

CHEIM & READ

# Art in America

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## Louise Fishman at Cheim & Read

To make a stroke of paint seem equivalent to a shaft of light is no small bit of magic, especially when it lacks any particular chromatic association with luminescence, and moreover is buried deep in a thicket of other paintstrokes. Pulling off this trick, which Louise Fishman does, for instance, in the scintillating, black-spattered lemony green of *Rock and Ruins* (2005), is, however, ancillary business—a spark thrown off in the heat of action. What matters in her recent paintings is movement: the tensile energy of linear structures cantilevered into space; the friction of bodies of paint piling on, creating collisions of decidedly impure color.

That the organization of Fishman's work derives ultimately from the grid, which was key 35 years ago, is vestigially apparent though less and less important. Some of the mark-making in the current paintings inclines toward writing, as has been true for around a decade. The calligraphic figures striding through *An Appearance of Again* (2005) in fact approach the pictographic, even the incipiently human. In other paintings—the moody, indigo-suffused nocturne *Moon and Movies* (2003), for example—the scaffolding is close to architectural; in *The Art of Losing* (2003), with its dense black bars, the architecture seems nearly penal. Occasionally there are patterns borrowed from textiles, as in *Les Nuits d'Été* (2005), where dusty late-summer colors are loosely brushed into a big checkerboard-patterned weave. But none of these structuring systems prevails over the work's centrifugal forces, which are, generally, perilously close to irresistible.



Louise Fishman: *Rock and Ruins*, 2005, oil on linen, 60 by 70 inches; at Cheim & Read.

Much has been made of Fishman's unladylike athleticism as a painter, of her use of big stiff brushes and, especially, a serrated trowel, and it is true that while the trail left by the knife is often oddly buoyant and even a little decorative, you can't miss the danger of its edge. Even when Fishman mutes her attack, as she does, a little, in *Les Nuits d'Été* and also in the slightly grayed blues and pinks of *Wild Poem* (2004), the restraint itself registers as an energetic struggle. Once, and not briefly, Fishman was a very agitated artist, and minced no words about it (a series of abstract paintings from 1973 paired the names of women artists and the word "angry"). An abundance of painterly vigor seems the lasting expression of that impulse. She also clearly still

keeps other painters in mind. When, in the current work, the dialogue appears to be with Joan Mitchell, the tension lets up a little, as in *A Few Things for Themselves* (2005), a bucolic romp in lovely greens and blues. When de Kooning or Rouault or Mary Heilmann seem to be standing at Fishman's shoulder, the conversation is livelier.

Incidentally (and perhaps a little pettily), it seems a shame, with paintings that slash and burn their way right to the edge of the canvas, to use elaborate bright white frames that put moats between image surfaces and walls. They objectify and sequester work that is all infectious energy, the more compelling for its virulence.

—Nancy Princenthal