

## Section:

### TODAY'S MASTERS

#### **Janet Fish demonstrates her mastery of light, space and color in amazingly complex paintings**

**Her colors** have the zing of Carnival in Rio; **her** emotive brushwork evokes the unrestrained rapture of Abstract Expressionism. But **her** eye for detail and **her** sense of composition are as finessed as in a 17th-century Dutch masterpiece. **Janet Fish's paintings** ordinarily may be categorized as "**still life**," or nature mort as the style is called in French. But there's nothing **still**, let alone mort, about them. Most notable about **her** work is "**her** treatment of **light**, which careens around **her paintings**," as art writer Robert Berlind has observed.

Indeed, **Fish** herself states, "I defined at a certain point that my real subject is **light**, and **light** as made by **color**. But this **light** also has energy, and it's always moving." Take, for example, "Pear and Bowl with Book," a **painting** she completed in the summer of 2005. The bowl, filled with golden rod, is of iridescent Depression glass. Its orange glow cascades over the green book cover, tempered by the shadow of the yellow goldenrod. Reflections from the bowl that fall onto the book also bounce onto the pear. The whole **painting** shimmers and shivers with **light**.

Lending to the kinetic dazzle of "Pear and Bowl with Book" is a painted tray with a Near Eastern motif reminiscent of a Persian carpet. "I like iridescent objects because they change in different **light**," says **Fish**, who notes that "if you get closer to the **painting**, you see that it's just a lot of little marks that look like gestural calligraphy." Chinese and Japanese calligraphers talk about "the spirit of the form," she adds, and this same vitality informs the quotidian objects in **her paintings**.

There is a familiarity, at once cozy and nostalgic, about the subject matter of **Fish's** works: fruits and flowers, vintage and cut glassware, seashells and old baskets, kitchen utensils and household baubles. She was attracted to objects, because she "didn't want to deal with people in the studio," the 68-year-old painter recalls with a sardonic edge in **her** voice. "You don't have to talk to things."

**Fish** started with old bottles and then began "looking around for different kinds of shapes and **colors**," she says. "I'm not interested in the object itself, but more in the way things relate to each other." Some items she acquired at flea markets and yard sales. "I didn't need things to be perfect," she interjects, other props she borrowed from friends. "I don't really want to own much stuff. It gets tiresome to own things." Arranging objects for a **painting** is a major part of **her** task. "Years ago, I might spend all day moving things around," she says. "It does take a while for me to find an 'environment' that engages me. Once I start **painting**, certain 'relationships' become evident. Then I might take something out, or put in another object, and let what's developing in the **painting** happen."

It's what's "happening" in the **painting** that's the point, **Fish** explains, noting that the objects are "merely a vehicle." The patterning made by a wire basket on a table top, for example, is of more concern for **Fish** than what that object itself actually is. What's important to **her** is "what the object can do." The intrinsic dynamism in **Fish's** works occasionally puts one in mind of Charles Burchfield's **paintings**, and it is a happy coincidence that **her** New York dealer of the past decade, DC Moore, also represents Burchfield's estate. "I've always loved Burchfield's **paintings**," **Fish** says, "because he always found a way to infuse them with a certain kind of natural energy."

**Fish** divides **her** time between a house in a small Vermont town and a loft in a rapidly gentrifying area of lower Manhattan. **Her** studios in both locales have lots of windows to allow for as much direct natural **light** as possible. "I have used artificial **light**, especially in the winter," she concedes, "but for me, the problem is that it's static." She admits, however, that last year she did one small **painting** of a passel of bright, fiery-red chili peppers under artificial **light**. "Maybe that's why I put in so many peppers," she laughs.

**Fish** was born in Boston, but **her** parents moved to Bermuda when she was an infant. "It's why I've always had some seashells around," she notes. "I don't spend that much time on the beach anymore." It also may be that because of **her** formative years in Bermuda, "where there's such a profusion of **light** and **color**," she seeks the same qualities in **her** works. "I always think that people from southern places relate more to **color**," she observes.

Whatever the case, **Fish's** works are now in many public collections, north and south, including the Museums of Fine Arts in both Boston and Houston. Two of **her** most enthusiastic private collectors also are in Texas. There, a couple designed their living room around one of **her paintings**. "They not only had a table finished in the same green," says **Fish**, "but picked out stones for the fireplace that blended with the shadows in the **painting**." It seems relationships between objects are not only important in **Fish's paintings** but around them as well.

**Janet Fish's** "Pastels" can be seen June 18 to August 20 at the Butler Institute of Art, Youngstown, Ohio. (330) 743-1711.

PHOTO (**COLOR**): "Grasses and Blue Birdcage," 2005, oil on canvas, 70" x 60".

PHOTO (**COLOR**): "Pears and Bowl with Book," 2005, oil on canvas, 36" x 40".

PHOTO (**COLOR**): "Apples and Apple Blossoms," 2005, oil on canvas, 44" x 75".

PHOTO (**COLOR**): Detail, "Eucalyptus Pods," 2006, oil on canvas, 50" x 60".

PHOTO (**COLOR**)

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