



Vernon Fisher, *Jocko at Dover*, 2009; oil and acrylic on canvas;
58 x 66 inches; courtesy the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary,
Dallas; photo by Vernon Fisher

Examining art is never a passive experience, where one sits back and “receives” the content of an artwork. Instead art viewing is an active game of connect-the-dots, where speculative thinking and a sometimes suspect projection of our own psychological trappings is inevitable. Delineating meaning for any work of art is a process resistant to the use of simple formulas.

Vernon Fisher’s reference-laden painting *Jocko at Dover* makes the puzzling maze of interpreting art obvious. In general, Fisher’s paintings

are the equivalent of a pinball machine; disparate subjects and stylistic disjunctions force our attention to rebound from one aspect of his imagery to another. In fact, his longstanding strategy is to situate seemingly opposite images and text in close proximity, suggesting physical, visual and metaphorical relationships that then engender a host of possible interpretations. Reducing Fisher’s art to a set of intentions and a clear meaning is difficult due, in part, to the artist’s efforts to embody theories about the

slippery nature of representation in his work. But, despite Fisher's debt to Poststructuralist ideas about the contextual shifting of meaning and the limits of artistic authorship, his work is much more than an airless academic illustration or earnest polemical statement on such topics. In fact, *Jocko at Dover* appears darkly comical as it evokes layered interpretations akin to the verbal complexity of poetry.

The most common features found in Fisher's art are historical maps, bumbling cartoons and trompe l'oeil landscape vignettes. Derived from the artist's collection of photographs, his chosen imagery often feels nostalgic but is ultimately subsumed to less sentimental (or more critical) ends. Fisher looks back at cultural artifacts, such as old film stills, early twentieth-century cartoons and scientific renderings from encyclopedias, in order to reconfigure a visual history, both public and personal. By consistently arranging discordant elements, his practice emphasizes the essential murkiness of all images and the inherent failure of any act of communication; *Jocko at Dover* is no exception.

As with most of Fisher's art, *Jocko at Dover* means multiple things, but not everything at once. Examining this large painting, one is first struck by the smudged pallor of the foundational image—a carefully crafted, peach-colored map depicting troop movements during the World War II Battle of Flanders. Scattered upon this surface, one can see small areas of abstract geometry that look like pixels and have the effect of deteriorating the legibility of the map image. Near these areas are vignettes of the well-known cartoon character Nancy (first seen in the *Fritzi Ritz* comic strip in 1922) and a likeness of the clown Jocko (the quintessential clown from the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus). Further complicating this visual panoply, Fisher renders a peaceful-looking beach scene near the center of the painting. This naturalistic picture of waves rolling ashore appears like a floating thought bubble or a roving hyperlink in a website. As a final, textual touch, Fisher copies a phrase from a billiards manual, which, running the length of the base of the painting, functions as a kind of subtitle or caption.

Attempting to make sense of this hodgepodge, one must begin with the predominating map of the Battle of Flanders. The positions charted just precede the famous Battle of Dunkirk, where English troops narrowly escaped German advances as they rushed to the sea, stealing away on any vessel available. One can't help but draw connections between the title reference to Dover, to which English troops returned as they crossed the channel exiting Belgium, and the painting's transcribed definition of "Running English":

Running English, also known as Natural English adds speed to the cue ball and widens the angle after the ball hits the cushion.

Such commentary coyly references the rushed movement of troops as well as the interpretive spin the artist places upon his images as they interact on the painted canvas like balls sliding across a pool table.

Interestingly, Fisher alters the arcing lines and clarity of the text on the map until they form new words or nonsense. "The Battle of Flanders," for example, looks more like "The Bottle of Flanders." Again, the painting embodies the vagaries of language and history as it elicits questions regarding the accuracy of all information. This seems an apropos subject, given our culture's current means and willingness to manipulate and falsify imagery and data. In this era of guerilla advertising and political speak, where everyone strives to "control the message," Fisher's art reflects our need to filter information and construct provisional understandings, even if they're based on potentially unreliable sources.

The cartoon character Nancy (whom Fisher recently stated is in part a reference to his mentally disabled sister) and Nancy's befuddled boyfriend Sluggo populate the painting in small but discrete snippets placed carefully around the canvas. Fisher uses these characters as avatars or emblems for unease, brokenness or even overt pain. The characters are invariably in a state of suffering or committing cartoon violence. All the while the head of Jocko the clown takes a central, almost omniscient, role in the action and the implications therein. His face, marked by a red nose and bouffant hair, seems to watch over the painting, suggesting a dark absurdity. Curiously, the clown appears to be gazing at the one area of calm, the beach scene. The clown's directed line of sight circles the viewer's attention back to the beachhead and the movement of soldiers from the shores of Europe to the white cliffs of Dover.

So, what does careening between a distorted battle map, cartoon characters, a clown and a seascape within a single painting reveal? By my measure it seems to add up to a complex rendering of our failures—failure of language, failure of nations, personal failure and maybe even the failure of art. But the inherent ambiguity of Fisher's approach precludes me from commenting with anything approaching certainty. Perhaps asking what this artwork means is simply the wrong question. Fisher seems to suggest that we should instead ask, what do we do with a work of art? His painting constantly leads us to an awareness of how we play the perceptual and intellectual game that the artwork instigates. *Jocko at Dover* does not have a simple solution, but the process of finding a foothold in the work of art proves rewarding in that it clarifies our thinking, sharpens our feeling and reveals the method of our evaluation. If *Jocko at Dover* is filled with conflicting associations, it's not accidental. On the contrary, Fisher foregrounds such complexity with his purposefully fractured design. Walt Whitman's famous words in "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* spring to mind:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

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