

*The Drug Administration: Beverly Fishman talks High Modernism and Big Pharma*

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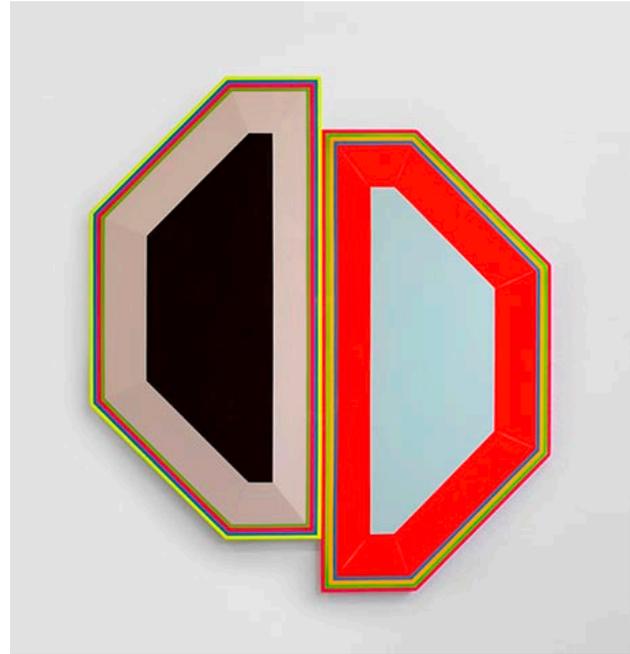
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LESLIE WAYNE: You're having a busy year – three solo shows which have opened within the last three months – Pain Management at the Library Street Collective in Detroit, Another Day in Paradise at the Abrams-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts in Birmingham, AL, and most recently Dose, curated by Nick Cave at the CUE Foundation here in NYC. Congratulations!

BEVERLY FISHMAN: Thank you! I've just had a very busy year that was in part fueled by a one semester sabbatical in the fall of 2016. It allowed me to temporarily move away from Detroit and set up my studio in New York for six months, which was an absolute inspiration.

LW: You've stated that you would like to have your viewers "think about the seductive nature of the pharmaceutical industry as well as the purist and transcendental language of high modernism." For any audience, whether educated in the arts or not, thinking about the pharmaceutical industry right now is extremely potent as we consider the political climate we are in with a Trump/Bannon agenda to privatize and corporatize our institutions and our American, and I might say, most precious – values. Using the language of high modernist abstraction to speak about those issues is a seductive way to bring people into the conversation.



A lot has been written, and written really well about the conceptual underpinnings of your work, so I thought it might be more interesting to approach this interview from another perspective, one more related to your personal history and your process.

As an artist myself, I was struck by a point that Bob Nickas brought up in his bristling catalogue essay for your 2015 show at Columbia College of Art & Design, when he made a comparison between your work and Tom Friedman's one-to-one simulations of pills. While sighting the lyrics from Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," he followed up with, "These are works of art. Their physical and visual properties revolve around the concerns of painters and sculptors – color, composition, form, material, scale and display."

As a viewer of your works, I am first and foremost drawn to the physical qualities of your paintings – their jarring palette, their forms and shapes, their dimensionality and their extremely seductive reflective surfaces. As a native of Southern California, I immediately think of the Finish-Fetish guys of the early 60s. But there's a huge difference between their process and yours. Their cult of hand-sanding and polishing their works by themselves came right out of the shortboard revolution and hotrod counter-culture. For you, the process of getting that industrial finish is more a means to an end rather than an important and integral part of your studio practice. But obviously there's a great deal of process that does go into the conception and realization of your work, experimenting with color combinations and establishing the shapes of each panel as they relate to specific pharmaceuticals. But I imagine that these are experiments with very specific goals in mind. I'm reminded of something Gerhard Richter said in a recent interview when he was asked, "What do you think about when you're painting?" and he replied, "I'm not thinking about anything. I'm painting." Are there moments in the studio where perhaps you stop "thinking" and something else takes over?

BF: That's a great question! It's true that I am not interested in sanding and hand-finishing these paintings; but, at the same time, I have always been very physically engaged with these works. For me, color is an extremely material substance—hues change depending on their finishes, their values, their saturation, their sheer quantities (i.e., the areas that they cover), and the other colors that you place in relation to them. For this reason, to understand the effect that different colors have, I need to physically engage with them through collage. So, when I'm in the studio, I'm always developing a series of color studies, a set of works on paper that incorporate natural and artificial color systems as well as matte and glossy finishes. These collages are based on a limited set of pill formats, shapes that have been selected so that they also evoke the tra-

dition of high modernism, from hard-edge painting to minimalism. By making study after study, I get to explore color permutations, searching for relationships that surprise or shock me. And when I'm doing this—which is how I spend a lot of my time in the studio—I'm not really thinking about the concept behind the series anymore, but rather I'm working through the effects of different colors. That's where the spontaneity of my practice lies for me: in the process of gluing down different colors and responding to the material impact that they have on me.

LW: It's great to see on page 27 of the CUE catalog a studio shot of your color experiments on paper. I understand that you are working with a given range of colors based on skin tones and the kinds of synthetic colors one finds in the advertising world. But beyond that, your approach in the studio sounds like it's very intuitive. Did you study color theory in school?

BF: Yes, I studied it, and then I taught a course on color theory, which helped me think even more deeply about it. I don't directly follow anyone's color theory, however. For example, I love how Wassily Kandinsky connected particular colors to specific sounds and properties. By reflecting on his system, I think about how colors can refer to other types of sensations that are not necessarily visual. Joseph Albers has been a huge inspiration—the way he worked through such a wide range of color relationships has made me much more aware of value and saturation, for example. His work is part of a mental background that inspires me. At the same time, I'm not thinking about color theory when I'm working. Instead, color is completely intuitive when I'm in the studio. I'm searching for a sensorial experience.

Traditional color theories have only helped me so far, because they don't deal with fluorescents. Because I use so many synthetic colors, I've had to develop my own ways of thinking about color. For this body of work, I started looking at cosmetics and makeup much more, and they became a way of bringing another layer of identity questions into the mix. However, once I had added this palette to the various color systems that I use, manipulating it became intuitive once again. I incorporate palettes that I find in Home Depot and CVS, mixing them with more traditional palettes, such as the ones I find in standard art supplies.

LW: You packed a lot into that answer and I want to unpack a couple of different things from it separately. One is the idea of color referring to other kinds of sensations. Kandinsky was believed by many to be a synesthete. I get the feeling that some of your colors are meant to inspire synesthetic responses, or at least physical ones if not specifically aural or related to taste, etc., though taste would make sense given that the work is all about pharmaceuticals! The way you lay out different color combinations for example feels almost musical in the colors' rhythmic relationships to one another, like a fugue – the way you have the viewer's eye move from one color in one quadrant to its mirror in a darker shade in another quadrant, and then flip over to do the same thing in its complimentary color in the other two quadrants, like in the blue and red *Untitled (Opioid Addiction)*, 2016. But you also do something else with the colors when you paint on the inside and outside edges of your panels, as in the lovely fluorescent *Untitled (Opioid Addiction/Missing Dose)*, 2017. I love the way those colors cast fluorescent halos onto the wall behind the painting. It's a very delicate and sophisticated balance that you get just right. I suspect though that no amount of collaging with colored paper can anticipate exactly how that will look once you've created the final piece in three dimensions. Are you ever surprised?

BF: I am definitely surprised by how certain pieces turn out. Because of the shift in scale and medium, my color collages are not the same as the large works. It is exciting for me to see the piece fully realized. Most of the time, I am satisfied; but, if the painting doesn't have the effect that I want, then it must be repainted. Pieces can sit in my studio for months and gnaw at me until it becomes clear that they will never see the light of day! At other times, I know instantly that the painting is not working. Some pieces are repainted multiple times. As far as the question about synesthesia goes, I do believe that color creates linkages between vision and other senses. I have a synesthetic response to fluorescent yellow—I get a sour taste in my mouth—but this is an exception. No other color gives me a corresponding sensation. I believe that colors trigger responses in viewers, experiences that include not just mental associations, but also actual sensory reactions. I definitely want you to see a bright, shiny, candy-like surface and think about what it feels and tastes like. However, I am often quite surprised by viewers' responses to my colors.

As far as the connection to music goes, I love your analogy between my paintings and a fugue. I'm definitely thinking about that—contrasting parallel movements between complementary colors or colors of different shades. I use colors to create the effect of afterimages or moments in which our vision flickers. I also paint on the inside and outside edges of my panels in order to destabilize the physical limits of my works. I want the glows to create a situation in which it is hard to tell where the wall ends and the work begins.

LW: It definitely does that! You also do something dynamic with the shapes, particularly when you combine two different pill forms, as in the green and black *Untitled (Stacked Pills)*, 2016, which is a beauty. It seems from some of the titles however, like *Untitled (ADHD/Opioid Cocktail)* 2016, that you not only thinking formally about your choice of shapes but about the actual chemical interactions between the pills as well. Do you privilege the formal considerations first, or the conceptual ones?

BF: I don't really privilege either. I am drawn to certain forms because of what the pills are used for medically. I won't use a shape if the chemical compound is not significant to me in some way or other. At the same time, the formal combinations are also very important to me, and I won't create a "cocktail" if the structural components don't function well together. In my most recent urethane paintings on wood, I am working with the forms of generic legal drugs. Many generics have the same shape—despite treating vastly different diseases or conditions. For this reason, there is some leeway with the combinations—the same piece could represent a number of different mixtures of pharmaceuticals.

LW: So, switching gears here for a minute – I understand that the AIDS crisis was a pivotal point in your artistic thinking. Many of your friends died of AIDS and that compelled you to rethink what you were doing. Can you talk about that transformation?

BF: The AIDS crisis had a profound impact on me, but it did not cause me to work in a new way or with different materials.

Throughout the 1980s, I was exploring questions of the body and disease. My initial reasons for this focus were personal—they had to do with my family. My interest in sickness and health was there before I was aware of the AIDS crisis. At the time, I was making sculptures that mimicked flayed bodies with all their viscera exposed; and then, in the late-1980s, I turned to mixed-media paintings that incorporated cellular and biological images that I appropriated from medical texts with a black-and-white Xerox machine and a color copier. The AIDS crisis reinforced my interest in exploring how our culture defined us as either sick or healthy and how our bodies—our chemical and physical compositions, our DNA, the viruses we acquired—strongly determined who and what we were. It made me all the more aware that I was dealing with issues of identity as defined by science and culture and how critical those issues were to me. Perhaps even more importantly, AIDS had a huge impact on the ways in which I approached my work and my life. I saw close friends die in their twenties. It made me realize how fragile life was, and how our time on earth was finite. The crisis taught me that being alive and healthy was a profound gift, and that if I wanted to be an artist, I needed to live my life as an artist every day.