

# PATRON

ART / CULTURE / DESIGN

## INSIDE VERNON FISHER'S STUDIO

June 1, 2015 Patricia Mora and Photography by John Smith



HIS LATEST WORK MAY PROVE TO BE HIS “LONGEST SPARK.”

*Vernon Fisher lives and works in Fort Worth, Texas, which is a mere 150 miles from Hardin-Simmons University where he began his academic career as an English major. When he had only one class to complete before graduation, one of Fisher's professors urged him to take an art class and, as the cliché goes, the rest is history. He completed an M.F.A. at the University of Illinois and began making work that has led to astounding success that includes three NEA grants and one Guggenheim*

*fellowship as well as a place in the most prestigious museum collections in the country. An incomplete list of said museums includes the following institutions: Art Institute of Chicago; Corcoran Gallery of Art, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, D.C.; Houston Museum of Fine Arts; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.*

*A compendium of his exhibitions makes for an equally impressive roster. For instance, Fisher is one of the few artists from North Texas who has had a show at New York's MOMA. In other words, when V people fall into the preconception that nothing great comes from their native soil, it's wise to remember Fisher's meteoric career. For anyone who visited his show at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in 2011, "K-Mart Conceptualism," there can be little doubt that he is an artist who will endure. His brilliance is evident. He's silver-haired, tall, and lean, and speaks with a heavy Texas accent. And his cordial nature is yet another gift that makes the experience of meeting him both fascinating and hugely humbling. If you learn about him—and there's plenty to learn—it's akin to discovering that Mozart spent time in Mesquite. North Texas's native soil is far richer than anyone might suspect.*



*Mr. Fisher has been handsomely represented by Talley Dunn Gallery in Highland Park for many years. Plus, Dunn deserves huge thanks for organizing an interview and studio visits. Two galleries will mount solo shows for Fisher in 2015: Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, California, is hosting a retrospective of his work from June 18 to July 18. Similarly, Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago is opening a Fisher show featuring new paintings on September 11 that will run through October 31. One of those paintings is previewed here.*

I'm quite certain that Vernon Fisher is the only artist I've met who can deliver an off-the-cuff explanation of metaphysical poetry, metonymy, New Criticism, T. S. Eliot, Buddhism, film noir, and more. Among countless other topics, the "more" includes prose so delectable that it's unmatched in the English language. Namely, he speaks easily about Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov. This is too much. It might be expected if I were having a latenight chat with a former professor, but it's hugely startling when you realize this torrent of insight comes from one of the most successful visual

artists on the globe. And speaking of globes, cartography is yet another one of Fisher's passions. This is perhaps all the more apropos when you realize that he demands that we all explore new terrain and chart new territory. In fact, many of his works are rigorous, yet thoroughly fun-infused, excursions that are analogous to solving for "x." In mathematics it is widely known that "x" is the symbol for questions that yield up answers that are as pleasurable to retrieve as pennies snagged from chlorinated pools in childhood summers. But Fisher doesn't let us off that easily. He's enormously adept at keeping the coin, "the penny," perpetually out of reach. You can feel its contour with your fingertips but you'll never manage to push it into the surface sunlight. If you're looking for closure, you might be better off sticking to lesser artists who feign an understanding of how the world operates by delivering mere bromides.



Everyone wants to know precisely what's going on—but Fisher won't pretend that we'll ever fully grasp the real and its unfurling "plot." In fact, he may even view such bare bones of the truth as a fallacy. He's quick to point out, "In literature, people are okay with ambiguity, but not in visual art. They want to know the 'truth' of the piece." The corollary is that the truth of the piece is the piece and it can't be articulated, paraphrased, or encapsulated in language. He posits that the same is true of a poem, and while this is a rare observation, it's also accurate. Fisher understands both visual art and literary texts better than most people who hold doctorates. And he also knows that we long for unequivocal responses to posed questions, but he never caves in to a facile sensibility. He, laudably, keeps it real.

Moreover, we urgently want to know where we reside in relationship to other things; Cartesian graphs, Mercator projections, and longitude and latitude are oddly comforting. Thus, Fisher's ability to incorporate maps into his works splits open locales like scintillating peep shows for autodidacts. Under his aegis, places and objects aren't just things; they morph into metaphorical promises. They aren't warm-blooded little kittens—which Fisher also has— but, instead, they're chilly classroom preoccupations that hint at a universe that makes sense. And that's existentially soothing in ways that a cargo ship of Playboy bunnies can never be. Fisher, of course, knows this and (I hope) would find

the observation humorous. Plus, he's smart enough to deliver work that is thoroughly mimetic. In other words, he won't pretend there are answers where none are apparent. Moreover, what he does better than anyone else on our bluegreen bauble of a planet is show us precisely how we operate, how we think, how we freight things with our own psychic material, and how we conjure meaning. His work, like that of the aforementioned poet, Wallace Stevens, is thoroughly epistemological. Fisher's art seduces us into thinking about thinking. And if you're willing to plunder the interior space of your own cranial cavity, this is splendid fun.

"Once you're into aesthetics, once you're really dealing with an aesthetic experience, then it's not that big a jump from there to art. But once I got into art, I was, like, nuts. It's all I wanted to do. I was crazy for it."

-Vernon Fisher



Fisher's studio is a mammoth space located on North Main Street in Fort Worth. It has a stucco façade and a terra cotta tile roof. It seems oddly anachronistic for someone creating cutting-edge art. I suppose I was expecting hipster chic, and what I got instead was realtime conversation with a fellow for whom I had little idea how to prepare questions. I was cognizant of the aforementioned epistemological concerns, but that all seemed a tad highfalutin for openers. Instead, I opted to let the conversation meander rather than doggedly "solve for 'x'." He met me at the door and led me in to a front room that housed some familiar imagery found in his works—fiftiesera cartoon figures, a well-known piece depicting a globe being carved by a young boy's father, papers, desks, and an array of material that reflects Fisher's sprawling compendium of interests. Fisher is amiable, patient, and kind, and wore a t-shirt with horizontal stripes that reminded me of fifties sit-coms. He slumps a bit as he



sits in an old-fashioned lawn chair, and it seems as if he bears a ponderous weight on his shoulders. He has admitted that his wife, artist Julie Bozzi, says, “Vernon, you just think too much!” That may be true; but I find that to be a trait of anyone worth knowing. We sat in front of a painting that he recently completed, *Hotel*, 2015, and he spoke about it.

The piece shows coastal terrain butting against a body of water, and the work’s lighting indicates a crepuscular evening. Palm trees jut up and punctuate a grayish sky. As in most of Fisher’s work, text is woven into the image; however, in this case it’s barely legible. He said, “I enjoy this time of day, this kind of twilight.” I noted that the light and the land meeting the water seemed to suggest that he enjoys liminal connects them. He cocks his head but doesn’t respond; instead, he looks down and notes, “The pink markings are actually recessed into the surface.” Then he had me stand up and feel the indentations of the pale paint on the canvas. For any person who has set foot in a museum, this is strange terrain. I’m used to being cordoned off from artwork and certainly unable to touch it. This is infinitely more verboten than running with scissors coupled with writing in library books. But it’s also an ultimate brand of frisson and coolness for art aficionados. (I was reminded of the time a museum guard in Paris let me stroke the back of Marcel Proust’s chair.)



Everything about *Hotel* made me realize that the activity of the painting doesn’t work within typical confines. Instead, it makes us enter our own psychological interspace, the phenomenological interstices and mysterious terrain that—in actuality—constitute our lives. The text, the light, the watery landscape suggest that the real is never going to present itself without ambiguity. Even the verbiage, something many people typically consider to be a linear march toward disclosure, is impossible to discern, as is its context. And to cap it off, there is a section at the bottom in Spanish. It’s a combination of poetic musing about the sea and death, which is literally cropped in a way that obscures translation, and an announcement (on the right side) that adds perplexing exclamations. “It must be her! No one else knows this steep path to come here.” This is no conclusive narrative. Rather, it’s perpetually in medias res and, ultimately, that sums things up on a “literal” level— both in the painting and in our lives. We’re always left in a murky twilight when it comes to understanding the world, and *Hotel* is a plangent reminder of precisely how we live. That is to say, we navigate in a space that is essentially a vast mysterium. Fisher makes us confront the fact that the wisest move we can make is to befriend the questions, the cacophony, and the confusion.

Vernon Fisher, *Hotel*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.



"I have had the tremendous pleasure of working with Vernon Fisher for over twenty years now. His work is intriguing on every level—visually, intellectually, and conceptually. His works are layered with the complexities of memory, the unconscious, and thought. He has distinguished himself throughout his career with his intellect, wit, and rigor. He is regarded throughout the country as a tremendously significant artist with great integrity and vision."

—Talley Dunn, owner of Talley Dunn Gallery

This ability to acquiesce to the tension of “not knowing” and merely “sit” with not understanding is something that Fisher is fond of calling “Zen-Dumb.” He says the phrase a couple of times and sits quietly. But I get it. He’s referring to the moment in which we are momentarily stunned into silence and left with a singularly transformative moment of perplexing awe. It’s beyond light and dark, beyond land and water, and beyond vowels and consonants. It’s a (non) map into the contours of our own psyches. It can even be imagined as therapy for which you don’t have to pay, unless you count the cost of effort exerted to excavate memories, reading material, films, countries traversed, and emotions felt—which is not an inconsiderable emotional expense. But Fisher gives us such marvelously luscious morsels to work with that the rational and psychological work is worth the effort.

One of his many pieces that evidence his abiding passion for literature is *Poison Tree*, created in 1991. It leans against the wall in a backroom of his gallery. It’s a large, leafless limb that is cast in bronze; the text of a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is made of glinting metal and “climbs” the branch; Fisher keeps Robert Bly’s translation of the German text nearby. It reads: *Over all the hilltops / Silence, / Among all the treetops / You feel hardly / A breath moving. / The birds fall silent in the woods. / Simply wait! Soon / You too will be silent.*

This is hardly a lyric idyll, yet it melds seamlessly with Fisher’s body of work. It speaks of isolation and death and offers up yet another moment of “Zen-Dumb.” We’re lassoed by darkness and the contemplation of transcendent things. In other words, we’re in Fisher’s universe and he is demanding that we go into places that are discomfiting and unsettling—which, of course, is precisely what great art should do.

*The Raw and the Cooked* is yet another one of Fisher’s works that is absolutely fascinating. In fact, I could scarcely believe that I was standing about a foot from it. The piece is created with a grid background and features a young Johnny Weissmuller as the movie character, Tarzan, in the upper left corner. Adjacent to Weissmuller is his pet chimpanzee, Cheetah, staring out of jungle foliage as well as an array of men in pith helmets. Also pictured are a stereotypical tribesman, a Renaissance gentleman, and lastly, Fred Astaire. This serves as a quick compendium of what ostensibly constitutes Western civility, or lack thereof, with Astaire operating as the former in the form of an over-the-top movie idol. As many know, the name of the work is taken from a book, *Mythologiques*, written by French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. The book states that quotidian opposites operate as a means of understanding cultural constructs via binary qualities. Consequently, “raw” and “cooked” easily segues into a juxtaposition of “natural man” and the dashing and tuxedo-clad Fred Astaire. We’re climbing the ladder of ascent toward the consummate gentleman. Or are we? The grid in the background seems to lend each image equal heft and, thus, this is a piece that, once again, leaves us in a metaphorical twilight that is enigmatic and indeterminate. Is it true that clothes make the man? Or, more likely, are snappy sartorial threads simply an indication that we are easily duped by the thin sheen of fraudulence?

In the back of Fisher's studio, a door slides open and reveals an overgrown garden. This seems somehow fitting. Up front are the cerebral, mind-busting koans in the form of perfectly crafted art. Out back, it's nature gone semi-wild. We're back to the raw versus the cooked—then yet another door slides open where, surprisingly, there is still more art.



Adjacent to the aforementioned Goethe-infused bronze are pieces that are utterly irresistible, Aardvark: Shorter History blisters with an aperture of vivid red depicting a battleship/ plane combo; it's a rip in an organized surface of verbiage reminiscent of an old-fashioned encyclopedia. The work calls up smudged blackboards in classrooms punctuated by an image of war. It dangles in psychological space and gathers in its wake every experience and reference point you have about combat, particularly World War II—and the means by which they constellate a psychological experience. The work unhinges memory and its concomitant lode. It's life come undone and recodified. This is new language for a new world and it's splendidly unfractured. And, in this instance, war seems to be understood via boyhood fantasies of planes, engines, and undulating water. However, there's something eerie about the smudged blackboard. The juxtaposition of words—claws, nests, sticky, tongue, escape, kill—are the stuff of nightmares. Which is it? Bucolic childhood or monsters under the bed? I have no idea, and I'm not sure I genuinely want to know the answer. In other words, this is one coin I'm hesitant to pluck from the pool.



*Six Objects in Light* presents life in the crosshairs. Four bunnies stare into darkness while cordoned off by brambles— nature’s version of concertina wire. They are numbered and an ambush seems imminent. Meanwhile, two parachutists are shown in a vivid blue aperture in the backdrop. We’re ferried back into yet another war zone replete with dark smoke and billowing white parachutes. Each of the six “objects” is being hunted. The narrative is fraught with a loaded violence. Two kinds of light are depicted and each is as terrifying as the other. There’s no escape—and that’s the truth of it. Fisher seems to intimate that no one gets out alive. Or, at least, not unscathed. It’s all a high-wire act, and Fisher loves to show us existential goods on a grand scale.

On one occasion he compared art to electrical current in a wire. He noted, “You can snip the wire but you’ll still get a spark. And you can move the ends of the wires further and further apart until there’s no longer a connection.” He pauses before adding, “But what I’m aiming for is the longest spark I can get.” I suspect he’s talking about our own synapses firing and the points of juncture between objects portrayed and our psyches. And it should be noted that not only does Fisher achieve “the longest spark”—he creates a light that is gorgeously ambitious in its trajectory and thrilling to behold. Which is not bad for a boy born outside Fort Worth in a little town called Granbury. He has won a place in the ultimate pantheon of spectacular artistic talent—and, from what I gather, it was hard-won turf. Before such monumental effort and genius, there’s only one proper response. I, for one, can’t help but bow my head. —P



Vernon Fisher (left), *White Hunter*, 1986, cast hydrostone, steel, nickel-plated copper, fiberglass, 73 x 15 x 9 in. and Vernon Fisher (right), *Psyche*, 1983, acrylic on paper, steel, 61 x 77 x 4 in.