

Beverly Fishman: "Exploring Polypharmacy Through Art"

By Emily Wilson

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Beverly Fishman | Credit: Lauren Montgomery

Artist Beverly Fishman's abstract work targets social issues, drawing attention to the pharmaceutical industry

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Artist Shiva Ahmadi first met Beverly Fishman in 2002 when Ahmadi was at Wayne State University in Detroit getting a Master of Fine Arts degree, after already earning one from Azad University in Tehran, Iran.

Fishman, then head of painting at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan (where she taught for almost three decades), visited Ahmadi's studio and bought two of her paintings.

"I told her it was my dream to go to Cranbrook and I applied the next year, and she accepted me," said Ahmadi, now a professor at University of California, Davis. "She is my mentor, she is my American mother, she is everything to me and I love and respect her."

"She really pushes the formal elements to convey the message the best way she can. She's so relentless in that."

Asked what she admires about Fishman's work, Ahmadi doesn't hesitate to talk about the way Fishman kept working when it was difficult for a woman to get shows or galleries to represent her. No matter what, Fishman went to her studio, Ahmadi said.

"Every year, you would look at the work and it would look different, and to this day, it amazes me. When I'm looking at her work for the last 20, 25, years, it's just amazing how it's basically the same idea, but it takes different shapes and forms and colors and presentations," Ahmadi said. "She really pushes the formal elements to convey the message the best way she can. She's so relentless in that."

Looking at Pharmaceuticals

For the last few decades, Fishman has investigated pharmacology and how medicine manages human emotion.

Her work, like her recent solo show, "The Pursuit of Perfection," at Jessica Silverman, a gallery in San Francisco, reflects on the way pharmaceuticals have shaped and changed our experience of being human.

Fishman's pristine triangles, ovals and circles, alluring and mostly white with glowing touches of color, mimic how pharmaceutical companies make their pills attractive to the public.

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Pursuit of Perfection, 2024 Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA | Credit: Phillip Maisel

The intent with "The Pursuit of Perfection" was to examine polypharmacy, something that particularly affects the aging population.

"It's a huge issue in our country and became a growing concern," she said. "People are taking three to five pills a day. And as you get older, there's more and more and more."

Fishman's sleek shapes look untouched by humans, and her use of layers of urethane paint, often used for cars, underscores that. But Fishman goes through an elaborate process to make them by hand, finding the shapes she wants, drawing the groupings and then making notations, before she sends them out to someone who makes a drawing with the measurements. After they go back and forth, he makes the forms and sands them.

"When I pick all the colors that I'm going to cut, I'm thinking about what if it was this, or what if it was that."

Fishman tries out several different combinations in her color collages, working intuitively.

"When I pick all the colors that I'm going to cut, I'm thinking about what if it was this, or what if it was that," she said. "I work with two people that took a very long time for me to find, and they color match. They're using their eye. They're not using a book. It's not like going to Lowe's or some hardware store and saying, 'I want this paint and then three drops of this and 10 drops of this. They're color matching, which takes a certain eye and an expertise — that's very old school."

Jessica Silverman grew up right near Cranbrook and has long been familiar with Fishman's work. The artist's startling use of color is one of the reasons Silverman was drawn to her.

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"I love color," Silverman said. "I think she's an amazing colorist, and I've always been impressed and engaged with her palette and the layering of color and unexpected nature of color." Fishman takes time with all aspects of her work, spending a week or more coating and sanding the forms to get the surface the way she wants it.



Awareness, Contentment, Calm, Choice, 2024 | Credit: Timothy Johnson

"The form itself is almost like glass," she said. "The paint is incredibly smooth and it looks like a machine made it, but actually a person who uses airbrush and mixes is making this work. I'm looking for a very high level of craft."

This attention to detail is another reason Silverman wanted to work with Fishman.

"I love the way things are made and artists who really care about the final result," Silverman said. "Bev takes deep care in the process, and I know for a fact if something is produced that she doesn't like, it doesn't see the light of day."

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Fishman's work is compared to Judy Chicago in the 60s (another artist Silverman represents) or Ellsworth Kelly, who is associated with minimalism and Color field painting. Fishman's abstract art is unusual in that it deals with social issues, drawing attention to the pharmaceutical industry.

Targeting Women With Advertising

Back in the 70s, Fishman said she got interested in identity, the body and feminism. A lot of the advertising for pills is directed to women, she notes.

"We are told by the culture that we have to be a certain way, look a certain way and age a certain way. As you get older, everything is about anti-aging," she said. "Women are specifically sold certain products to stay a certain size and look a certain way and not be an assertive, brilliant woman who can stand up to anyone."

Fishman points out that drugs like Valium were often marketed to women for their "nerves." "I grew up at a time when my mother and her girlfriends would sit around and talk about having worries and the doctor giving them pills," Fishman said. "At the time those pills were considered harmless, but they were not harmless. They caused addiction and dependence, and the pharmaceutical companies understood that for many, many years."

In her work, Fishman uses hearts to represent Valium. "I've made the hearts prettier and cuter and more seductive," she said. "That's what the pharmaceutical industry does, right?"



Equanimity, 2019 | Credit: Timothy Johnson

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Fishman says she believes that art can shift people's consciousness. That's what she wants in her work, she says, and one of the reasons she makes it so appealing — so people will keep looking at it.

Something that's changed in Fishman's work in more recent years is the ways she names her pieces. They used to be called by the malady such as *Untitled (Anxiety, ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, Anti-Psychotic, ¼ Tab Opioid Addiction)*, 2019. Now, the names she gives them is the feeling people want when taking them such as *Awareness, Contentment, Calm, Choice*, 2024

"Instead of looking at the disease that the pill is treating, I'm looking at the cure or the potential, and I think the work is also doing that, looking at the potential," Fishman said. "When people see it, they ooh and they aah, and they see this great beauty, and they're seduced, and the work is mysterious to them, and I want that, right? I want that. I'm the artist. I'm looking for that.

I'm looking for great beauty from the here and now in life, and it's very difficult to achieve. I don't want pretty."

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