

ARTFORUM

"Beverly Fishman"

By Richard Speer

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Beverly Fishman, *Sexual Freedom, Calm, Solace, Joy*, 2024, urethane paint on wood, 48 x 119".

With their glossy surfaces and immaculate geometries, the paintings and sculptures in Beverly Fishman's "The Pursuit of Perfection" betrayed no residue of the artist's hand. Although composed of wooden armatures undergirding myriad layers of urethane paint, their surfaces read as metal, fiberglass, or plastic: hermetic, industrial, and inviolable materials. This almost perverse slickness, however, belied the works' conceptual origins in the grody, nubby, disease-prone imperfections of the human body and our attempts to forestall infirmity through biotechnology. Spanning four series and eighteen years of formal and thematic evolution, from 2006 through 2024, the exhibition's works shared a clear throughline. Using elemental forms as vehicles toward sociopolitical commentary, the artist demonstrated how profit-driven actors—drug dealers, Big Pharma, and the global beauty industry—inculcate consumers, especially women, into dependence on diet pills, mood stabilizers, hormone boosters, and all manner of youth-recovering supplements and serums.

In a suite of bas-relief paintings collectively titled *Polypharmacy*, from the ongoing series of works of the same name started in 2012, Fishman adopts circles, ovals, rounded triangles, and beveled

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polygons of prescription pills, many of which she then subdivides to mimic the scoring of pills into half and quarter doses. Two of the three scored segments in *Focus, Awareness, Relief*, 2024, had open centers, alluding to the unseen potency we might imagine inside a pill's core. The painting's interior and outside edges were painted neon hues, refracting an eerie nimbus onto the white walls on which it hung. This syntax of reductive forms, negative space, and assertive color mutated across the series into a prolific array of permutations—a thin oval here, two abutting triangles there, a jaunty dot on the far end—which linked together like parts of speech or the punctuation marks of some futuristic alphabet.

Fishman allowed herself interpretive liberties with the pill forms, which heightened their feminist subtexts. In *Sexual Freedom, Calm, Solace, Joy*, 2024, she swaps the cutout Vs of four Valiums with heart symbols: a nod, perhaps, to the love/hate relationship a generation of women had with "Mother's little helper." Her career-long critique of patriarchal dominance over the objectified female body also manifested in works that ironically employed a palette of pastels and jewel tones, selected to evoke the hues of skin and cosmetics. Based in the manufacturing hub of Detroit, she has long employed assistants with backgrounds in the automobile industry to help fabricate and paint her forms—appropriating and repurposing Detroit's car culture in a manner that recalled Judy Chicago's emasculation of California car culture in the artist's "Hoods" paintings of 1964–65. With gently subversive wit, Fishman's feminine-coded colors played foil to her masculine-coded hot-rod finishes.

Installed at the front and back of the gallery were nine freestanding sculptures that also assumed the shapes of prescription pills. Diminutive in stature and whimsical in affect, the paintings have curvilinear contours that were as balming as their titles (*Serenity*, 2019; *Quietude*, 2020; *Repose*, 2019) and the antidepressants and sleep aids they depicted. Ten poured-resin wall sculptures (2007–10) and ten paintings on polished steel from the earlier "Kandyland" series (2009–10) referenced street and party drugs, primarily the rave staple MDMA. *Dark Kandyland*, 2009–10, and *Lime Green Kandyland*, 2008, layered EKG signals, brain waves, and techno-music sound waves beneath renderings of Ecstasy tablets. Compositing the effects of illicit substances and dance music on heartbeat and neurotransmitters, they were essentially diagrams or abstracted portraits of "your brain on drugs."

Fishman's inquiry into the body's pathologies began in the 1970s with work inspired by cells, viruses, the AIDS epidemic, and the attraction/repulsion dynamic of human viscera. It's been a long road from the organicism and grotesqueries of that early period to the pristine luster of the *Polypharmacy* paintings, but the overarching focus has remained corporeal. As pharmaceutical giants have reckoned with class-action lawsuits and activist efforts such as Nan Goldin's crusade against the Sackler family, it's tempting to see Fishman's oeuvre as protest art. But in interviews and talks, including her September Q&A with Susie Kantor at Jessica Silverman, she has adopted the more nuanced position that prescription drugs, for all their pitfalls, can also heal and cure. It's notable that in past shows, she titled her paintings after the maladies pills treat (as in *Depression, Osteoporosis, ADHD*, 2023, exhibited at New York's Miles McEnery Gallery), whereas in "The Pursuit of Perfection" she for the first time titled pieces after pills' positive outcomes, such as those aforementioned or *Strength, Serenity, Self-Determination, Tranquility*, 2024. This change, coupled with the sheer seductive beauty of the work, seemed to acknowledge our susceptibility and complicity in enabling biotech firms to profit off our fears, insecurities, and vanities. To the degree that these artworks were cautionary, their suave shapes and candy colors provided spoonfuls of sugar to help their bitter medicine go down.

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