UNSTRAIGHT LINES

passages

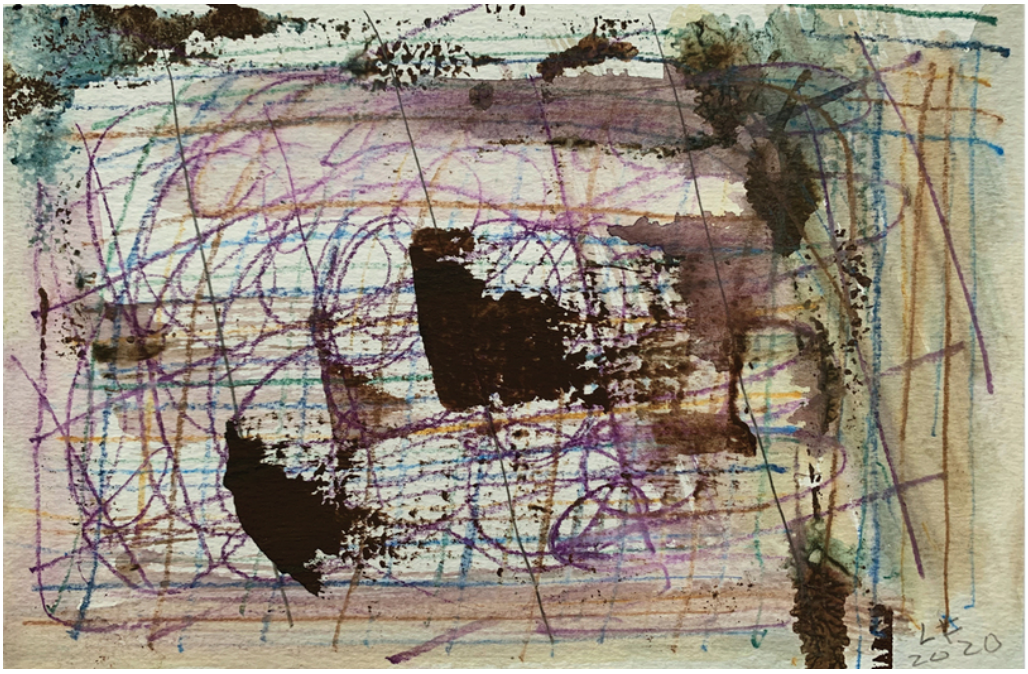
Louise Fishman (1939–2021)

Louise Fishman in her studio, New York, April 2016. Photo: Christian Hogstedt/Art Partner Licensing.

> *"It is unstraight lines, or many straight and curved lines together, that are eloquent to the touch. They appear and disappear, are now deep, now shallow, now broken off or lengthened or swelling. They rise and sink beneath my fingers, they are full of sudden starts and pauses, and their variety is inexhaustible and wonderful." . . . The author is a blind woman, Helen Keller. Her sensitiveness shames us whose open eyes fail to grasp these qualities of form.*
> —Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," 1960

THERE WAS AN EMAIL in my inbox on July 26 from Louise Fishman's wife, Ingrid Nyeboe, with the brief, startling headline "Louise died." Inside, I was cc'd on a sad notification: Louise had passed away the night before from complications of an illness. And with that, Louise was no more and, as the Jews say, may her memory be for a blessing.

What now stood in her place was the corpus of her work, a body of enormous heft. Louise's very presence had always been like a force of nature to me anyway. I'd known her since the 1970s, though not that well. She was never a hangout buddy but an elder stateswoman, a serious-ass painter, a living link to the New York School stretching back to painting giants like Mitchell, Guston, and de Kooning and forward to all us wannabe-serious painters who were still in the grip of that kind of work. Sometimes I would see her in Chelsea walking around in utilitarian pants and sporty wraparound shades—and Louise was *literally* sporty. As a girl, she had wanted to be a professional ballplayer, and several writers since have made the connection between sports fields and Louise's canvases, both of which are delineated rectangles of activity in which coded sets of gestures are pitched, whether baseball pitches or paint strokes. Anyway, when I saw her, I would not interrupt her because she was deep in thought—about what, who knows—but as de Kooning once said of someone, she had an abstract look on her face.



Louise Fishman, *Untitled*, 2020, watercolor, color pencil, and pencil on paper, 6 × 9".

Samuel Beckett said the artist's task is to find form to accommodate the mess. Louise found a form that is both the mess *and* its accommodation: the rectangle. Her paintings are fundamentally blocklike constructions, hand-built like ancient walls; they are gridded, girded, gritty, and grouted, carved into with scrapers and knives. But they also manage to convey a surprising airiness via the gaps and reveals in their construction, through which you can see all the way back to the canvas behind. They're like front porches—rectangular thresholds with stuff stacked off-kilter on them, decked with strokes both taut and drooping or tangling, the jagged parts potchkied together, scrubbed and stained to various degrees of finish or unfinish. Louise's saturated palette is mitigated by tones of ash, mud, sludge, low-hanging clouds. Her painting spaces afford you enough room to go shallowly back and forth, in and out—a dynamic that is classically termed "push-pull" but that in Louise's hands feels more like "shove-drag," an athletic move, like wrestlers in a hold grappling with each other yet appearing to be standing still. This inner tension in Louise's work contains the barometric pressure of moods that move through the paintings like weather fronts. You feel her atmospheres in her gestures and choices of tool, from the speed of the colored loops to the decorative way she dots, dashes, and scores rectangular planes to the clotted mash-ups of line, the mournful swipes of gray-blue, and the letters that spell out anger, the anger of women. Louise made her "Angry Women" paintings in 1973; in them, the uninitiated can immediately perceive her purpose, which is definitely *not* the grid as a neutral space, or formalism *per se*, or anything universal, or about flatness. Instead, she makes gestural paintings that act like protest signs—waging a fight, lodging a complaint, naming a constituency, and reclaiming space.

I'd call Louise an iconic anti-dandy for asserting negation and criticality not through indifference or absence, but rather through presence, attachment, and stubborn confrontation.

Louise Fishman,*Breaking and Entering*, 2005, oil on canvas, 77 × 88".

As a self-described lesbian feminist Jewish abstract painter, Louise navigated this unstraight territory all her life. Having hyphenated identities meant that she had multiple allegiances and had to buck orthodoxy on many fronts. Maybe the classic diasporic Jewish attitude equips you for the long game: You feel like an outsider all the time, including at home, and come from that tradition of Torah wrestling (going back to Jacob, who, in the Book of Genesis, wrestled with an angel all night long and was blessed). Louise's blessing was her failure to assimilate neatly into an identity niche. She grew up in the '40s and '50s in an observant Jewish household, but she didn't understand Hebrew and later claimed that something always upset her about that language. In the '60s, as a young painter in downtown New York, she realized quickly that, as a lesbian, she wasn't going to be sleeping her way to the top with the Cedar Tavern set. In the '70s, she conscientiously tried to eliminate all straight-white-male influence from her work and to work with women's crafts, though later, in 2012, she noted sardonically that the project was "impossible, of course," and that she hated woman-craft. She also started naming paintings after various Jewish ritual objects and holidays. In the '80s, she visited the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Terezín and collected ashes and pebbles that she mixed into the surfaces and solvents of subsequent paintings. In 2020, she published advice for young lesbian painters:

> Don’t stop looking at El Greco because he’s not Jewish, or Chardin because he’s not an abstract painter, or Matisse because he’s not a lesbian. By all means look at Agnes Martin and Georgia O’Keeffe and Eva Hesse. But don’t forget Cézanne, Manet, and Giotto. If good painting is what you want to do, then good painting is what you must look at. Take what you want and leave the dreck.

That was her kind of politics and her kind of love: Start with your own struggle, look to the surrounding world to figure out your community, work out your relational lifelines by means of what you love, maintain an attitude of remembrance but noncompliance.

Louise Fishman, *Like Air I’ll Rise*, 2018, oil on linen, 74 × 86".

In her assertion of complex being, you can track Louise’s work amid a wide swath of vitally materialist painters and sculptors who have also embraced abstraction’s opacity, its complexity, difficulty, and hybridity, and whose work operates purposefully with an insiderly/outsiderly know-how. I’m thinking, for example, of the eloquent silence of Beverly Buchanan’s rock piles, the iridescent shimmer of Ed Clark’s swept fields, the compression and expansion of Jack Whitten’s mosaicked cosmologies, and of many other fellow travelers, from Rochelle Feinstein to Stanley Whitney to Rodney McMillian to Torkwase Dyson to Tomashi Jackson to Rindon Johnson and beyond. All of them have dipped back into art history, taken what they needed to move forward, and made matter speak. Louise’s work is a thick slab of painting history and an object lesson in both taking it and leaving it. She reclaimed some of the very qualities that high modernism tried valiantly to shed or tamp down: the personal, the sentimental, the anecdotal, the narrative. She made work about angry women, and work with an attachment to studio labor. I’d call Louise an iconic anti-dandy for asserting negation and criticality not

through indifference or absence, but rather through presence, attachment, and stubborn confrontation. It can be ugly/beautiful, this hard-won, thick-skinned kind of work. When I think of Louise's paintings, I think of Adrienne Rich's words: "The thing I came for: the wrecks and not the story of the wreck, the thing itself and not the myth." Painting, the thing itself, was what was liberatory to Louise, and the painting's rectangle was no mythic picture plane but a literal life raft, a little rectangular zone you make by hand that you hang on to in the turbulent sea. Painting was the way you send out your signal, plot your course through precarious waters, navigate toward other vessels, other shorelines, other people. You steer that little square, and its unstraight lines, as it rises and sinks, and that's how you try to save your own life.

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