

Pharma Art—Abstract Medication in the Work of Beverly Fishman

Bonnie Pitman, MA

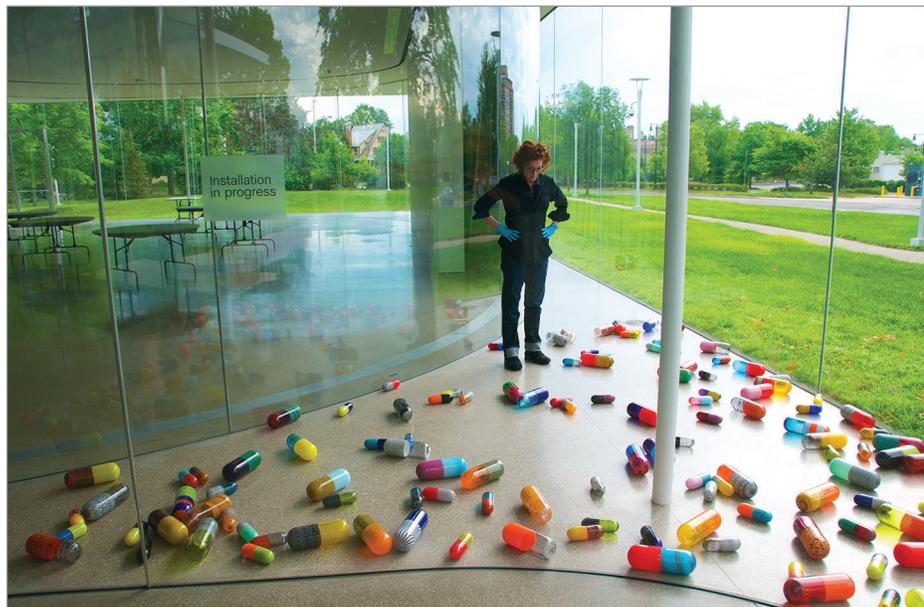
Beverly Fishman is a visual artist whose work explores the role and representations of pharmacy and the pharmaceutical industry in contemporary culture. She creates sculptural paintings—large, constructed installations with hypersaturated colors and industrial-like slick surfaces—that evoke the design of pills, their combinations in drug “cocktails,” and the colors and surfaces of drug advertising. They also comment on drug overprescription and dependence and the ways medications not only treat but define illness.

Since the late 1990s, Fishman has consciously modeled her work after the shapes of tablets and capsules, alone and in combinations—complete, distorted, abstracted, and deconstructed. Her earliest work took the form of small, wall-mounted pill casts handcarved in resin, easily identifiable as alprazolam (Xanax), sildenafil (Viagra), or 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA) (ecstasy or molly), organized into larger regular grids or clusters. But Fishman has moved toward formal abstraction and continually mined art history to keep her work alive and developing in new directions. Her most identifiable affinity now may be with [early era Frank Stella](#), who introduced the use of bold geometric shapes and intense hard-edge lines into the abstract art movement of the 1960s, but she also acknowledges strong artistic connections to the work of [Ellsworth Kelly](#), [Elizabeth Murray](#), [Anne Truitt](#), and [Judy Pfaff](#). Though the work is abstract, with titles and subtitles like *DOSE*, *Opioid Addiction*, *Diabetes*, and *Pain Management*, her paintings address very real illnesses that preoccupy medicine and society today.

Color is crucial to her project, as it often is to pharmaceutical packaging and advertising. Influenced by [Wassily Kandinsky](#), [Josef Albers](#), and [Hans Hofmann](#)—artists who explored through their art and writing how colors shift appearance depending on their values, saturations, adjacencies, finish, areas, and interrelationships—Fishman uses colors and light to create dynamic effects around her installations, such as reflected halos and flickering afterimage moments when colors seem to re-

appear after looking away. She carefully constructs a painting’s surface and edges to obscure the boundaries of where the painting ends and the wall begins. All are intentional methods to attract viewers to the art and coax them into confronting the vital, often illusory, and sometimes complicated ways clinical pharmacy illuminates our lives.

These artistic and thematic concerns are the latest expressions of a gradual evolution through health-related themes. In the 1980s, as she began to lose friends to the AIDS epidemic, Fishman created a series of works influenced by human cells and viruses. Turning from disease to cure, Fishman began to create wall-mounted pharmaceutical forms in the late 1990s that modified the colors and sizes of conventional medication—a phase that culminated in a series of phosphorescent [glow-in-the-dark installations](#). In the 2000s, she moved into [modular metal paintings](#) of molecules, scans, ECG and EEG patterns, and DNA codes. Inspired by her earlier resin works, 2-D images of capsules and brand-name pharmaceuticals continued to appear in the visual mix, now in combination with imagery that evoked the scientific representation of the human body. Her cellular and biological images required experiments with colors and shapes, moving her into abstraction. Over the years, her work evolved into larger-scale sculptural paintings that she continues to this day—now more centrally focused on the forms of legal and illegal drugs.



Pill Spill by Beverly Fishman, 2011. Blown glass, more than 100 unique elements. Featured at the Toledo Museum of Art, Glass Pavilion, Toledo, Ohio, from July 15, 2011, through September 30, 2011. Photo courtesy of Matthew Biro.



Left, *Untitled (Anxiety)* by Beverly Fishman, 2017. Urethane paint on wood, 105.4 cm × 105.4 cm.



Right, *Untitled (Stacked Pills)* by Beverly Fishman, 2016. Urethane paint on wood, 149.9 cm × 121.9 cm × 5.1 cm. Photos courtesy of PD Rearick.

In 2011, Fishman was awarded the Toledo Museum of Art's [Guest Artist Pavilion Project](#), which invites contemporary artists to collaborate on glass-based projects in the museum's postmodern Glass Pavilion. When Fishman saw the building and space (designed by Tokyo-based SANAA), she decided to return to 3-D pharmaceutical forms—this time as floor-based “scatters” of oversized capsules: “I immediately thought about treating the museum as a ‘body,’” she said, “and releasing my capsules into the curved glass hollows between its walls, transforming the building’s architecture into a giant circulatory system.” Her *Pill Spill* installation comprised more than 100 unique blown-glass capsules, ranging in size from 3 to 15 inches scattered in the interstices of the building’s double-glass walls. She has subsequently done large-scale installations of the capsule delivery system at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Chrysler Museum of Art, and at solo shows in New York and Michigan.

Her latest body of work, which she began in 2012, involves larger-scale installations. Fishman brings a high level of production to her studio, manufacturing shaped, wooden supports and consulting with industrial paint specialists to achieve immaculately smooth, high-gloss, saturated surfaces with jarring colors. She begins the process by researching shapes and colors online, then makes a series of collages, physically placing colors and shapes in relationships to each other to judge their interactions. She is looking for ways to “surprise and shock” herself as she considers each variation and impact. The frameworks of the paintings are then created in wood and specialists do the urethane painting. Fishman acknowledges that there are successes and failures—and that she needs to live with some pieces and then will have them repainted, some multiple times, until she is satisfied. Failure is part of her practice. She wants to experiment and looks intently for new ideas and solutions, especially with color.

Untitled (Anxiety), 2017, is an example of her newer work. It evokes the shape of a fractured pill tablet, soft curves re-

placed by hard offset angles, joined uneasily in the middle by pink and orange lines referencing the score on an actual pill where it is broken apart to adjust dosage. Its fluorescent pink and orange shapes contrast with irregular central shapes in dark brown and creamy beige (colors Fishman bases on skin tones and the cosmetic industry) and with 3 luminous bands of colors at the outer edges that further activate the forms. The dynamic, 3-dimensional surface possesses beveled edges and angled surfaces framing central parallel faces, and vibrant colors push off the wall. The overall effect is one of tension, movement, and vibration, a visual representation of anxious moods and diagnoses and the remedies we use to quiet them.

Untitled (Stacked Pills), 2016, comprises 2 pill-like sculptures atop one another, one of many of Fishman's artistic references to pill combinations and polypharmacy used to treat conditions like HIV, viral hepatitis, and mental health disorders. It is a formidable example of Fishman's more formal color experiments. Viewers perceive the chartreuse color in the oval shape at the top as yellow, green, or a combination of the 2, depending on variations in the cone receptors of the eye. The overhead fluorescent light on the color enhances its coolness and eerie qualities in sharp contrast to the larger, matte black shape below; the physicality of the black form absorbs in the light while the chartreuse reflects it. A side view of the work shows Fishman's carefully built-up layers of urethane, including a rich green layer encircling both pill forms that creates a green halo around the edges of painting and lifts it away from the wall with reflective light, making the wall part of the piece and not just a place on which it hangs.

Intrinsic to these 2 paintings and to Fishman's work more generally is the shock of displacement. By placing pill forms on walls; exaggerating their formal elements of scale, shape, volume, and color; and combining them in myriad creative ways, Fishman hopes to make the ordinary extraordinary and compel viewers to consider how medication mediates their sense of mood and self and shapes our culture as a whole.

Author Affiliations: Distinguished Scholar in Residence, Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, Dallas, Texas; Director of Art-Brain Initiatives, Center for Brain Health, University of Texas at Dallas.

Corresponding Author: Bonnie Pitman, MA, University of Texas at Dallas, 800 W Campbell Rd, ATC 11, Office ATC 3.602, Richardson, TX 75080 (bpitman@utdallas.edu).

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The author has completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest; none were reported.

Additional Information: Beverly Fishman is [artist in residence](#) and head of painting at Cranbrook Academy of Art and lives and works in Detroit. An MFA graduate of Yale University, she exhibits at Jack Shainman Gallery and Kravets Wehby Gallery in New York City. Since 2000, Fishman's work has been exhibited internationally and is in the collections of more than 30 museums including the Chrysler Museum, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, Detroit Institute of Arts, Toledo Museum of Art, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Life Sciences Institute at the University of Michigan, and US Consulate General in Istanbul.

Orpheus' Descent Into the Neurointensive Care Unit

Francesco Brigo, MD

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice tells the story of a mortally wounded woman (Eurydice) who is taken to the Underworld and whose poet-musician lover (Orpheus) enters the Underworld to save her. Orpheus is allowed to bring Eurydice back on the condition he not gaze at her as they return to the surface of the living, a test he fails at the last moment. Among many things, the story is about the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life.

In 1859 Hector Berlioz revised and adapted previous operatic versions of the myth composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck, and in 2014 Italian director Romeo Castellucci staged it at [Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie](#) in Brussels as a drama in the neurointensive care unit.

Captions behind the singer playing the role of Orpheus tell the story of a young woman affected by locked-in syndrome following basilar artery thrombosis. Orpheus' descent to the Underworld is represented by black-and-white images

projected on the screen showing a journey toward the ICU where the woman lies in her hospital bed. Captions advise the audience that the opera is being broadcast live to her, and in the final scene of the production, the images show her wearing headphones relaying the song of Orpheus direct from the opera house.

The staging uses the Greek myth as a template for the frustration and grief experienced by relatives of patients with coma, persistent vegetative state, or locked-in syndrome, and the hope against impossibility of bringing their loved ones back to a normal life.

This is the first instance of an opera production using Orpheus and Eurydice to address issues in neurology and neurointensive care, and it is an example of how cinema, theater, and opera are powerful tools to convey emotional states and can also play a role in increasing public awareness of issues in medicine and ethics.



Images from Hector Berlioz's *Orphée et Eurydice* directed by Romeo Castellucci. Reproduced with permission. Copyright B. Uhlig and De Munt La Monnaie.

Author Affiliation: Department of Neuroscience, Biomedicines and Movement Science, University of Verona, Italy.

Corresponding Author: Francesco Brigo, MD, University of Verona, P.le L.A. Scuro, 8, Verona 37134, Italy (dr.francescobrigo@gmail.com).

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The author has completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Dr Brigo

reported grant funding from Eisai and personal fees from Peervoice, Eisai, Italfarmaco SpA, and UCB.

Additional Contributions: I thank Alice Pierson and Aurore Aubouin for permission to reproduce images of this production and Andrea Orioli for graphical support.

Additional Information: Excerpts of the production can be seen at ja.ma/OrpheeEurydice.