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 Abroms-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.

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-
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
LW: It definitely does that! You also do something dynamic with the shapes, particularly when you combine two different pill
As far as the connection to music goes, I love your analogy between my paintings and a fugue. I'm definitely thinking about
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
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 col
Traditional color theories have only helped me so far, because they don't deal with fluorescents. Because I use so many
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
BF: I am definitely surprised by how certain pieces turn out. Because of the shift in scale and medium, my color collages are not
LW: You definitely surprised by how your practice lies for me: in the process of gluing down different colors and responding to the material impact that they have on me.

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.

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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.