

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

"Beverly Fishman: Something for the Pain"

By Jason Stopa

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Installation view: *Beverly Fishman: Something For The Pain*, Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, 2023.  
Courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery.

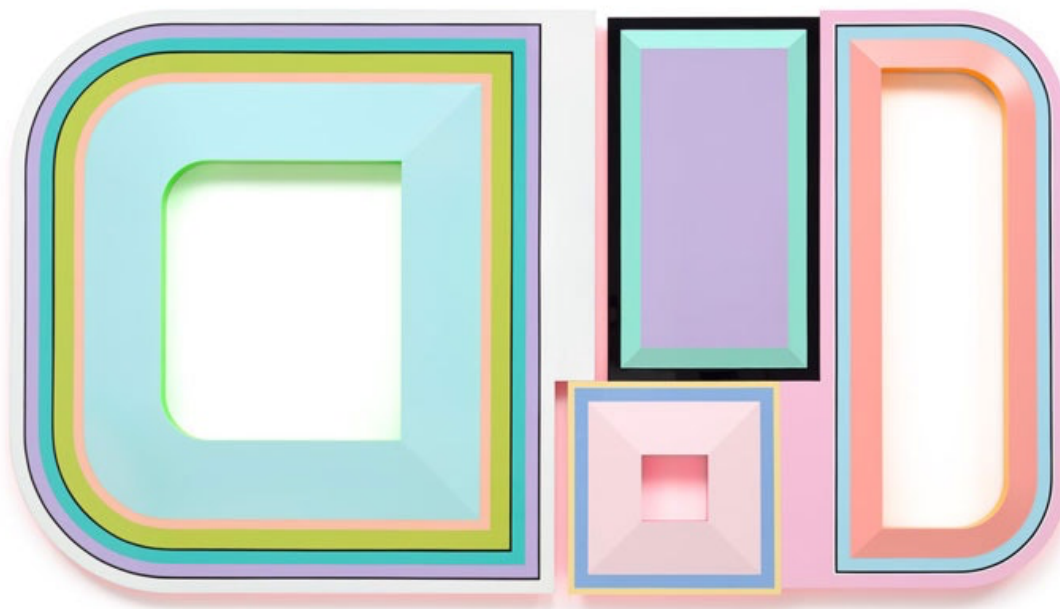
Beverly Fishman likes the look of Finish. No, not like Larry Bell and Helen Pashgian, artists associated with the Finish Fetish scene in LA in the 1960s. Though she may start from the same materialist impulse, she occupies her own territory. For starters those artists used glass, resin, enamel, and aluminum to make abstract paintings and sculptures in an effort to address the new materiality surrounding everything from car culture to consumer culture at large. Fishman applies highly saturated urethane paint to wood using geometric forms borrowed from the "neutral" design of prescription pills. In her world dualities abound. Her palette is as exuberant as it is clinical. These are referential paintings that look like hard-edge geometric abstraction—somehow they

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are both and yet neither. In her recent solo show *Something for the Pain* at Miles McEnery, Fishman introduces an empathetic reading of geometry.

Fishman began exploring the digital imaging of disease in the 1980s and 1990s. She is now concerned with the aesthetics of medicine. Works like *Untitled (Pain, Pain, ADHD)* (2022) combine three separate geometric forms to explore the positive/negative space within and around the painting. She paints a light teal, half-moon form with leaf green, bright yellow, cadmium red and black lines that outline the perimeter of the form. The half-moon's center is cut out revealing inner detailing painted in hot green. It glows within. The half-moon butts up against a deep, teal circle on the upper right, which has a pale, pink center with cadmium red and black lines on the edge. The circle rests on top of a small, white triangle with a peach center cutout. Put together it all nearly mimics a corporate logo. Fishman's color is coolly sophisticated, and her surfaces are high gloss. Both act as bait for the form, but her content does the talking.



Beverly Fishman, *Untitled (GERD, Parkinson's, Depression, Insomnia)*, 2023. Urethane paint on wood, 44 1/4 x 82 3/4 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

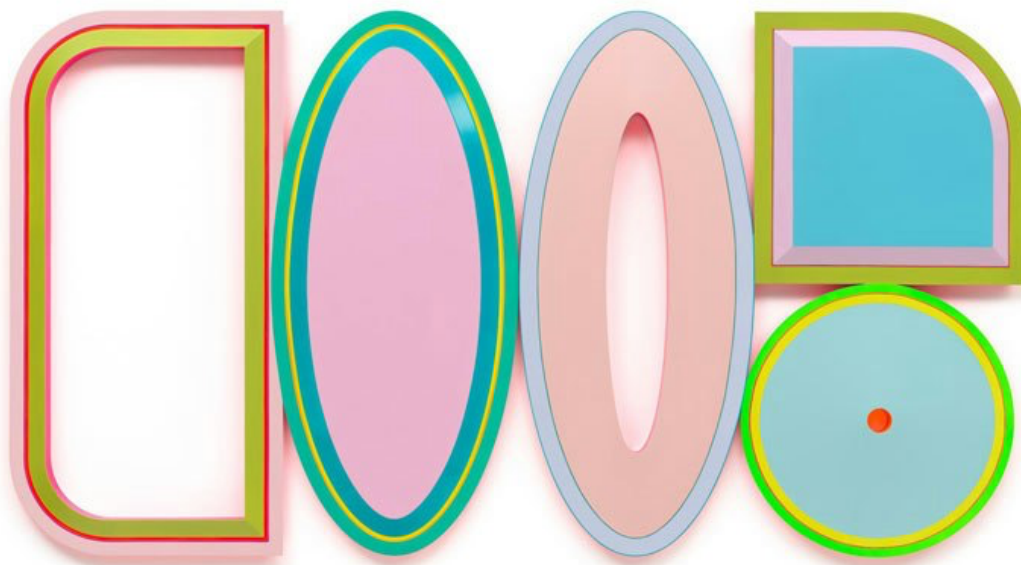
Scale and precision are important in this show. The artist's use of convex and concave form derives from the design of pills. Her use of cutout, detailed line work, painted edges, and fluorescent paint against muted color aestheticize her content. Let's face it: pill design isn't exactly all that inventive, as what's being sold is the cure, not the look of the product. Works like *Untitled (GERD, Parkinson's, Depression, Insomnia)* (2023) is one of the largest works in the show, measuring 82 inches across. Here, four adjoining rectangles painted in mostly pastel read as glyphs in an unknown alphabet of medicine. Fishman's scaling up of the pill alters our relationship

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to the pill's social and political reality, allowing the gravity of her whole project to hit home. There are plenty of large paintings in the world, some made merely for the sake of size, which may be the most American reason of all. Fishman's relationship to scale sends up prescription pills as the magical objects they are promised to be—larger than life. She takes it a step further by dressing them up in attractive color worlds, effectively pulling the veneer off their supposed neutrality. The results are slyly subversive.

This supposed neutrality is a thorny issue in abstraction and, more generally, in American public discourse. Painting, even when divorced from overt politics, is humanistic insofar as it advocates for focusing attention in a world that profits from its distribution. Geometry is the basis of the homes we live in, the architecture of the built world around us, the fabric on our backs, and the material residue of our production. It's never neutral. Fishman's show makes this evident. Her geometry is the material production we hope to keep secret, a pill taken at our most vulnerable. The more subtle takeaway in this show is that America has a failure of perspective and a failure of priorities. Here, too, scale is an issue. Take the Sackler debacle for example. The family agreed to pay \$6 billion in an opioid settlement between Purdue Pharma and various states, this figure in exchange for over 200,000 lives. Americans aren't in the streets protesting, Twitter mobs haven't canceled the Sacklers, and they aren't on trial for murder. As of 2022, the family is still worth nearly 5 billion dollars. Not too shabby. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same for the many black and brown men in prison serving lengthy sentences for mere possession thanks to Nixon's so-called War on Drugs or Clinton's 1994 crime bill. So much for perspective.



Beverly Fishman, *Untitled (Insomnia, Weight Loss, Insomnia, Opioid Addiction, Birth Control)*, 2022. Urethane paint on wood, 44 x 82 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

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Pew research statistics tell us that 63% of Americans favor universal healthcare. Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies spent over \$372 million lobbying Congress in 2022, outspending every other industry. Democracy means representation based on collective desire. The collective clearly wants single payer. Yet, the few politicians who advocate for single payer are labeled "radical," while naysayers line their pockets with cash. Others argue it's too expensive. Odd that the US routinely *finds* over 700 billion dollars a year for defense spending in its purse. So much for priorities.

That idea that a select few should benefit from the suffering of the many ought to strike most as incredibly immoral. Yet accountability is only ever selectively applied, some benign offenses are treated as despicable, while heinous ones get a pass. Contrary to what we might infer from artworld press releases, the job of an artist is not to fix social problems. An artist's job is to point at the contradictions and to hone an aesthetic that creates a context for meaning. Fishman does just that. In 2023, many communities are only recently emerging from the emotional and physical crisis of the last two and a half years, all seeking something for the pain. Fishman has tapped into the hive mind of an art world blinkered by celebrities, pandemics, and the next flashy art fair. This show redirects us to what it's actually all about.

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