

Interview with LOUISE FISHMAN

OBJECT LESSON

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PHOTO BY BETSY CROWELL

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

Trends come and go in the art world, but Louise Fishman has always stuck to her guns. Practicing a variant of Abstract Expressionism, she is actually closer to those artists whose hallmarks were open fluid gesture, tragic timeless feeling and an intractable sense of integrity. Her show at Cheim and Reid was a marvelous synthesis of abraded surface and dense calligraphic line, embodying a rich and unique perspective.

You're well known for the paintings based on your experience in Eastern Europe. Can you tell me about it?

In 1988, I went to Eastern Europe on a trip sponsored by the Simon Weisenthal Foundation with a painter friend who was a Holocaust survivor. Nothing prepared me for the response I would have. We went to Auschwitz and Terezin. While at Auschwitz I discovered a pond beside a (Birkenau) crematorium called "The Pond of Living Ashes." When the camp was liberated, the Germans tried to destroy the crematorium by dumping the ashes there. I walked into the pond and without thinking about the implications, took a handful of the soil with me in a little Kleenex box. When I arrived back in New York, I was going to use it to plant a tree. Instead, at the urging of my friend Bertha Harris, I ground a small amount of this material into some bee's wax. I used this material mixed with oil paint to do a series of paintings. I hadn't planned to show the work but during that summer Simon Watson, my then dealer, came up to visit. He saw the paintings and photographs that I had taken in Europe. He was very excited and decided he wanted to show them. It would simply be a statement about what had happened during and following this trip. I felt that the paintings needed titles. I did not want to employ anything related to the Holocaust. What came to mind was the holiday of Passover which is a celebration of freedom. I did a little research and what I came up with seemed very appropriate. So each of these paintings has a name that is associated with the holiday.

There were many really moving things that happened during this time. Several survivors came to talk to me about the work and their gratifying responses to it. It made me feel very

good because I had been worried that the show would be misconstrued. But several different kinds of people responded positively.

In addition to being a private healing process, this was also a refiguring of my relationship with painting. It was a sort of exorcism.

Your life attitude parallels your aesthetic attitude. All your references are physical, concrete. Your experiences happen, then you paint. It's very much as if your life is a container, then your work comes out of it.

In the past, I've been concerned about the dichotomy between the life of an artist and that of working people. I didn't know what would justify what I was doing. It was one of the first times that I was teaching art a couple of days a week, leaving the rest of the time free to paint. It was a gift that I had trouble accepting. Particularly involved with a lot of questions about painting and abstraction in the late 70s, early 80s. The same thing happened when I came back from the camps. It's something that recurs every once in a while, a questioning and a reaffirmation of painting.

The window of the studio that I had at this time looked directly into a chain factory. I watched these people who were there long before I arrived in the morning. They made chains until 4:00 o'clock and then went home. I wanted to have that kind of simple clarity and discipline about what I was doing. I wanted my work to feel like it had not only a purpose, but a function. At that point I wanted to make objects. My paintings were much more object-like. I wanted them to feel like the Van Gogh shoes or a Chardin still life. That feeling of wholeness and that kind of presence.

I've always felt that there's a lot of Chinese influence in your work.

For the last ten years, I've been very involved with Chinese scholars' rocks and tomb sculpture. The rocks I'm interested in are small, portable and placed on the scholar/artist's table. There was a very critical thing that I learned looking at these rocks. First of all, they're completely abstract. I learned from the John Hay essay (published by China Institute in the 80s) that there is a specific language for



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the abstract qualities that emerge in the rocks. The knowledge of that gave me a great deal of confidence in my commitment to abstraction.

There was indeed a place in the world where abstraction was revered and imbued with formal and spiritual meaning. I now own some scholars' rocks. They fill my studio with enormous energy and have been a great inspiration. I think they're largely responsible for the recent changes in my work.

It often looks more like calligraphy and I'm sure that's a part of it, but I think it (the physical style) comes from the rocks themselves and their particular kind of energy. My interest in Chinese art is also connected to a Buddhist practice. What I learned from this practice is that everything I need is always present. Everything I need to make art is already there. It's a question of letting it come out clearly and simply.

What are continuing challenges for an artist?

One thing I think about is what happens to an artist when their work is mature and they're getting attention. It's very easy to get confused as to what's important; to lose the connection that's so private with painting. As a young painter I remember thinking how careful artists have to be in order not to repeat themselves. How important it is to continually

renew that true relationship. There's a real confusion between their lives as professional artists and their lives in the studio.

In the last few months I've been wanting my paintings to be simpler. It's like what happened to me when I came back from Eastern Europe. I'm about to be 60 and am preparing for the next decade of work. I like the idea of clarity. The late de Kooning show was terrifically inspiring to me. It was just the shot in the arm I needed. The paintings were about painting and nothing else. It was such a complete turning oneself over to the paint that it gave me great courage. I learned that I had to trust the work as it came out without trying to alter, edit or fool around with it. There's a kind of urgency. I'm much clearer about what I want. It was good to know that at de Kooning's age and physical condition, he was still able to experience the glory of this art. I think of his work as a continuous line. It's like James Joyce. For myself, it means an opportunity to have this true marriage between my life and my work. I feel the great possibility of just floating down the river with this. Putting your foot in the stream is a Buddhist phrase. It means taking a step towards enlightenment and what I'm talking about is a kind of an enlightened experience of one's own work.