

# MAGIC BULLET

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*Beverly Fishman*

My art examines the relationship between color, form, and human identity while synthesizing subjective and mechanical processes. Throughout my career, I have been interested in exploring abstraction and juxtaposing formal and material investigations with questions about how science and technology transform human beings. I have always worked in multiple media and combined representation with abstraction. Painting, however, has been at the center of my practice; I have developed hybrid processes that integrate subjective color choices and gesture with mass reproduction and industrial fabrication. My overall subject is how science, technology, and medicine affect both the body and the mind: how they represent, idealize, and stereotype us—and how they change us.

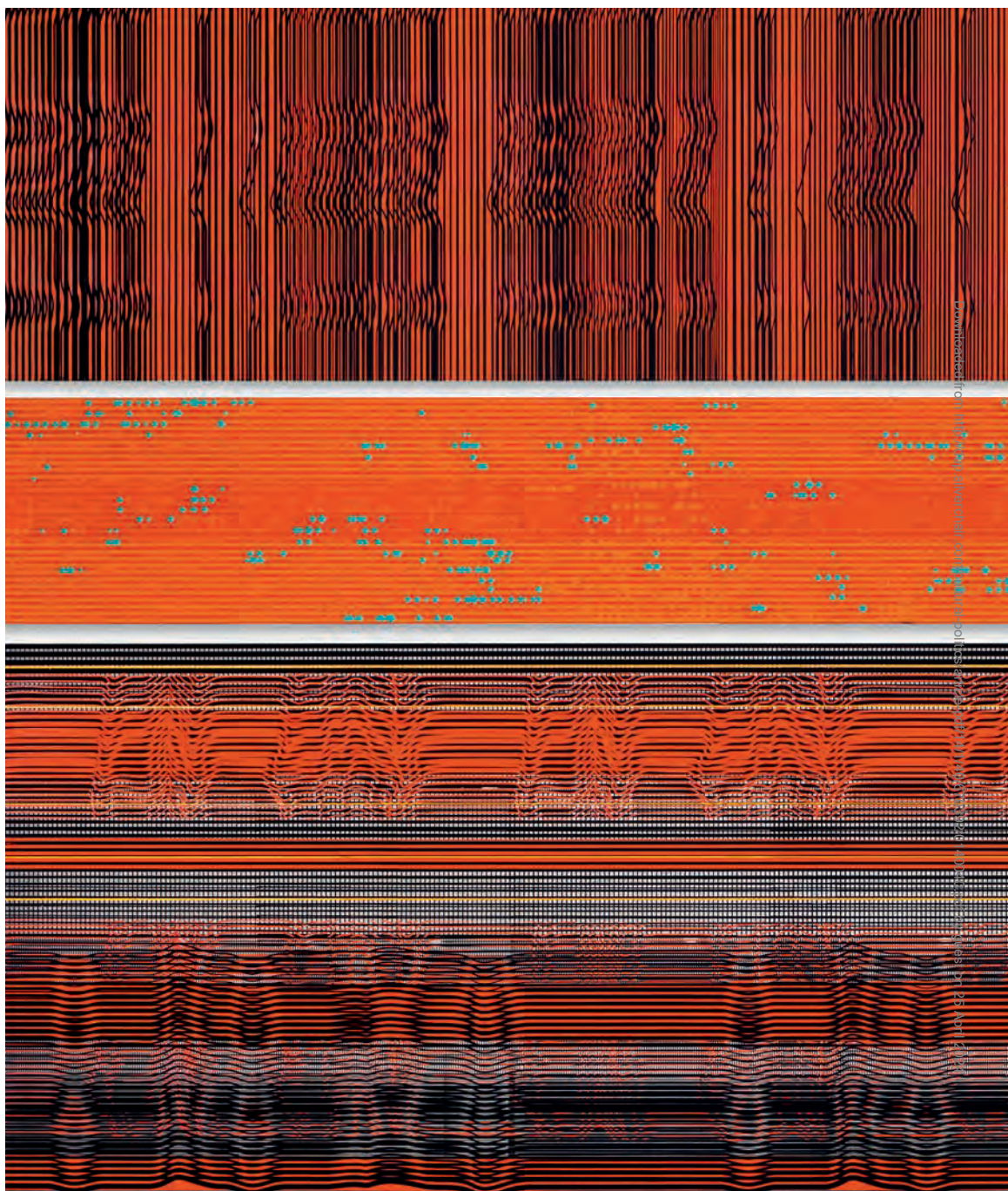
In the 1980s I analyzed the sensorial body through sculptural form. Looking at anatomy books and everything under the skin, I was interested in the body as viscera. I created large, abject sculptures that showed human beings as internal, biological, and centered in the flesh. I was interested not in what we looked like externally but in what we were as material, chemical, and electrical organisms. As a feminist, I was also highly aware of how society tried to reduce women to physical and emotional characteristics. In part, my sculptures were a way to highlight and subvert those readings of women as (mere) bodies.



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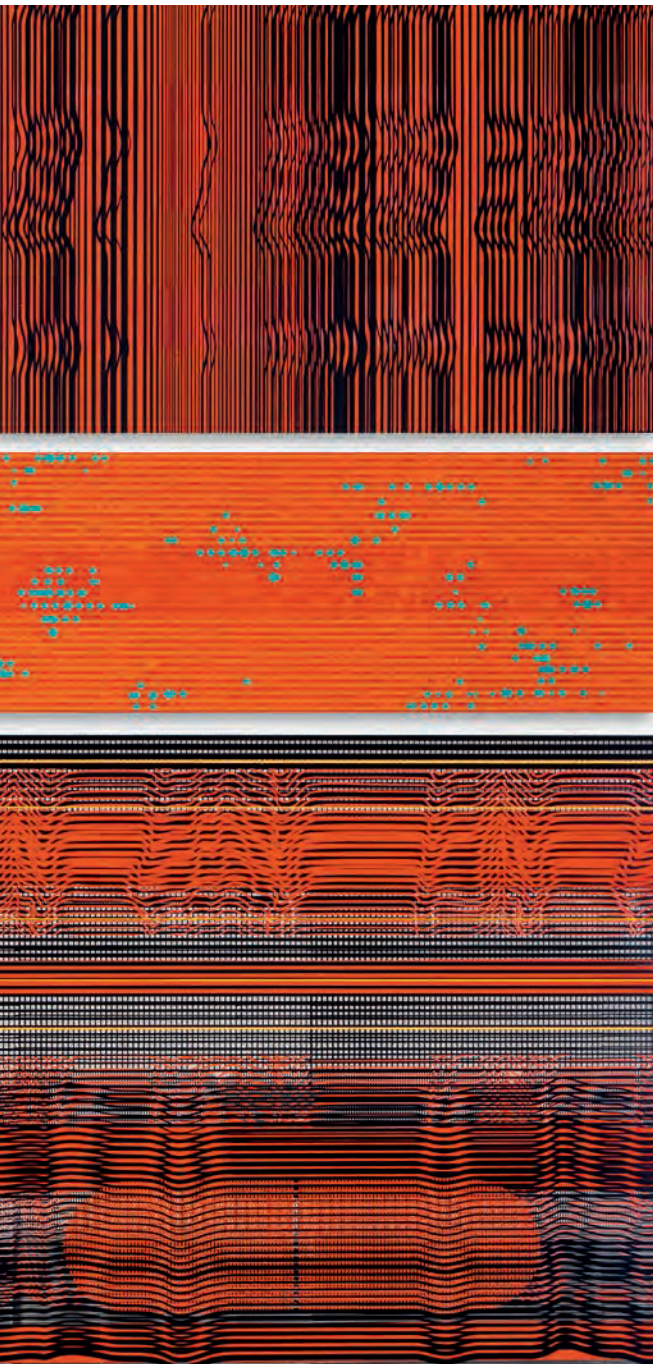


**Figure 1** *L.Y.M. #1–151*, photo-based collage, acrylic, resin on wood, 84.5 × 66 in., 1997–99. Private collection, Michigan



In the late 1980s I started to use a black-and-white copying machine to create collage elements that I integrated into mixed-media paintings on wood. I began using a color copier a few years later. Appropriating and abstracting images of

cells, I sought to link the reproduction of images to mutation and biological development. Living in New York during the AIDS crisis, I was aware of how a virus could define one's identity. I wanted to represent the body while engaging with the



**Figure 2** *Dividose: N.S.P.*, enamel on polished stainless steel, 63 × 84 in. (three panels), 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery

technologies through which our interiors were visualized and reproduced. As a result, my mixed-media paintings changed shape and began to mimic the forms of eyes, lenses, and petri dishes.

I incorporated representations of stars and nebulae into my imagery in the mid-1990s to suggest analogies between the body and space, micro- and macrocosm. These works culminated in large-scale installations of modular paintings that interconnected the human figure with the cosmos. For my *Intervention* at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1995, I paired my shaped reliefs with medieval armor to emphasize that our skins are permeable and that the self can be undermined from both within and without.

I also created installations of cell-like modules consisting of photo-collage, acrylic, and resin in the mid- to late 1990s. Exploring the shaped module as a mixture of appropriated and hand-painted elements, I used painting to create a dialogue between biological and technological modes of reproduction in my *I.D. Series*. As with my earlier works, I wanted to infect high modernism, adding social content related to questions of the body and disease to “pure” abstraction. Experiencing my parents and siblings struggle with grave illnesses, I chose to use painting to reveal the fragility and unpredictability of life.

Cluster paintings evolved out of the shaped cellular modules, but now multiple elements were combined into a “single” painting, which played between unity and diversity and suggested organic movement, instability, and change. I was interested in bringing images of cellular and cosmic life into dialogue with questions of installation, the shaped canvas, the mechanical and the handmade, and uniqueness and appropriation.

Around 2000 I turned from an image bank evoking disease to one that visualized





**Figure 3** *Pill Spill*, blown glass, more than one hundred unique elements, each installation varies, 2011. Toledo Museum of Art, Glass Pavilion, July 15–September 30, 2011. Courtesy of the artist

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pharmaceutical cures. Using cast resin with pigment, I created new forms of cluster paintings: sculptural works that hung on the wall and that further undermined distinctions between painting, sculpture, installation, and environment. The early resin clusters appropriated the shapes of pills in order to raise questions about our stereotypes of sickness and health, normal and abnormal. The clusters in turn evolved into glow-in-the-dark pharmaceutical installations that explored color and form as they changed under different environmental conditions. Appropriated images of ecstasy pills, which revealed the designing and branding of illegal drugs, became part of the mix in 2007.

In the early 2000s I began rectangular-format modular paintings, thus expanding my representational imagery to evoke new ways for defining and imagining the body and the mind. Early metal paintings combined technological representations of the body—molecules, helixes, EKG and EEG patterns, and sound waves—with morphed pharmaceutical logos. By collaging colored industrial sign-vinyl on powder-coated aluminum rectangles, I wanted to suggest a perfect virtual image at a distance and a rough and factured surface when viewed up close. Science and medicine, I hoped to suggest, could both cure and destroy.

As my metal paintings developed, I began to incorporate graphic patterning from circuit schematics as well as DNA notation, bar codes, QR codes, and representations of neuron spikes. I also began screen-printing layers of enamel on polished stainless steel. This move to a

**Figure 4** Beverly Fishman: *In Sickness and in Health*, installation view, 2015–16. Chrysler Museum of Art



reflective surface was the result of my desire to find new ways to erase boundaries between artworks, viewers, and environments. Through these metal paintings, I hoped to engage spectators by means of bodily reflections and draw them into a painted “virtual” environment that would remind them of their chemically and technologically mediated societies.

*My Pill Spills*, which I began in 2010, are large, sculptural floor installations of brightly colored, moiré-patterned, blown-glass capsules ranging from six to fifteen inches. Through these expansive scatters of eighty to one hundred unique elements, I treat museum or gallery spaces as living organisms, releasing pharmaceuticals into different institutional interiors. The two-part capsule serves as both an icon for the paradoxes of medicine and a vehicle for abstraction, through which changing color and pattern combinations can be unfolded. By their position on the floor, these fragile objects were designed to contest the preciousness of their materials, and their strewn and accumulated configurations were calculated to blur the boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, conscious and unconscious processes. I later added glass tablets and placed the blown-glass capsules into vitrines, or “pillboxes.” Intended to evoke high-end product displays, these were drug cocktails designed for specific collectors.

Science and medicine, as I understand them, are some of the highest expressions of our societies—they are lifesaving, terrifying, and creative all at the same time. For this reason, the capsule, as I envision it, is profoundly ambiguous: a technology that brings health as well as sickness. My *Pill Spills* all begin from the same question: What does it mean for the capsule to become a medium—as opposed to a subject—of art?

The polychrome reliefs that I began to fabricate in wood and urethane paint in 2012 explore our contemporary global condition in which drugs construct and contest our identities and in which the production and consumption of art can seem like an addiction. Inspired by my research into the use of design strategies by pharmaceutical companies, generic manufacturers, and the purveyors of illegal drugs, these reliefs engage with the phenomenology of spectatorship and with the concrete historical conditions that undergird the multibillion-dollar drug production industry. Drug manufacturers use shapes and colors to distinguish their products visually and to promote brand loyalty. Both corporate and street chemical “pushers” develop specific iconographies to create lifestyle-driven products. They brand the pills to target audiences’ tastes, desires, beliefs, and ideals.

The shapes of my wall objects, ranging from twenty-five inches to fifteen feet, are derived from the structures of common pharmaceuticals (brand-name and generic) as well as ecstasy pills, while their colors reference both skin tones—sold to us through cosmetics—and the realms of technology and industry, as indicated by nonnatural, industrial hues, such as those produced by fluorescent and automobile paints. Created through my combination of industrial and hand-based practices, these works, with their reflective surfaces, physical presence, and phenomenological impact are socially critical. I want my audiences to reflect on both the benefits and the dangers that drugs and pharmaceuticals offer us. The reliefs employ scale shifts and chromatic juxtapositions to turn tiny commodities into large signs and corporate logos that promise health, beauty, pleasure, and the transcendence of death. But as today’s opioid crisis graphically



**Figure 5** *Untitled (Alcoholism)*, urethane paint on wood, 44 × 39 × 2 in., 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery. Photo by PD Rearick

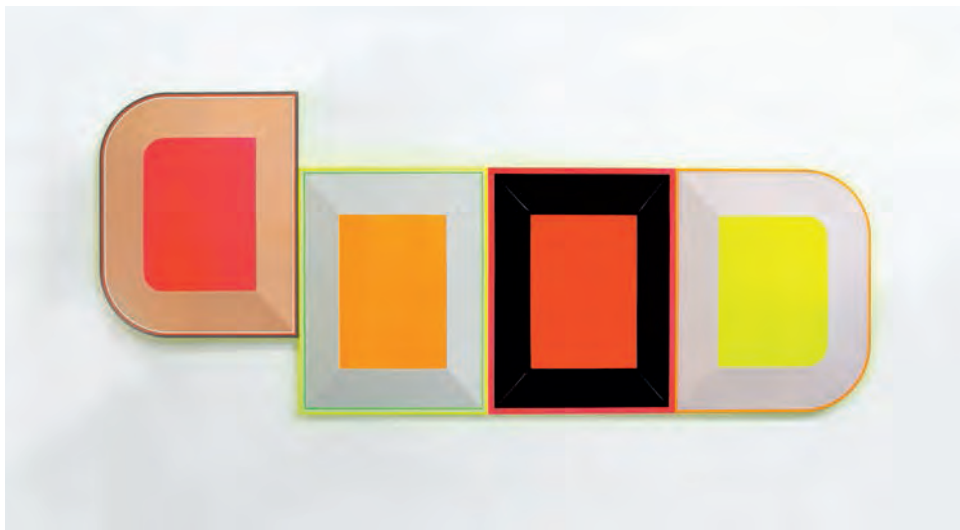
demonstrates, we must be vigilant in distinguishing healthful from harmful uses of drugs.

Mining the histories of geometric and hard-edge abstraction and pop art, and reconfiguring them through strategies of appropriation and references to both living bodies and seductive objects, I hope to provoke reflection on both art and society in an increasingly anxious, addicted, and divided moment. It is only by examining how we diagnostically view and medicate ourselves that we may see our way past the most pressing dangers of our time.

### ***Acknowledgments***

Many thanks to Jim Blasi for preliminary graphic design.

***Beverly Fishman's*** work adopts the language of abstraction to explore the body, issues of identity, and contemporary culture. Her career-long investigation draws on medical and scientific imaging and the pharmaceutical industry to create seductive works that entice the viewer with their luminescent forms and chromatic lushness while referencing the trajectory of modernist painting. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at galleries in New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Thessaloniki, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Detroit, and has also been shown at the Chrysler Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Columbus Museum of Art, among others. Her work is represented in many collections, including the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, the Cranbrook Art Museum, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, and the Pizzuti Collection. She is artist-in-residence and head of the Painting Department at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan.



**Figure 6** *Untitled (Anxiety)*, urethane paint on wood, 47 × 126 × 2 in., 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery. Photo by PD Rearick