THE BROOKLYN RAIL

LOUISE FISHMAN

By Jessica Holmes | June 2025

In one of her best-known poems, “The Soul Should Always Stand Ajar,” Emily Dickinson opines on behalf of receptivity, of being open to the ecstatic experience of being. That just a sliver of Dickinson’s title is used for the exhibition *Louise Fishman: always stand ajar* at Van Doren Waxter is apropos—the show is a collection of paintings that the artist titled similarly, plucking expressive phrases from poems she loved. Fishman (1939–2021) was an avid poetry reader and ten of the fourteen works on view derive their names from either Dickinson or Wallace Stevens, two of her literary touchstones. Though the paintings were not directly inspired by the specific poems (she only christened them once they were complete), poetry itself was a developmental force.

Louise Fishman, *Loose the Flood*, 2009. Courtesy Van Doren Waxter.

Vitality is a hallmark of a Fishman canvas, an individual imprint that distinguishes her athletic brushstrokes, subversive color palette, and confident gestures. Her self-possession was possibly born of the fact she was a queer woman, a feminist, who was deeply involved with Abstract Expressionist painting by the early 1970s, when the field was overwhelmingly male, a circumstance that entailed a strong degree of moxie. Or perhaps she just knew she was a damn good painter.

The loose, organizing principle of gathering works named by the poetical lines of Dickinson and Stevens unites a syncopated body of paintings that collectively divulge the cadence and exuberance characteristic of Fishman’s work. Spanning a decade from 2003–13, a prolific and creatively mature period of her career, they pulse and respire with palpable vigor. *Loose the Flood* (2009) ripples with the physicality so crucial to Fishman’s surfaces, an instance where the conference of body to canvas feels almost tangible. Broad strokes of muted blues intermingle with brown and ochres. And then, in

an interruption of this melding, a large swath of frenetic, white-blue brushstrokes purposefully intercede, disrupting the flow. In Dickinson's poem "Split the Lark—and You'll Find the Music," the line "Loose the Flood" is often reckoned as a metaphor for the poet unleashing her creative energy. In these whiplash gestures erupting from the mellow background, Fishman seems to shepherd Dickinson's words into something visceral.

Green in the Body (2004), taking its name from "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard" by Stevens, coalesces many of the artist's concerns. Fishman painted intuitively, going straight to the canvas without preconception, but she frequently structured her imagery on the idea of a grid, albeit a liberated notion of one. Dark, emboldened brushstrokes outline earthen green tones, hinting at—but never succumbing to—a formalized framework. A close look reveals a saffron hue beneath Fishman's overarching greens, and a triangle of this warmer shade is left untouched in the lower right-hand corner. It is a moment of surprise that reveals a glimpse of how Fishman arrived at such distinct, singular colors through shrewd layering of paint.

The human-scaled *Green in the Body* (2004) relates to *The Crust of Shape* (2003), which is the largest work in the show. At over seven feet tall, it's a bigger canvas than was typical for Fishman. "Between you and the shapes you take / When the crust of shape has been destroyed," Stevens wrote in his poem. One may imagine the appeal these words must have held for Fishman who, through her very practice, torpedoed the old maxims about what painting can and should be, and rebuilt its shapes through her own distinctive vision.

Louise Fishman, *Green in the Body,* 2004.
Courtesy Van Doren Waxter.

Louise Fishman, *The Crust of Shape,* 2003.
Courtesy Van Doren Waxter.