

Fish, Janet

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Gayle Hoogstraten

Selected KIA painting: "June", by artist Janet Fish
1999, oil on canvas

Janet Fish was born in Boston, Mass., in 1938 to a family very much involved in the visual arts: her grandfather, Clark Voorhees, was an American Impressionist painter, her father an art history teacher, her mother and uncle are sculptors and her sister a photographer. She grew up on the island of Bermuda.

Her formal education included Smith College in Massachusetts, studying printmaking and sculpture and graduating in 1960. She then earned a BFA degree and was one of the first women to graduate with a MFA degree at Yale University School of Art and Architecture in 1963.

The following description of the evolution of her career as a very successful painter comes mainly from two interviews by a fellow Yale student, Robert Berling, that were recorded on November 2, 2004 in Janet Fish's Soho loft and on November 5 at the DC Moore Gallery in New York. My aim is to refer to Ms. Fish's own words about her work in order to be as authentic as possible.

In answer to a question about why she started painting from real life in an environment that was heavily into Abstract Expressionism, which was the style of her time at Yale, she says, "I think it was because nobody was actually teaching it that I ended up doing it. I was thrashing around making big, gestural, kind of messy paintings, and I'm feeling like it was meaningless."

Of her earlier paintings in the '60's, she says, "I painted it very straight because I really wanted to get out of my head and to discover something outside of the limitations of that small amount of information I had in my head. I wanted to learn and bring stuff in." This process of trying to paint only what she had carefully set up in front of her brought spells of panic for fear of not being able to make her painting "work". She says "And that can be very stressful, but otherwise I think I would just fall asleep and not want to paint anymore."

Her style changed in the '70's as a result of wanting to challenge the way she had learned to structure her paintings. She would pick up a shrink-wrapped product in the store and paint it "square on, but as I was doing it I began to really see the light on the plastic. And then *that* became the subject." It was the beginning of many paintings that included reflections of light, shadows of color and the transparency of glass. She began to improvise by organizing a still life with a group of objects that related to each other by color, shape or texture. She then would start painting and would find that she needed to change the original set-up as the painting progressed. She says, "Once I start painting,

then I start to see things, and I think what I'm more into now is composing things based on echoes and repetitions—I let it all just happen”.

Over time, her paintings evolved from very tightly controlled compositions to very complex, Baroque-like paintings. Although she moved away from an emphasis on painting the transparency and reflections of glass and plastic, light remained essential to her paintings. She says, “Light is energy. Light is very much a part of what I need....”

Another essential element is movement, which she orchestrates in her compositions through repetition (or echoes, as she refers to them) of color, line, shape and texture. She says, “Lots of times it's direction, it's movement—you know, how your eye is directed—that holds the painting together, that can hold a lot of activity.”

In talking about her style of painting, she says, “When people look at realist paintings, they focus on the objects, which I don't think are the subject at all. I think the object is one of the tools, like the paint and the brush. The real subject is the light, movement and color and echoes of the objects in one's mind. All these things are part of what I use to make the painting.”

“June”, the work selected from the KIA's collection, was painted in 1999, and so is an example of Janet Fish's mature work. The picture plane is tipped up and allows the viewer to see inside the objects. The strong light of a summer day comes from a natural source in the upper left-hand corner and reflects through the objects. The flowers and fruits are those seen in June and summer in general. The warm and cool colors are vibrant and “echo” throughout the composition, moving your eye in a circular direction, as do the shapes and lines of the objects. The painting appeals to me personally, and I found myself looking and thinking about its interplay of elements for a long, long time.

Janet Fish works in her studios in New York City and in Middletown Springs, Vermont.