

ART SPIEL

Beverly Fishman's Greatest Emergency

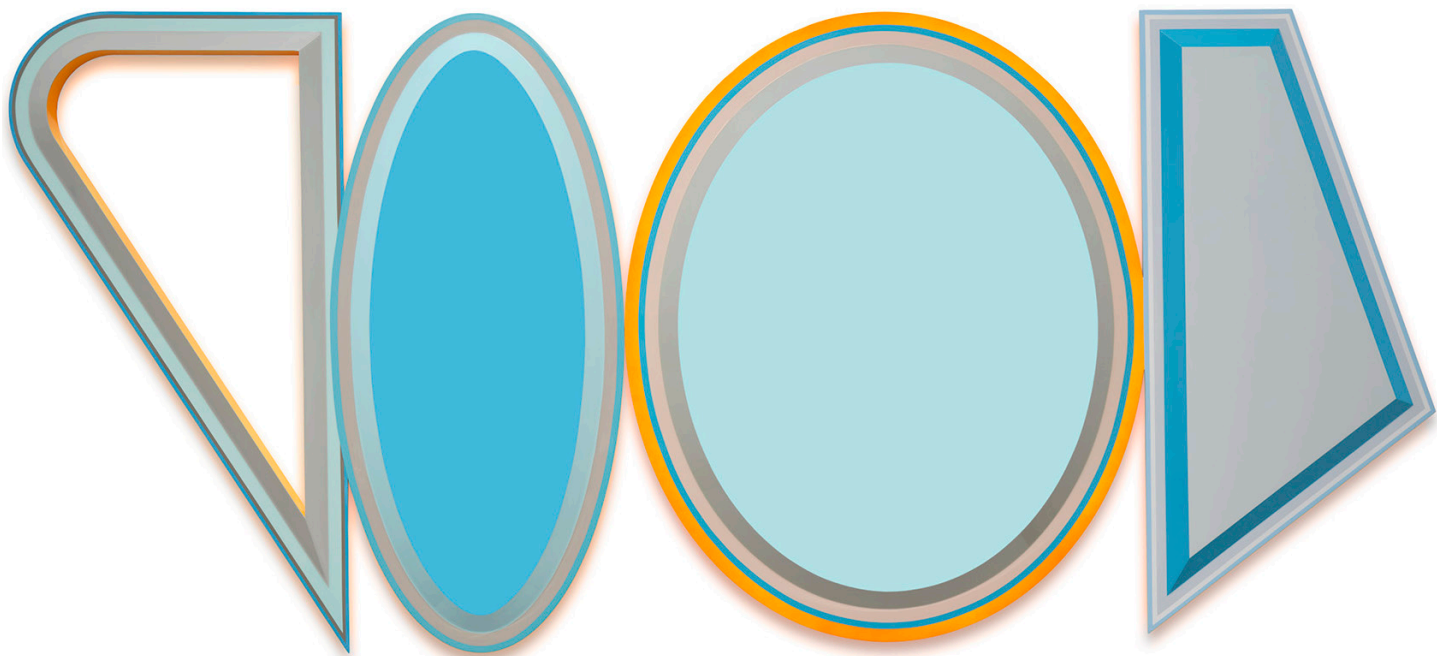
By Santiago Zabala | 28 May 2024



Installation image of Beverly Fishman: *I Dream of Sleep*, 2020, Miles McEnery Gallery

Unlike many art historians and art critics, philosophers do not look for works of art that are necessarily beautiful or interesting. Most of us—at least those educated in the continental tradition of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Arendt—instead look for works that disclose a theoretical stance. Martin Heidegger's writing on Van Gogh's shoes paintings, Arthur Danto on Andy Warhol's Pop Art, and Jacques Rancière on Alfredo Jaar's photographs are paradigmatic examples. This does not mean we do not care about the artist's effort in creating such work; rather, we focus more on whether the work discloses an aesthetic notion, political idea, or anthropological concept that has meaning for society at large. Artists, for us, have the same ontological purpose as scientists or politicians. A great work of art, new scientific discovery, or progressive policy can change people's relationship with reality. If these works, discoveries, and policies change this relationship, it is not necessarily because they are "better" than others but because they touch our existence to a greater degree.

Since the publication of my book *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (2017), friends have pointed out to me works of art that thrust us into absent emergencies. These, as I will now explain, are our greatest emergencies—and the ones we do not confront. I'm very grateful to the Italian artist Filippo Minelli because he has recently drawn my attention to Beverly Fishman's work. The goal of this brief article is to illustrate why and how Fishman's works are an excellent example of "why only art can save us" in this age of "absent emergencies." One of her sculptures will be presented at an exhibition—*The Greatest Emergency*—I'm curating at the Circulo de Bellas Artes of Madrid in October, where several artists—Diane Burko, Josh Kline, and many others—will "rescue us into" absent emergencies. But what is the difference between absent or great emergencies and actual emergencies?

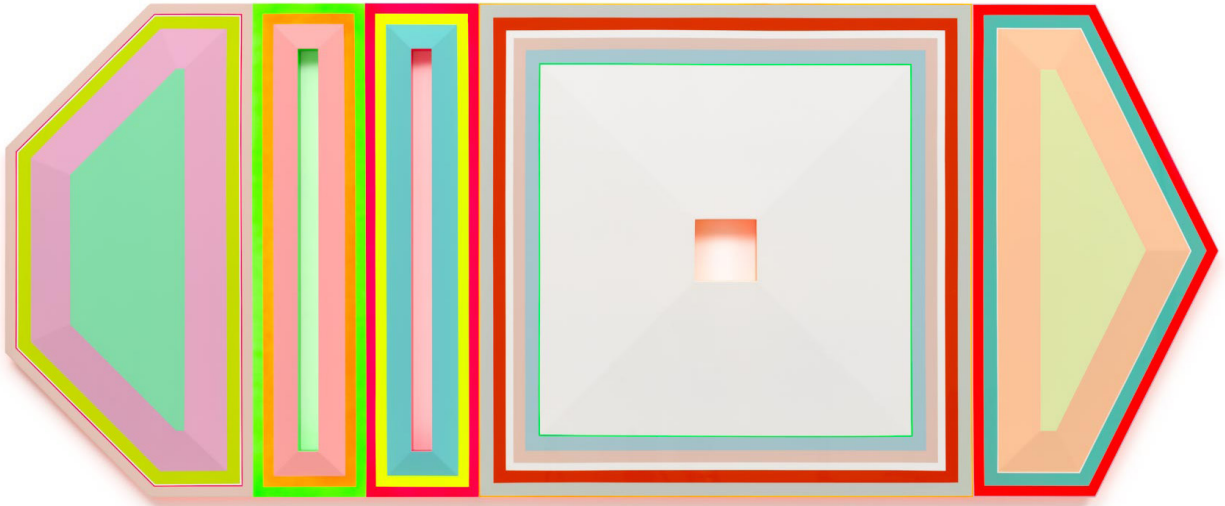


Untitled (Epilepsy, Pain, ADHD, Anxiety), 2021, Urethane paint on wood, 48 x 108 inches

We are living in an epoch where the greatest emergencies are the ones we do not confront. This does not mean that a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic is not a fundamental emergency we must confront at all levels. It simply suggests the greatest emergencies are the silent existential ones hidden behind the churn of ongoing crises. These include, among others, economic inequality, refugee crises, and climate change. Despite the warnings of scientists and activists since the 1970s, climate change is responsible for the deaths of seven million human beings every year because of air pollution. Yet every year, once again, nothing meaningful is done to stop it or the extractive capitalism that sustains it. What is dramatic about COVID-19 is that it was an “absent” or “great” emergency for many years; sociologists, such as Mike Davis, scientists, such as David Quammen, and international organizations, such as the WHO, have been warning for decades of the threat of pandemic influenzas. This novel coronavirus was an absent emergency that turned into an emergency—though it is easy to point out that its underlying cause may be the same as that of climate change, the world-altering forces of extractive capitalism. Fishman thrusts us into a different absent emergency: our addiction to pharmaceutical drugs.

The recent HBO documentary *The Crime of the Century* and the HULU TV series *Dopesick* on the opioid epidemic and how the U.S. government permitted the Sackler family and Purdue Pharma to get Oxycontin approved for wider use is a good example of how the widespread addiction to pharmaceutical drugs occurs: through the actions of the capitalist class protecting its interests no matter the cost. Although this documentary and TV series focus only on a specific drug, it is easy to imagine that a similar process describes the relationships of other pharmaceutical corporations and governments. According to Nora D. Volkow, the director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), in 2021, “drug overdose deaths in the U.S. surpass an unthinkable milestone: 100,000 deaths in a year.” When we learn that for every dollar pharmaceutical companies spend on the research and development of a new drug, they spend nineteen on its advertisement, it is clear we have become their target primarily as medicated consumers. Fishman’s works of art aim to disclose this second category of targeted medicated consumers.

To disclose this emergency, Fishman’s paintings and sculptures invite the viewer to acknowledge the color and forms of pills and tablets and that the effects of these colors are a central part of the marketing of pharmaceuticals. If pills are often pink, yellow, or blue, studies show that pink suggests something sweet tasting, such as yellow or lemon, and blue, which is calming. The choice of color is not medically determined but determined by the best way to manipulate a market. These colors can also be found in her paintings on shaped panels that resemble



Untitled (Alcoholism, Anxiety, Depression, Abortion), 2022, Urethane paint on wood, 48 x 118 inches

geometric arrangements of the tablets, capsules, and pills that we often find ourselves swallowing in the morning. The most significant difference between the pills we take and the ones in Fishman's marvelous exhibition at the Contemporary Dayton (curated by Michael Goodson) is our reflection in the paintings' glossy finishes and the shiny surfaces of the glass. When we look closely at her work, we can see our distorted faces. This distortion is absent in real pills, even though it is present in a much more profound way as soon as we take them.

Fishman's work continues a long tradition of art related to pharmaceuticals that can be found both in the works of Marcel Duchamp and, more recently, Damien Hirst. While both titled a ready-made and installation *Pharmacy*, Fishman uses a variety of titles for her exhibits and works—*In Sickness and in Health* (2015-2016), *I Dream of Sleep* (2020), and *The Promise of Happiness* (2021)—that immediately invite us to acknowledge the true function of their subjects. The most significant difference between the work of these artists and Fishman's lies in the significance we attribute to pharmaceuticals. The glowing forms of the tablets and pills not only turn them into something to treasure but also distract us from their inevitable side effects. In this dangerous distraction, we can acknowledge why Fishman's work exemplifies salvation through art.

If we agree with the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin when he states that "where the danger is, also grows the saving power" and accept that Fishman's works thrust us into one of the greatest emergencies of our time, then her art is also meant to save us. According to Heidegger, "Usually we think that it means only to seize hold of a thing threatened by ruin, in order to secure it in its former continuance. But the verb 'to save' says more. 'To save' is to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing." Fishman manages to disclose the danger of pharmaceutical drugs by creating works of art where this "genuine appearance" manifests itself through the different tablets and pills that constitute her works.

Philosophers, as mentioned above, have a special interest in works of art that touch our existence rather than please our aesthetic senses through beauty. Some artists focus on "rescuing us from emergencies," and others are interested in "rescuing us into emergencies." Fishman clearly belongs to the latter. This distinction does not define who is more original but rather what is more essential: the emergency or its absence? If most artists have lost touch with the absence of emergency, it's not only because they are framed within a cultural order but also because they have become the means of such order. Fishman instead rescues us from one of our greatest emergencies by drawing us closer to its genuine appearance. This appearance touches our existence and relation with reality. However, drawing us closer does not mean only that we "experience" or "awaken" the emergency but rather that we also become the emergency. This is our distorted reflection, manifest on the surface of artificial pills as we inspect her works. It should not come as a surprise that I invited her to *The Greatest Emergency* exhibition that will take place at the Circulo de Bellas Artes of Madrid in the fall.