

Art in America

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Janet Fish at DC Moore

"I don't screen for corniness," Janet Fish once told an interviewer. Her lush paintings depict such seemingly unexamined indicators of cheerful abundance as exotic fruit and vegetables, colorful flower arrangements and scenes selected and set to celebrate the seasons: rich-hued leaves and apples for fall, a pastel seascape with shells for summer. As much as the actual settings Fish chooses to paint, however, the subjects of her paintings are materiality, light and balance—no less opti-

mistic for the wear, but certainly more conceptually engaging than uncomplicated delight in niceties.

Fish clearly likes to challenge herself. The items in her paintings are chosen for their visual voluptuousness, as well as their capacity to provide her with instances to showcase her prodigious painting skills. Drawing on the moment-specific esthetics of Impressionism and the gestural bravado of Abstract Expressionism, for instance, the 42-by-86-inch still life, *Transparent Bags/White Tulips*, features a variety of translucent plastic wraps through which light passes in different ways. On the backdrop of a white tablecloth, cellophane sheathes tulips that rest at a diagonal across the canvas; a thicker cellophane encases what is either a wedge of cheese or a slice of cake wrapped in white paper; a thin plastic bag holds a lemon (resting behind a reflective, silver-wire fruit bowl that holds more lemons). Bold, bright colors stand out from the grays and whites of the still-life arrangement: a red mesh bag, yellow bananas, semi-peeled oranges, a slice of cantaloupe. Giving circular motion to the composition, the color draws the eye in and balances an intricate matrix of shadows and morning sunlight.

Since Fish has been exploring similar terrain over more than three decades, one might presume that her process, by now, would have become second nature. Yet, speaking of *Milkweed*, which portrays wrinkled pods spilling wispy white strands, peppered with seeds, onto a blanket, Fish says, "I had to find something that would be milkweed—a color, a mark, a texture. Sometimes that's where some of the fear comes in. Can I do it? Can I find it? Can I find it fast enough?" The same sense of urgency comes through in *Ingrid's Clementine With Tulips*, where Fish masterfully orchestrates different sorts of wood, in addition to flowers, fabric, fruit and yarn. In the background, an orange tiger cat catches its reflection in a mirror—a sly little nod to van Eyck. Asked whether the process of entering the "dark room" of beginning each painting lends a spiritual content to her work, Fish responds resolutely: "Yes."

—Sarah Valdez

Janet Fish: *Fall Asters*, 1999, oil on canvas, 60 inches square; at DC Moore.

