

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Janet Fish's Jarring Experiments in Still Life Painting

• by **Peter Malone** on January 28, 2016



Janet Fish, "Smucker's Jelly" (1973), oil on canvas, 36 x 64 in (all images courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York)

Among several modes enthusiastically adopted by painters in the last century, spontaneity is still held in the highest regard. Having proved durable for artists of varying ideologies and orientations, spontaneity has been transformed from a method to a value. Overworking an image, a technical misstep one assumes was as common in the past as it is today, is no longer understood as a misstep but as an insufficient appreciation of the extemporaneous. Our ubiquitous taste for color in the higher keys is also a direct result of our collective loyalty to this and to other assertive painting methods. Color is likely to be cleaner and more intense if applied in uninterrupted passes over a prepared surface.

These generally accepted values — intense color and spontaneous execution — defined the ground on which representational painters made peace with their abstract brethren in the early 1960s. What ties the work of Lois Dodd and Neil Welliver to the period that saw the rise of Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella is a shared bias toward directly applied and unadulterated color, and it is on this same ground that Janet Fish has thrived for decades, exploring in subtle ways the boundaries of representational and abstract painting.



Janet Fish, "Untitled (Two Packages of Pears)" (1969), oil on canvas, 52 1/4 x 42 in

The current exhibition at DC Moore Gallery highlights a selection of Fish's work from the late 1960s and 1970s that demonstrates how, within the limitations she had set for herself at the time, she found a surprising range of solutions to problems arising from still life arrangements in the unforgiving light of a sunny window. "Untitled (Two Packages of Pears)" (1969), for instance, one of the earliest canvases in the show, portrays six pears wrapped in a shrink-type plastic membrane taken as is from the produce section of a supermarket. It is as complex an assembly of near

incongruous planes as any cubist composition of the early 20th century,

yet it is built upon the artist's affinity for things as they actually appear. Its subject fills the entire frame, distributing the images of the greenish pears among bending reflections of the artist's studio windows. Like a James Rosenquist billboard-size canvas of similar subject matter, Fish's easel-size canvas exploits the twisting reflections to her advantage. With deliberate brushwork she manages to create a painterly reality, effectively holding our attention to both its abstract patterns and color-saturated ordinariness. In a similar canvas, "Plantains in a Box" (1969), the high-contrast reflections on the plastic surface dominate the painting. But for the rump of a green

bunch of plantains extending toward the foreground, the reflections would have compelled a totally abstract reading.

But it is Fish's eye-popping color that initially draws the viewer across the gallery's expansive floor. As you enter the space, brightly colored jars and bottles beckon for a closer look. Yet by the time you are standing at an optimal distance from any one canvas, the scale has swollen to a size that has no relation to the actual object. Jelly jars climb to a yard high, rendering their orange glow back into the



Janet Fish, "Plantains in a Box" (1969), oil on canvas, 44 x 44 in

reality of paint on canvas. The displacement of scale compels a viewer to accept both the illusion and the painted surface in a balance that is far more absorbing than orthodox photorealism, which strives to defeat the painterly aspect. Fish keeps our attention on both illusion and surface by maintaining a field of direct, near ascetic strokes in all of the manifestations of her style.

It's surprising to see how many manifestations of a simple premise can be developed. There is one in particular, dating from the mid-'70s, that departs from the strong color found in the earlier pictures. "Five Tall Glasses, One Dawn Morning" (1975), painted in near grisaille tones with sparse hints of blue and yellow, pushes the representational to the edges of visual coherence. Much of the painting's interest is generated by distorted



Janet Fish, "Windex Bottles"
(1971–72), oil on linen, 49 3/4 x 29
3/4 in

traces of unseen visual sources, some of which appear to be windows, but with no corresponding images filtering through their panes. Some are so loose in character that they imply freehand invention, the effect of which is to work against a strong reading of the illusion. Yet the properties of glass and water remain palpable.

Except for the conventionally photo-realist "Windex Bottles" (1971–72), the paintings chosen for this exhibition consistently tease the viewer's attention away from the purely mimetic and nudge it back toward the surface. In "Stuffed Peppers" (1970), an asymmetrical pattern of vertical window reflections acts as a single-axis grid, flattening the picture in spite of the carefully modelled forms stacked in each jar's pale brine.

"Smucker's Jelly" (1973), a horizontal composition of three jars, is one of the most abstract of the lot.

Three jars in the foreground are set up with a finger's width of space between them. The two strips of space that appear between the jars are then filled, in one instance with the color from a fourth jar behind the first and second, and in the other with the same light grayish hue that narrowly frames the entire image. The tapering of each jar's elevation leaves these two spaces slightly triangular, which heightens their abstract profile. As shapes, they manage to maintain their presence against the pull of the painting's convincing artifice, creating a vigorous dialectic between surface and pictorial depth. More than any other aspect of this show, this dialectic reveals Fish to be more than a painter of pleasant still lifes. She is — or certainly was between 1968 and 1978 — energetically involved in matters of pictorial structure that clearly differentiate her work from that of painters who at the time maintained a greater adherence to photography.



Janet Fish, "Stuffed Peppers" (1970), oil on canvas, 59 x 57 in

Janet Fish: Glass & Plastic, The Early Years, 1968–1978 *continues* at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 13.

<http://hyperallergic.com/271485/janet-fishs-jarring-experiments-in-still-life-painting/>