

artnet

Art & Exhibitions

The Long-Overlooked ‘Queer Queen of Abstraction’ Reclaims the Spotlight Louise Fishman's widow, Ingrid Nyeboe, is committed to securing the painter's legacy.

by Sarah Cascone June 24, 2025



Louise Fishman. Photo: by Nina Subin, courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

In a history of abstract painting dominated by macho, paint-splattered men, Louise Fishman (1939–2021) wanted to stand alone, turning away from the leading school of Abstract Expressionism to develop her own vision colored by her personal identity as a Queer Jewish woman.

Her current show at New York's Van Doren Waxter spotlights 10 of her later paintings, from 2003 to 2013, their rich colors and deft brushwork informed by a lifetime in the studio. Uniting the works are the titles, all drawn from the verses of American poets Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), reflecting Fishman's interest in the connection between painting and the written word.

“When I started going through the work to have it appraised, I realized that there was actually a lot of work that had titles from poetry,” the artist's widow, Ingrid Nyeboe (b. 1946), told me during a tour of the show. “Louise never titled her paintings until after she finished them. It could take days before she found a title, or sometimes even weeks. She would let the painting hang on the wall, and she would look at books or listen to music, or we would just sort of talk about titles. It was a lot of fun, actually.”

The exhibition is part of Nyeboe's efforts since Fishman's death to establish her legacy as one of the great artists of the 20th century, the unsung “Queer queen of abstraction.”

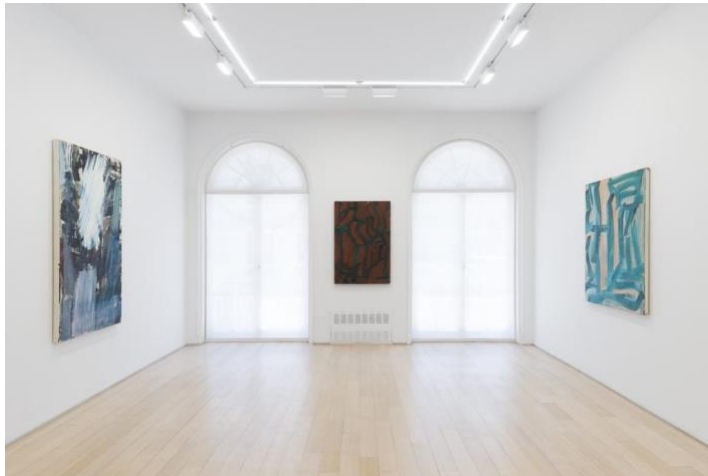


Louise Fishman, *Glitter of a Being* (2005). Photo: courtesy of Van Doren Waxter, New York.

“Louise never really thought of herself as an Abstract Expressionist painter,” Nyeboe said. “She knew that the language that she was wielding had a lot to do with it, but she made it her own. And she pushed the barriers.”

That’s actually quite literal, as you’ll see upon closely examining the unframed canvases in the show.

“Her compositions often exceed the kind of physical boundaries of the picture. You kind of read them right off the edge in a way,” gallery cofounder Dorsey Waxter told me. “I look sometimes at the side, and you can see clues about how Louise layered colors, even colors you don’t think are there—but they are!”



“Louise Fishman: Always Stand Ajar” at Van Doren Waxter. Photo: courtesy of Van Doren Waxter.

The works, done with oil on linen, canvas, or jute, are priced starting at \$75,000 each for smaller paintings. The biggest one, the five-foot-wide and seven-and-a-half-foot tall *The Crust of Shape*, a green and black piece from 2003, is \$290,000. (This exceeds Fishman’s auction record of \$201,600, set at [Christie’s New York](#) in 2022, and the only time the artist has exceeded six figures, according to the [Artnet Price Database](#).)

This is the first Fishman show for the gallery, which began representing her estate in 2024. (After showing for many years with Cheim & Read, Fishman briefly joined [Karma](#), which has locations in New York, Los Angeles, and Maine, in 2020.) But Waxter first met the artist while interning at Nancy Hoffman’s then-new Soho gallery back in 1973.



Louise Fishman, *The Crust of Shape* (2003).
Photo: courtesy of Van Doren Waxter, New York.

“It was a very riotous moment for women in the world of making art,” Waxter said, recalling consciousness-raising meetings with Fishman and other feminist artists and performers held at the gallery.

Born in Philadelphia to Jewish parents, Fishman came from a family of women artists. In 2012, she had a show at Philadelphia’s Woodmere Art Museum pairing her work with that of her mother, Gertrude Fisher-Fishman (1916–2013), and her paternal aunt, Razel Kapustin (1908–1968). An avid basketball player in her youth, Fishman considered pursuing the sport as an adult before turning to the canvas.

“Her understanding of the rectangle really comes out of that game, because she always knew where her body was in relation to the edges,” Nyeboe said. “That dream of playing basketball taught her something.”



Louise Fishman. Photo: by Nina Subin, courtesy of Van Doren Waxter.

Although Fishman never achieved mainstream fame, her work is the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Pittsburg’s Carnegie Museum of Art, Atlanta’s High Museum of Art, and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum.

The artist studied at the Philadelphia College of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Tyler School of Fine Arts in Elkins, Penn., before earning an MFA at the University of Illinois, Champaign, in 1965. That year, Fishman moved to New York City, taking a day job as a legal proofreader while immersing herself in the downtown art scene. An encounter at the storied Cedar Bar disabused any notions, however, of joining the male-dominated Abstract Expressionist scene.

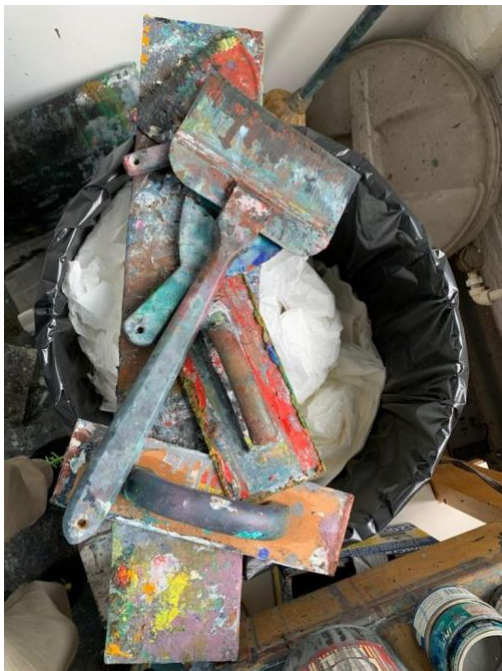


Louise Fishman's New York studio. Photo: courtesy of Ingrid Nyeboe.

"My friends and I were sitting in a booth towards the back when I noticed a booth full of famous artists closer to the front of the restaurant. Milton Resnick motioned to me to come his booth. I was very excited," Fishman once said in an interview. "I walked up to his booth only to discover he wanted me to sit on his lap. At that moment I understood the sad truth—I would always be an outsider to that community."

But that realization also led to freedom for the artist, who had come out as a lesbian as a teenager in the '50s.

"I felt that Abstract Expressionist work was an appropriate language for me as a queer," Fishman said in an interview for the catalog of her 2016 retrospective at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y. "It was a hidden language, on the radical fringe, a language appropriate to being separate." "At some point, Louise felt that what she was doing was very driven by the expectations of the of the masculine tradition, so she stopped painting," Nyeboe said. "She took her canvases that she had painted on and cut them and cut them up in little strips and sewed them back together in various configurations."



Louise Fishman's painting tools in her New York studio. Photo: courtesy of Ingrid Nyeboe.

And when she did paint—she returned to the medium after a couple of years—Fishman didn't limit herself to brushes. She used spatulas, masonry trowels, knives, and other tools to apply paint to canvas. (Nyeboe has preserved the artist's studio as it was at the time of the artist's death.) "Louise was willing to risk everything when she was in the studio—she tried never to repeat what she'd done before. And she was always interested in what the paint was able to do, what she was able to do with the paint on the surface," Nyeboe added. Fishman and Nyeboe knew each other for decades before getting involved romantically, as Fishman was a close friend of Nyeboe's first wife, the art and dance critic Jill Johnston (1929–2010). "Jill was always following Louise's work and taking me around to her gallery shows," Nyeboe recalled. "When Jill died, Louise just sort of stepped into my life, intensely. We were both equally surprised at what happened."



Louise Fishman, *Loose the Flood* (2009). Photo: courtesy of Van Doren Waxter, New York.

Nyeboe and Fishman's marriage was also a creative partnership, and in 2014, they founded the Louise Fishman Foundation with an eye toward the artist's legacy planning. Now, with Fishman gone, Nyeboe hopes her work will speak for the late artist.

"Louise's idea about making a painting was born out of her instincts about painting, not about a place or a landscape or something out in the real world," Waxter said. "It was really about just her and the paint."

"Louise Fishman: Always Stand Ajar" is on view at Van Doren Waxter, 23 East 73rd Street, Second Floor, New York, New York, April 10–June 27, 2025.