

Janet Fish — Modern Still Life Painter

Janet Fish (American, born 1938), Kara, 1983, oil on canvas, 70 1/4 x 60 1/2 inches, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase with funds provided by the Museum Collectors, 84.199. © Janet Fish

Janet Fish's work is characterized by:

- painterly realism
- focus on the effects of light and atmosphere
- unusual combinations of still-life subject matter

Artist

American artist Janet Fish was born in Boston and also spent part of her childhood in Bermuda. Her interest in art could have been influenced by several members of her family: her grandfather Clark Voorhees was a painter; her uncle, also named Clark Voorhees, was a sculptor; her mother, Florence Whistler Fish, was a sculptor and potter; and her father, Peter Stuyvesant Fish, was an art history professor. Fish received her BFA from Smith College in 1960 and was one of the first female students to be awarded an MFA from Yale University School of Art and Architecture in 1963. Her fellow classmates included Chuck Close, Richard Serra, and Brice Marden. Fish studied and worked in sculpture throughout high school and college but at Yale switched to painting. Fish painted initially in an Abstract Expressionist style before realizing, as she stated, "Abstract Expressionism didn't mean anything to me. It was a set of rules."

Subject

When Fish began to add human figures to her still-life paintings, she noted, "The danger with my work now is that people might focus on the story." In the painting *Kara*, Fish composed a scene that feels more like watching a film rather than a still two-dimensional surface. In a light-filled room, a somber and reflective woman looks up from a letter opened in her hand. She sits at a table strewn with everyday objects of contemporary life: a vase of flowers, a book, a bowl of candy, newly purchased gloves and shoes. The table and flowers extend beyond the edge of the canvas, suggesting movement and life beyond the immediate scene, while gift wrap and ribbon suggest future occasions or things to come. Although carefully composed, Fish allows the viewer's own life experiences to complete the story.

Style/Technique

Early training at Yale in the Abstract Expressionist style introduced Fish to painting on a large scale, a technique she has mastered in the still-life paintings for which she is best known. When Fish began painting still-lives in the 1960s, she filled the entire canvas with one monolithic object—a bunch of bananas, a single red pepper, a box of lemons—using an eye-level perspective. In the 1970s, her still-lives began to provide a sense of place and the everyday by including more of the world and space around her carefully selected objects. Fish focused on the visual energy and activity created by the arrangement of objects. She became fascinated with objects' abilities to reflect and refract light, and often included luminous, reflective glassware.

She began adding human figures to her compositions in the early 1980s, and stated, "When the figure gets into the painting, in some ways it makes it easier. The figure demands so much attention. The eye goes right to it, so in some sense that makes organization of the painting easier. On the other hand, there's a complication, because the figure gives out so many messages." However, in this painting Fish successfully treated *Kara* as just one part of a whole composed scene, which she laboriously designed and infused with brilliant light, color, and movement.

Context

Fish's attention to detail suggests comparisons to the Dutch still-life paintings of the 17th century. Just as Dutch artist Willem Claesz Heda (1594–1680) carefully composed the scene in *Banquet Piece with Ham*, 1656 (see MFAH art card AC037), arranging objects with exact precision and attention to detail, Fish obsessively selects, arranges, and rearranges objects in her compositions. The striking difference is her very modern and monumental approach. Rather



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Context *continued*

than just capturing a singular moment in time and depicting objects in a visually realistic way, Fish's canvases often reflect an amalgam of changing light conditions that she observed throughout the day. Fish looks at the world through a prismatic microscope, and then visually celebrates every detail on canvas.

Discussion Questions

- Fish uses objects formally to construct a composition, but also selects subjects that have different levels of meanings. What do the objects in *Kara*—from the white tablecloth, candy, gloves, a letter, to the gift wrap items—mean to you? What could the objects mean to the artist or to the sitter?
- Consider the color, size, and surface qualities of the objects in this work. What grabs your attention? How do these objects' qualities move your eye around the composition? What area of the painting anchors the work? What formal choices did Fish make in executing this composition?

Classroom Ideas

- In later works, Janet Fish often took multiple snapshots of her subjects, such as humans or animals, which she referred to later while painting. Take photographs of a person or animal. Next, arrange a selection of objects on a table. As you paint, refer to your photographs to insert animate subjects.

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