooses colors with a calculating eye. A master colorist, Fishman explores the allure of intoxication: the fluorescent highs of addiction and sickly tones of withdrawal. With her vivid and enticingly colored pill-like works, Fishman formulates a response to the role of aesthetics within the pharmaceutical industry. She appropriates the visual vocabulary of postindustrial minimalism to delve into the psychology of addiction. For an addict, the subtle yet familiar color, shape, and packaging of pills can trigger a biological response, a craving for the next fix that soon morphs into a twisted brand loyalty. As a result, prescription drugs like Oxycodone, Demerol, and Vicodin maintain a cult following, which leads us to an essential question raised by Fishman's work: what turns the consumer into the consumed?

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Fishman leads viewers on an exploration of the nexus between medical and visual conditioning. What are the sensory responses leading to addiction, and how are they hardwired in the human brain? Works such as *Untitled (Symptoms Associated with Taking Opiates)* exemplify the artist's vibrant color palette: bright, ecstatic, neon. Fishman replicates colors used in advertisements to catch the viewer's eye. Initial responses to these colors bring familiar associations: neon yellows and hot pinks are filled with electricity, a symbolic nod to the highest highs of stimulants; electric blues and bright greens have a calming effect that visually mimics that of anti-anxiety drugs. Where Fishman excels is in restraint, for the brighter colors are often relegated to the outlines of her pill sculptures. As a practitioner of color theory, she recalls some lessons of modernism and minimalism, exercising restraint for maximum effect. Her neon colors are like candy coatings on her pills, hiding darker cores that represent the sinister side of addiction and withdrawal.



Beverly Fishman. *Untitled (Anxiety)*, 2016. Urethane paint on wood; 39 x 126 x 2 inches.
Private collection. Photo: PD Rearick. Courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation.

Unlike the colors in actual pills, Fishman's are not synthetically made. Harkening back to apothecaries of yore, Fishman crafts her pills from scratch, choosing her colors based on luminosity and contrast while working in the painterly tradition of artists mixing their own colors. Evoking the theory and practice of Josef Albers, Fishman believes in the power of color as an illusory force. The balancing of color and shape is a perfectionist's endeavor, and Fishman applies her passion for exactitude to parallel the dosage requirements of many pharmaceuticals; she captures the action of splitting pills by dividing her sculptures into quarters and halves. The four parts of *Untitled (Anxiety)*, for example, explore the subtle shades between pink and white. Resembling an optical illusion, the work's juxtaposition of slightly different tones allows Fishman to play with capturing the sensation of seeing a color change a shade lighter or darker before our eyes.

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

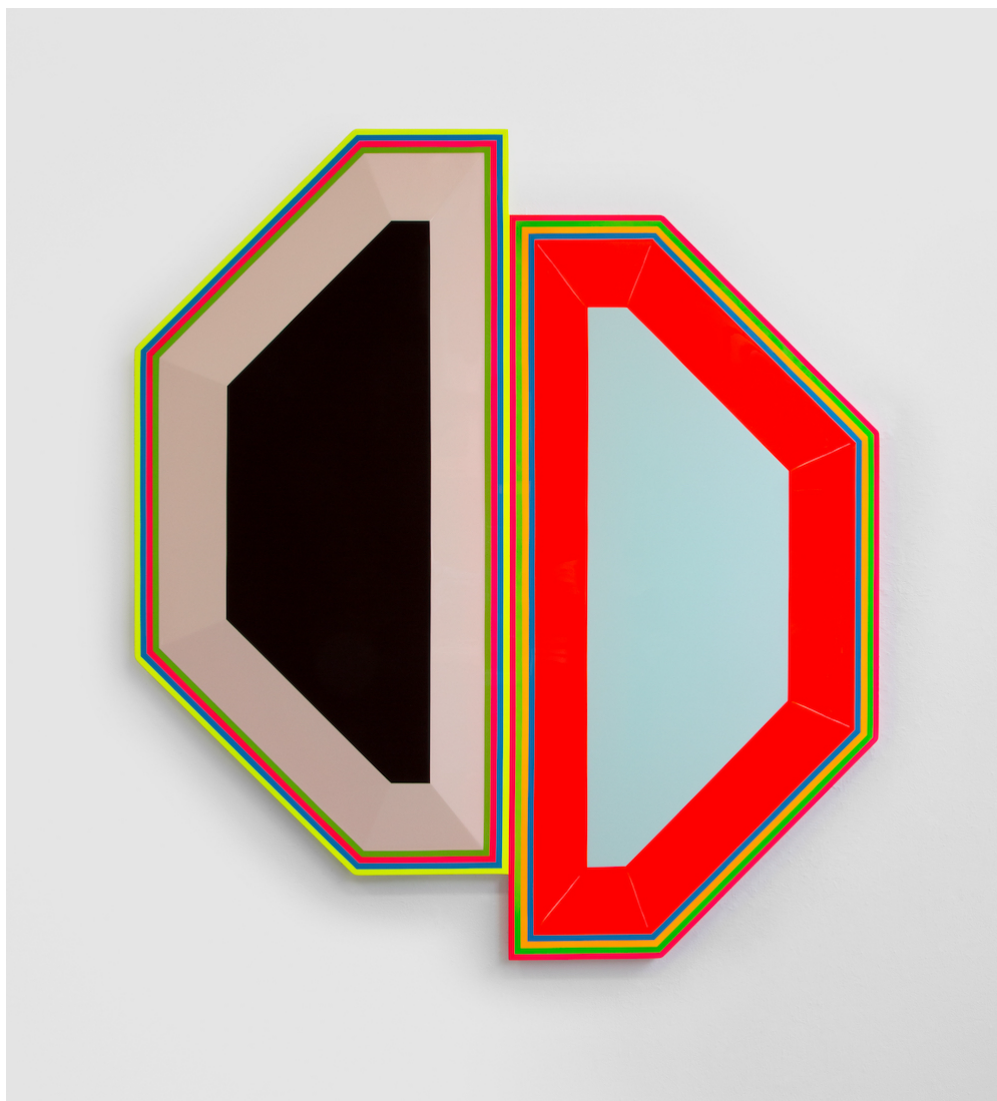
With the right concoctions, Fishman imbues her work with such vibrancy that her pills envelop viewers in her aesthetic world. The luminescent effects she creates echo her longstanding interest in glow paint, as in her earlier glow-in-the-dark ecstasy pills. Fishman allows her sculptures to glow—on the edges, as in *Untitled (Anxiety)*, and in the empty spaces of pills like *Untitled (Opioid Addiction)*—throwing a wash of color onto the gallery’s white walls. In works like the latter, the artist fills a void with nothing but the slightest suggestion of color—photons invisibly bouncing off a hard surface. Formally, Fishman recalls Mark Rothko’s investigation of color’s ambiguous relationship with space. In a Rothko painting, colors are repeatedly unseated in the picture plane, shifting between foreground, background, and middle ground. Adapting this idea to wall sculpture, Fishman’s atmospheric pigments test depth in a three-dimensional space, deconstructing through optical illusions our belief that color is a flat phenomenon.

More symbolically, the faintness of the glow hints at a dulling of the senses or shift in perception like that experienced by a drug user. The colorful haze suggests the correlation between biochemistry and color, reminiscent of ancient alchemy. In this Greco-Roman precursor to modern

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medicine, following a crude Aristotelian system called the four humors, soothsayers composed a complex dialectic aimed at connecting physical and mental illnesses with imbalances in bodily liquids; in turn, those liquids came to be associated with colors, especially dark green, red, yellow, and a murky blue. Through the signifiers of color, a doctor would prescribe treatment. Today we see the legacy of this system in the hues we associate with sickness. At the center of Fishman's pills are many of the colors mentioned above, along with black, an obvious signifier of death. These colors exert a gravitational pull, sucking up the light emanating from the colors of the pills' edges. By tapping into the visual history of medicine, Fishman obfuscates the division between the corporeal and the pharmaceutical. She successfully implicates what is at stake in an unchecked medical industry: our bodies.

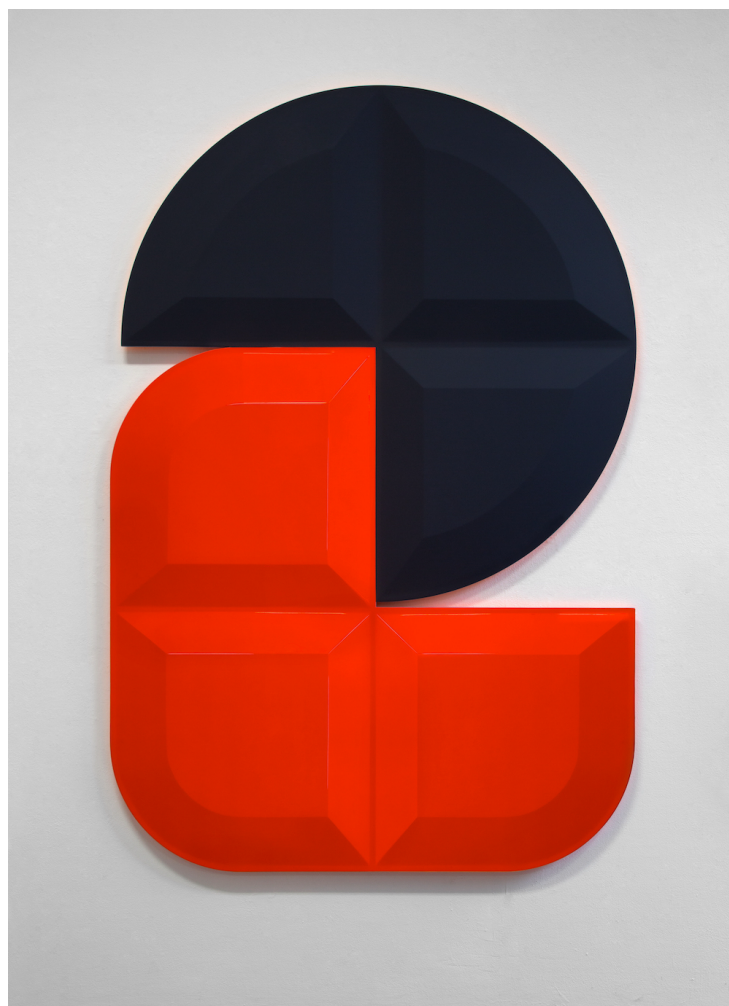


Beverly Fishman. *Untitled (Split Pill / Alcoholism)*, 2016. Urethane paint on wood; 67 x 60 x 2 inches. Kari and Nick Coburn Collection. Photo: PD Rearick. Courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation.

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For pill-takers, the fear of unknowingly ingesting dangerous drugs is very real. It underlies society's overall distrust of the drug industry. Who is to say which specific chemicals in a drug are safe and which are not? How can average consumers know if they are swallowing a placebo or the real thing? Fishman addresses the mysteries of internal medicine and questions the reliability of pharmaceuticals. Even when a capsule is split in half, it reveals nothing about the actual contents of its curatives; all we see is chemical dust. The dull monochrome tones of real pills belie their ability to alter the brain's chemistry. This irony is not lost on Fishman, who relays the divide between manufacturer and consumer. Similar to the industrial character of her color palette, Fishman's pills have a glossy, plastic finish. This is another red herring, an effect that might lead a viewer to believe her work is mass-produced in a factory. Again, Fishman has deceived us, masking the meticulously shaped wood she uses for her sculptures. Appearing completely unnatural, Fishman's pills refashion Donald Judd's preference for anonymous industrial objects into a criticism of the pharmaceutical industry's secrecy—or more acutely—the mystery inside a pill's capsule.



Beverly Fishman. *Untitled (ADHD / Opioid Cocktail)*, 2016. Urethane paint on wood; 71.75 x 48 x 2 inches.
Photo: PD Rearick. Courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation.

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Even when she splits the pills open, as in *Untitled (Alcoholism)*, Fishman does not show their specific contents; she does not detail their specific chemical components or brand names. Instead, she uses the lessons of minimalist abstraction to ask: what are we actually consuming? By alternating between brightly artificial and realistic bodily hues, Fishman through painting depicts what the pharmaceutical industry would rather hide: medicine is risk. The central divide of *Untitled (Alcoholism)* reveals an explosion of color that coats the pills' somber black and blue cores with a rapid succession of electric, candy-like hues. The dark interiors of Fishman's pills foster the paired sense of curiosity and dread that reflects the short-term highs of drug abuse with the long-term lows of addiction.

Fishman draws attention to one of this country's most insidious epidemics, prescription-drug addiction, approaching it in a non-histrionic way from the perspective of an artist and art historian. She explores the significance of color in medicine and delivers a visual code for addiction through the language of modernism, offering her viewers an access point into the psychology of addicts and the pharmaceutical companies that make them.



Beverly Fishman. *Untitled (ADHD)*, 2016. Urethane paint on wood; 60 x 180 x 2.25 inches.
Photo: PD Rearick. Courtesy of the artist and CUE Art Foundation.

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