





LOUISE FISHMAN

CHEIM & READ

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COLOR AS EXPERIENCE Judith E. Stein

Blue elbows its way to the front in Louise Fishman's new body of work, and pops up in the titles as well. Artists being artists, there is never just one reason why. Some understanding of her choices is gained by knowing that in October and November 2011, Fishman lived and worked in Venice on an Emily Harvey Foundation residency. Blue is the color of the Grand Canal, and of the open sky seen from the Lido. It is the ultramarine that Titian loved, and the bright azure of Ingrid Nyeboe's eyes.

Fishman had been in Venice before as a tourist. As a resident, she found herself walking in Titian's footsteps—literally—as she traced the paths between churches and palazzos that were standing when he was alive. If forced to choose her favorite painter, it would be Titian, she says.ⁱ Fishman fell in love with his paintings in the 1950s, when she studied art history at the Tyler School of Art with the ebullient German refugee, Herman Gundersheimer. He was a scholar with an infectious passion for art, who lectured on the Titian in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, an unusual portrait of a Cardinal half veiled by a translucent curtain.

But Louise Fishman knew who Titian was even before she began art school. She grew up hearing the women in her family talk about art. Her mother Gertrude Fisher-Fishman, and her paternal aunt Razel Kapustin, were artists. Both had attended classes at The Barnes Foundation: Razel studied with Dr. Barnes himself in the 1940s; a decade later, Gertrude took classes with his protégée, Violetta de Mazia. Until a lawsuit opened the collection to limited visitation in 1958, only those enrolled there as students had entrée to its riches. As a girl, Fishman perused Dr. Barnes's books in her mother's home studio: his treatise, *The Art in Painting*; and monographs on Renoir, Cezanne and Matisse.

Albert C. Barnes was a visionary collector and educator, whose mentor John Dewey believed that education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.ⁱⁱ Dr. Barnes taught that you need not study history to appreciate art. We all experience *color, line, light, and space* everywhere in the visual world. You need only to care about the visible aspects of the world, he said, to find satisfaction in color, texture, the flow of line, the rhythm of light and shadow, and the sequence and interplay of volume.ⁱⁱⁱ Appreciation derived from seeing how successfully the artist integrated these formal components.

Dr. Barnes gave primacy to color,^{iv} an unconventional emphasis in the early twentieth century. As far back as Aristotle, western culture has had an uneasy relationship with color. Ancient philosophers set up a hierarchy of elements in painting, valuing “rational” line over “irrational” color. Color was suspect, a weak sister linked to sensuality, excess, dream-states and the primitive. It was both distrusted and desired. Its very embodiment, pushed to the point of decadence, was the magic city of Venice.

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During her seven-week Venetian residency, Louise Fishman made no paintings. She brought watercolor and drawing supplies, and set up a studio in her flat near the Rialto that overlooked clotheslines and weathered walls. The artist and her dog Sammy ventured out daily with her camera. She invariably got lost on these peregrinations; but the compass app on her iPhone, and her sense that there was no wrong place to look, made each sally one of discovery. The shape-shifting city captivated her, and she took hundreds of photographs to record its micro and macro allure. At the request of the magazine *Texte zur Kunst*, she later assembled “Simultaneous Diaries,” pairing five of her watercolors and the photos that indirectly inspired them.

Back again in her New York studio, Fishman launched a new body of paintings. It is the artist’s practice to work on three or four canvases at a time. During an early break to assess her progress, she noticed that in one, gestures coursed up the center, and sped away from its axis. The uncharacteristic drama perplexed Fishman, a harsh self-critic. When her gaze shifted to the souvenir postcards she had pinned to her wall, she said to herself, “Oh for Christ’s sake; it’s Venice.” There looking back at her were miniature versions of Venetian paintings, including Titian’s majestic *Assumption of the Virgin*. The source of the new theatricality in her work became clear, and she ceased questioning it.

Assunta is the title Fishman gave to the airy painting that provoked her epiphany. Carpets of color circle a rising, ocular core, enacting the narrative of ascent. Paint tracks whoosh left and right, and sail up the center in corduroy streaks. Depictions of the Assumption of the Virgin abound in Venice; in Tintoretto’s version, Mary is buoyed by angels and cherubs sporting masses of Venetian blond curls. Her customary garb is a blue mantle over a blood-red garment; blue is the color of the sky, and consequently, a symbol of the celestial realm. At the end of Mary’s life, as the faithful believe, the apostles were present to witness her miraculous rise to Heaven, where she was assumed, body and soul. Thomas, doubtful, needed material proof, and so she let drop her sash, one downward slide in a world of up.

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During its eleven-hundred-year run as a city-state, Venice bore the regal appellation of “The Most Serene Republic,” or “La Serenissima.” Not only does Fishman’s *Serenissima* stir up recollections of the Venetian old masters, but it also evokes the experience of seeing them in churchly spaces: long naves, radiating chapels, and dramatic contrasts of light and dark. At its compositional heart, Fishman left the linen bare of paint. Pale shafts of color stretch beyond the frame in the upper right, otherworldly rays of light that could as easily be read as shining down. The artist’s new paintings have more light and air than ever before. But this openness began in advance of her residency. In earlier works such as *Blue for You*, and *Splintering Echo*, Fishman was in touch with her inner Venice. For the latter, she worked with acrylic, and then switched to oil for the turquoise marks that drizzle down and across its surface.

When Ingrid Nyeboe joined Louise Fishman in Venice, the artist gained a confederate for exploring the city. The two had recently fallen in love. Their sojourn would fast-forward into marriage six months





later. Something of their bliss—there is no better word—comes through in Fishman’s new paintings. Her titles never literally describe what we see; but they proffer a useful handle. *A Sweet Disorder* takes its name from a seventeenth century poem by Robert Herrick, who lovingly catalogued the “wild civility” of his beloved’s dress. A bewitched Herrick wrote of “erring” lace; fabric “thrown into a fine distraction;” and ribbons that “flow confusedly, —a winning wave.” Of Fishman’s new paintings, *A Sweet Disorder* has the least formal composition.

All of the elements that make a Fishman a Fishman are here, stacked strokes and grids, variously manifest. Reflecting on its color and construction, the artist related the painting to a small Titian and to a Giorgione she particularly admires. Like others of the smaller paintings in this new series, *A Sweet Disorder* is painted on jute, a fabric whose texture is coarser than linen. Fishman lets the nubby weave speak for itself in some areas, when her dry brush coaxed its warp and weft into visible relief. These Benda-dot patterns mime their sister grids; possibly, it is the other way around. The artist included subtractive grids, rapidly scored with a knife; and additive ones, succulent impressions of a sharp metal mesh.

Of the unusual green that surfaces in *A Sweet Disorder*, a mystified Fishman says with affection, “it just turned up and it stayed.” It’s a color that de Kooning used, a notorious challenge to painters because it is so difficult to integrate. Fishman carries it off, escorting it along a lazy diagonal in the upper right. As in her other recent work, the artist here worked with a variety of tools. Handprints are some of the most ancient human marks, and are present as dryish swipes of her paint-dipped, gloved fingers. Near the bottom, the press of her fingers created portholes through a translucent veil, exposing subterranean color.

Calle dei Cinque, an oil on jute, takes its name from the artist’s street address in Venice. Although Fishman reports that “a big chunk” of her influences come from Joan Mitchell, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, in *Calle dei Cinque* there is something of Norman Bluhm’s brio in the transit of her hand as she commanded tools to lick and lash surfaces with paint. An insurgent femur brakes to an inclined halt in the lower right as waves of black and blue crash around like an untamed surf. The artist may have had Kline’s canonic black and white paintings in mind when she limited her palette in *Calle dei Cinque*. Among the earliest of her new group of paintings, it is the one with the greatest unpainted ground. Fishman also held color in check in the large acrylic *Hydra*, a painting she named after a mythical, serpent-like water beast. Slithery ribbons of black paint swerve around one corner and shoot, limb-like, into another. Fueled by an impassioned choreography, Fishman’s gestures speed across a cream-colored sea.

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It is easy to walk in and out of the past in Venice, and to slip into fiction as well. Fishman and Nyeboe rode out to the Lido to sip cocktails at the lodgings of Gustav von Aschenbach, the doomed professor in *Death in Venice*. Such sorties added to the artist's store of the ways water comports itself in Venice. The Lido behaved more like the ocean than it did when she peered down from the deck of a vaporetto; different as well was the wet tangle of seaweed slapping against the side of Riva degli Schiavoni, the waterfront promenade.

A sensation of choppy instability comes through in *The Salt-Wavy Tumult*, a painting where white sets off dominant areas of blue and black. A hybrid with the fringe of a brush and the body of a comb, asserts a dark-blue diagonal; this curious configuration turns up in several of Fishman's post-Venice works. Two other paintings that tap the artist's kinetic memories of water are *Flotsam and Jetsam* and *Afloat in Mystic Blue*. During their time in Venice, the artist and her partner experienced acqua alta, when the lagoon's salt water overflowed the edges of the canals and flooded pedestrian walkways. Everywhere Fishman turned, she found signs of the tide's rising and sinking, as landings submerged, and emerged, step by linear step.

Stairs are a prominent feature of Palladio's Il Redentore, the serene Renaissance church that fronts the Grand Canal. You take its measure as Canaletto did, water in the foreground, and sky behind. A decorous balance of verticals and horizontals anchors the lower half of Fishman's oil on jute *Il Redentore*, suggesting the grandeur and gravitas of the painting's namesake. In the upper section, blue drums idle upward, as if gravity had stepped away for a macchiato.

Some paintings in Fishman's new series don't have overt connections to Venice. In *December*, a weave of emphatic blue swatches fall into place as an open grid, a major iteration of the minor tic-tac-toe patterns that crop up here and there. Strokes criss-cross in subtle layers, originating from, and disappear beyond, the boundaries of the rectangle. This sense of coming and going within one painting is characteristic of Fishman's process; it is facilitated by her dandy electric easel, and the ease it affords in shifting a painting's orientation. *Lolland*, with its broad expanses of icy blue, takes its name from Ingrid Nyeboe's birth island. "This is like a Danish winter," she said when she first saw it. Up close, you can see an orderly area of puckering paint resembling fish scales.

Sound as well as sight shaped the artist's Venetian experiences. She and Nyeboe heard operas in the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, and attended concerts in venerable churches. The beauty of these events was enhanced by the opportunity for sustained looking; with musical accompaniment, they scrutinized interiors, full of altarpieces and ceiling paintings. Music insinuated itself into Fishman's thoughts while on the streets as well. On one amble, Fishman found herself behind Venice's storied opera house, Teatro La Fenice. She came upon a plaque identifying an entrance that Maria Callas had used. Then she read the name of the street: Calle Maria Callas. The diva, an all-time favorite of the artist's, is the only woman who isn't a saint to have a street in Venice named after her. In the oil on jute painting Fishman would name *Calle Maria Callas*, colors stream up and down, sure, sustained trajectories that evoke flowing water, and the slow curves of the female form.





One of the books Fishman read while away was John Berendt's *The City of Falling Angels*, an engaging account of the heartbreaking 1996 fire that destroyed 80% of La Fenice. The title of Fishman's *Angel and Stone* touches on the subject of the book. In Fishman's painting, dense, stone grey boulders hunker into the lower left, as a glissando of green travels its upper right quadrant. Pulses of bright red rivet attention at the center. Embedded within *Angel and Stone* are unexpected references to Chaim Soutine, one of the artist's idols. In 1958, when The Barnes Foundation first opened to the public, the young Louise Fishman had sat transfixed in front of his paintings. How Dr. Barnes came to discover Soutine is one of the great Cinderella stories of modern art. The tenth child of an Orthodox Jewish clothes mender in rural Lithuania, Soutine had arrived in Paris in 1913 to join the informal brotherhood of avant-garde artists. He was destitute and unheralded when the collector happened upon his work during a buying trip to Paris late in 1922.

On a stop at Paul Guillaume's gallery, Dr. Barnes sighted an unusual painting. "It's a peach!" the collector exclaimed with gusto. "It's a pastry chef," corrected Guillaume, unfamiliar with colloquial English. Dr. Barnes bought the portrait. Within days, he would purchase fifty-one other canvases by Soutine, catapulting the obscure painter into fame. Late in his life, the collector explained his motivation: "The main reason that I bought so many of his paintings was that they were a surprise, if not a shock, and I wanted to find out how he got that way. Besides, I felt he was making creative use of Bosch, Tintoretto, van Gogh, Daumier and Cezanne, and was getting new effects with color."^v

Color defines Soutine's form. His beautiful and deeply unsettling *Flayed Rabbit* particularly impressed Louise Fishman when she first saw it at the Barnes. Like Soutine's better known depictions of beef carcasses, it honors the precedent of Rembrandt's butchered livestock. Both unmistakably reference the Crucifixion. With hind legs akimbo and front feet upraised, Soutine's hare on butcher paper resembles an infant flailing on a blanket, a wrenching evocation. Similarly spooky are the unlucky creature's recognizably furry back paws. Soutine showed the flayed carcass in perspective, larger in the foreground and smaller further away. Yet we look down at the supporting table, its tilted top framing the body with a visceral mix of reds, browns, ochres, and maroons. The format of *Flayed Rabbit* occasionally surfaces in Fishman's work, as it does in *Afloat in Mystic Blue*, with its suggestion of a central cruciform.

Crossing the Rubicon was christened by a friend of the artist's who visited her studio and saw the overt cross in another of her new paintings. The phrase references a river, and implies passing a point of no return. Fishman's composition is strongly frontal, with pinwheel segments that race towards the center. For the artist, the connection between a painting's name and its imagery is one of attitude. Red and blue are forcefully present in *Crossing the Rubicon*, hinting at battles, blood, and martyrdom. There are stained, watery patches and a pearliness in a scraped-away section, effects informed by Fishman's fascination with the texture of walls.

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What a wonderful invention, the artist's residency, when creative people with the misfortune to be born after the great age of princely patronage, are granted respite from their usual surroundings. Louise Fishman reveled in Venice's juicy decadence, and experienced color in fresh ways. In 1958, the year she fell under the spell of Soutine, a song in English and Italian hit the pop charts; she could not have failed to hear it, over and over again. The word blu—signifying the color blue and the sky—weaves through “*Volare*.”

Mi dipingevo le mani e la faccia di blu.
Poi d'improvviso venivo dal vento rapito
E incominciavo a volare nel cielo infinito. . . .
Nel blu, dipinto di blu,
Felice de stare lassù. . . .
Nel blu degli occhi tuoi blu,
Felice de stare quaggiù.

I painted my hands and my face with blue.
Then suddenly, I was taken by the wind
And I began to fly in the endless sky...
In the blue sky, painted in blue,
so glad to be there
In the blue of your blue eyes,
so glad to be there.

ⁱ Fishman, Louise. In conversation with the author, June 27, 2012. All subsequent statements by the artist derive from this exchange.

ⁱⁱ Dewey, John. “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal.” *The Philosophical Review* 2.6, 1893, pages 652–64. John Dewey wrote: “Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Barnes, Albert C. “The Problem of Appreciation.” *The Art in Painting*. New York: Barnes Foundation, 1926, passim.

^{iv} Ibid, page 82.

^v Barnes, Albert C. “Appendix A: A Letter from Albert C. Barnes.” *Chaim Soutine: An Expressionist in Paris*. New York: Jewish Museum, 1998, page 198.

