Words and Pictures: *Vernon Fisher, 1980 – 2019*

Curated by Tracee W. Robertson

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Descent of Man, 2014

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Introduction

In higher education, we often find ourselves considering the delicate balance between the established standards of our academic disciplines and the fresh energy and perspectives so consistently delivered by our students every semester. This is particularly relevant in the fine arts where our metrics of merit are often dictated by how creatively the established standards can be avoided (or even, demolished). There are, of course, many skillful ways an educator may guide aspiring artists through the minefield of studio instruction—stoking the embers of rebellion while building a legitimate appreciation for the *appreciated*—by which one might measure the success of any instruction.

Occasionally, however, there occurs the rare confluence of excellence in the classroom and critically authenticated

professional success. Vernon Fisher achieved that kind of excellence. Fisher's career at the University of North Texas began in 1978. In 1980, he won his second National Endowment for the Arts Grant. This began a pattern of lauded accomplishment and well received exhibitions, which would endure until his retirement as a Regents Professor of Art in 2006. His artwork is included in the collections of more than 40 museums across the world, such as the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., Art Institute of Chicago, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Even so, perhaps Vernon Fisher's most impactful contribution as artist and educator remains among the legions of students

he mentored and challenged over the years. Fisher's critiques championed formal analysis and critical observation, helping his students develop these core skills that underpin their critical successes and endure in so many of their creative endeavors.

Here at the University of North Texas we are proud to build on the tradition of creative rigor both in and out of the classroom. With this exhibition, we honor Vernon Fisher's indelible contribution to the arts, as we celebrate the formal opening of the expanded and integrated College of Visual Arts and Design facilities.

*By Greg Watts, Dean and Professor
College of Visual Arts and Design
University of North Texas*

Chalk Spills, 2000

Sparrows

By Tracee W. Robertson

“Perhaps you still don’t understand what I’m saying. What I want to say is a paradox, and so I am hardly able to put it into words.”

— Lady Philosophy, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius, 524 AD

Poetic Knowledge

Facing Vernon Fisher’s paintings can feel like an encounter with both beauty and a game. The experience calls to mind the first time I played sudoku. I remember reading the instructions and then staring at the puzzle’s squares for a long time, trying to find a way to start. Fisher’s paintings are less technically rigid than sudoku puzzles, and there are no instructions. To engage with his art, you have to know things. You have to be willing to simply enjoy the formal elements that give the experience harmony. You won’t know everything, but you will decipher enough to perceive an expression of life.

Fisher’s work roots our minds in the physical world rather than in the realm of ideas. This is a literary approach. It helps us honestly see the actions, motivations, yearnings, wounds, and triumphs of living.¹ We see a circus lion jumping through hoops; we see a human skeleton labeled with substances from nature; we see a human hand at a bathroom sink; we see a railroad crossing on a country road; and we see

myriad facial expressions, to name a few. So much goes on in the composition, and each element is of a different order of representation, that the only way to approach it is to ask, What do I see? Then, let go of the inclination to connect parts into a whole and give way to the feeling present there.

The display of recognizable images and words prompt us to connect individual elements into a cohesive story, but this inclination is soon frustrated. In these recognizable elements are layers of meaning: what we can see and describe, our experience and understanding of that thing, and its implied cultural meanings, which we may or may not know. The disparity or rather the individuality among the elements and, thus, the difficulty in making sense of them together, leads to an overwhelming number of largely nonsensical possibilities.

Fisher leaves the works open-ended, so connections are made not in the mind, by parts of the painting making sense together, but through feelings, by apprehending the expression of another’s interiority. Once we have exhausted

The Eternal Return, 2013-2019

our understanding of the physical references in the work, the plot of the story—this image has this meaning, that image has that meaning—we find we are left with a sense of both uncertainty and import.

The experience mimics Fisher's own experience, expressed in metaphor. The work is Fisher's expression of what life feels like. In the paintings are magnitude, recollection, beauty, and suffering. As when something awakens our longing—our "Intellect and Will, Imagination, Emotion, Passions, Instincts and ... Tendencies"²—we have grasped a feeling of obscure and momentary understanding of being, like a flash of clarity in and of itself. The only way to express it is, as I have done, by other means; in metaphor, in behavior, in wonder. What we have grasped is poetic knowledge.

Three Readings

Twilight of the Gods

In this painting, many similarly sized elements exist individually like acts in a play, inviting a methodic, individual reading. They seem to swirl around two forceful exclamation points in the near center of the composition. The words *death* and *clowns* are clearly written. There are references to illustrative figures, and repeating circles provide rhythm and rest. Facial expressions dominate.

Mickey Mouse faces appear three times, reacting, expectant, and pained. Surprised Mickey has an expression of double take, which implies a re-reaction to something unexpected after your mind catches up with your senses. Traditional Mickey smiles happily and eagerly. The prominent face, made of pieced together plaster debris to look like a pig-mouse, is the only three-dimensional figure. X-shaped eyes imply unconsciousness or death, or they could be remnants of the grid that underlies Fisher's work. Two exclamation marks, seemingly emanating from its expression, suggest consternation.

This figure, unlike others in the painting, protrudes and recedes in space. In Fisher's work, distance relates to time. We could say that this figure is the only one existing *in time*

Twilight of the Gods, 2019 (detail, see page 42)

versus in the past, in a photograph, or in a concept, making it stand in our place or perhaps as a narrator. It appears to turn away from something with a wince.

Olive Oyl, an early twentieth-century cartoon character associated with Popeye the Sailor, smiles brightly with eyebrows raised, as if looking upon a scene that meets her approval, and yet the word *CLOWNS* and the caption "Fig. 23" hover above her head. In her pixilation, she appears as an apparition, like a hologram, which makes her presence feel like a quaint and desperate message from a distant time. As I mimic Olive's expression, I find it suggests naive contentment over the rightness of things, implying judgment and a refusal to see suffering.

Both Olive and Traditional Mickey look at something in the distance, off the canvas, oblivious to the sudden cry of pig-mouse with his X-shaped eyes, who has caught Surprised Mickey's attention. Circus lion takes us to another place and time, but the ambiguity of what happens next—whether the lion complies with his routine or reverts to wildness—gives an apt sense of tension.

After careful looking at the individual elements in the work, we may ask, What does life feel like here? I see nobility and inherent, barely contained power in the lion; aggression in the word *CLOWNS*; urgency in the exclamation points around which the various forms appear to swirl; sorrowful pain in pig-mouse's wince; and scientific coldness in the reference to illustrative "figures." On the whole, I see anger in this painting.

American Landscape

A simpler composition, *American Landscape*, conveys feeling more readily than do other paintings. It is unmistakably ominous. What do we see? An empty street with electric poles, buildings, shrubs, and trees—the type seen in Southern California and the cities and towns of the southwest. A grotesquely glowing sky. The exposed under drawing, on the lower left, where the paint and the photographic reality of the landscape (its depth, value, and shape) roughly halts. A periodic table text labeling the scene as American. And, the dark silhouette of the self-assured, forever young eighty-one-year-old "wascally wabbit," Bugs Bunny.

With his nonchalant stance, head tilted and hands to jaunty hips, and his New York upbringing and world travels, he surveys the scene as if to say pragmatically, but with a bit of scorn, "*This?*" As one of Bugs's animators puts it, Bugs is well aware he's appearing in an animated cartoon, so perhaps he plans his escapade in this untended landscape, thinking, "Let's face it, Doc. I've read the script and I already know how it turns out."³

There is no threat here; it's not even real. Given Bugs's celebrity, it could be the back lot of a Los Angeles movie studio, or a stage set within, where the "American Landscape" or worldview is fabricated and sold every day. Yet, that foreboding orange light still threatens.

This landscape makes me think about survival. Having driven many times and by many different routes through the American Southwest, I have seen this landscape in small, desolate towns, so hot and sunbaked, isolated from other people and from water, that I feel panic. *American Landscape*, despite Bugs's nonchalance, the harmonious echoes of a triangular shape, and the merciful reach of the long shadow, feels like a warning.

The kind of subject matter that most often appears in Fisher's work as vignettes has taken over the painting's entirety. As we know, these vignettes point to the imagination and insert feelings into the painting that are

American Landscape, 2018 (detail, see page 36)

significantly different than those of other elements. They are often landscapes from another time and place than the here and now of the painting.⁴

Because the vignette subjects are recognizable as photographic images of familiar scenes, amid other more obscure symbols, they suggest the crux of a story. Here, this subject, the entire background of the painting, remains in the process of being painted. If this is a mind's vision of something, it portrays a mind unsure and unsettled.

What a Cat Sees

This sculpture's reflective surface and floppy edge make me think of a carnival house of mirrors, meant to skew one's perception. It reminds me of what a dream looks like—fleeting and fluid. At the edge of the metal sheeting we read a short story about someone attempting to see the world as his cat does:

"Animals see differently than we do," she said. "They don't see color or form, only movement." So I took my cat out into the garden where it was raining. She loves the rain. I took her out into the garden to see what she saw. Red roses with bright green stems. A scene from *Porgy and Bess*. A flat screen of watery dots. Da da da da da."

The story, subtly inscribed on the sculpture, describes what the cat sees: form and color; not movement, contrary to the authoritative statement at the beginning of the story and to what we may expect of a carnivorous animal. For Fisher, this confirms what he terms the problem of other minds, but he points out, "It's the mind of a cat with whom we could never relate. The piece is disorienting and makes me wonder if others see what I see."⁵

We also see a silhouetted image of a figure in profile, with a large crooked nose, wearing a tall pointed hat and a billowing cape and gripping a broom-like rod. Depending on the angle at which you approach the piece, the image may be painted or

What a Cat Sees, 1985 (detail, see page 38)

reflected, and the reflected image distorts as your sight moves around the piece.

Because of a childhood watching *The Wizard of Oz* every year, I see the Wicked Witch of the West, but Fisher asks, What makes us read these characteristics as *witch* or *wicked*? The concept is a fiction, with a unique history of development, depending on who you are. What do we know about what we see, then, if as Fisher shows us, what we see depends on culture, timing, and vantage?

What a Cat Sees is an expression of what it feels like to try to know another and to be known by him. Fisher remarks, "Whether or not we can know another's mind, we are trying with all our might."⁶

Lost

Vernon Fisher came of age in the midst of what is described as the “bloodiest and most brutal century in history.”⁷ It is an era characterized by skepticism and by a separation between objective reality, apprehended by the senses, and constructed realities rooted in social belief structures. It is also an era resentful of and desensitized to suffering. As a specific kind of observer of life, one who grasps that “the actual world becomes...symbolic of feeling...and [thereby] personally significant,”⁸ Fisher uses visual language to express what it means to be lost but searching in the face of indifference.

Literary scholar Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her 1968 study of how poems end, one of Fisher’s many sources, makes a bold claim about why poets of this time leave their works open-ended or without closure:

We know too much and are skeptical of all that we know, feel, and say. All traditions are equally viable partly because all are equally suspect. Where conviction is seen as self-delusion and all last words are lies, the only resolution may be in the affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but less stable than inconclusiveness.⁹

Smith wrote this during a time that questioned the ideals of European Modernism. The Modernist era believed in continued progress toward a greater and greater good, but it prescribed this good from a particular viewpoint that did not include all people in all places. Artists became suspicious of such authoritative programs and voices, including that of institutionalized abstract painting.

Well before Smith made her claim, Flannery O’Connor, a twentieth-century American writer, comments about Modernism in an essay she wrote in the late 1950s. Since the 1700s, she states, “The popular spirit of each succeeding age

Waiting for Lolita, 1986

has tended more and more to view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man, a belief that is still going strong even though this is the first generation to face total extinction because of these advances.”¹⁰ The Holocaust comes to mind.

Artists of this era, like O’Connor, working in all genres, looked at the world’s darkness and expressed what it means to be lost. Fisher, for whom Smith’s claim resonates as the only honest way to express experience from his own vantage of uncertainty and longing, is among them.

In his early work, Fisher used the elements of abstraction, namely the gesture of the brushstroke, like characters aware of their ruse, before turning in the early 1970s wholly to text and figurative imagery. He states emphatically that it was unthinkable to use the figure during his graduate school and

early professional years. As he explored a new way to work, he turned naturally to text and narrative, having earned his undergraduate degree in literature. His style, developed throughout the 1970s, embraced postmodern humor, irreverence, and anti-closure to deal with consciousness.

Fisher desires the work first to appear as meaningful clutter, and then, upon further looking, as like an archeological site. He explains the paintings present several layers, which, like geological strata, differ in what each contains. Such a site invites careful inspection, looking for and piecing together bits of information to gain an understanding of the nature of the place and time—commonly about the life of the planet or about the human story. Inviting this type of viewing, Fisher’s work leads us in an exploration of the nature of being and knowing, namely how we know what we know, in a particular era of this story.

Literary Tools

Fisher’s early abstract compositions look somewhat like his ensuing ones, substituting figurative imagery for gestural brushstrokes suspended within a background. He has said he is making abstract paintings with the tools of a novelist. In his use of literary and film techniques to build his compositions, Fisher desires to achieve the affect of a good detective story, complete with dark intrigue, plot twists, and superfluous signs. As readers, we sift through and piece together scant and unrelated clues into our own hypotheses.

The short stories Fisher writes have played various roles in his work, and he continues to write them. In the earliest narrative pieces, we see painted in the background a photographic image of a landscape overlaid entirely with a foreground text, which is a short story written by Fisher. Curator Madeleine Grynsztejn explains well how viewers read the story, visualize the plot, and bring that imagery into their experience of the painting.¹¹

It seems this phenomenon of reading captured something important to Fisher: a sense of vulnerability in how we know things. When we visually read Fisher's work, we're on shaky ground. This is a simple way to describe the "feeling-state," as Grynstejn calls it, to which Fisher draws us.

Art historian T. J. Clark wrote in the mid-1980s about the work of French Modernist Édouard Manet, as if Clark had Fisher's work in mind:

Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore, its favorite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretense of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savors discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.¹²

Point of View

In literature, the narrator determines the point of view, but Fisher asks, If the narrator is unreliable by being naive, idealistic, mentally disabled, and so forth, then how do we rest on his point of view? Upon whose authority is the story told? Fisher cites as an example William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*. This story is told from four separate points of view on four separate and nonsequential days: April 7, 1928; June 2, 1910; April 6, 1928; and April 8, 1928, each bringing both depth and uncertainty to the other.¹³ In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner gives us the experience of the absence of authority.

Fisher employs point of view visually by combining modes of representation. His variously composed elements—texts, illusions, objects, depictions—refer to different methods from the history of painting, such as mimesis, expression, etc., all present at the same time. By doing so, Fisher removes authority or power from any one mode by which we may see and also calls up the varying responses these modes are designed to provoke, resulting in a complex of emotions.

84 Sparrows, 1980 (detail, see page 47)

Metaphor

Fisher explains that his impetus to make art is the experience and witness of one's "inability to understand the invisible, commonly understood codes of the culture, the unspoken agreements and understandings that actually form the language we live in."¹⁴

Consider, for example, that the imagery Fisher selects and arranges points to an absent or not depicted experience. The absent experience is difficult to describe, such as awareness of mortality or encounters with evil. The presented image offers a wildly different but observed experience that can open our felt knowledge of the absent experience. We see an example in T. S. Eliot's twentieth-century poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, a piece that prompted Fisher's degree in literature:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;

What does Eliot's reference to a patient etherized upon a table say about the evening (or future) into which these two people go?

Despite uncertainty in the era of postmodernism, metaphor still gives voice to lived experience. As viewers of art, we see a coherent composition, displayed as art. We expect it to have meaning, to be about something. According to Smith, the postmodern artist relies on us "to grant that the utterance has, as an *artful* structure, justified its own integrity, stability, and sufficiency."¹⁵ Yet mid-twentieth-century American artists experienced a radical breakdown of this burden, after which to assert anything became inconceivable. Metaphor enables interior comprehension of the world in which we live. It doesn't require authority.

Encounter with Beauty

There is harmony in Fisher's compositions, most noted in the repetition of forms throughout. Repetition of simple forms, such as a circle, conveys an inherent order, not only in the artwork but also in nature. Its presence in the paintings provides confident rest for our minds as we contemplate the individual images we see. Fisher refers to this principle of visual unity in his work as echoes; in poetry, he says, it's called *assonance*. A form of assonance is rhyme, and rhyme is musical.

Light in the paintings also provides moments of mental quietude amid often unsettling imagery. Raking light creates deep shadows that mimic the long shadow of twilight. Twilight refers to a time of day characterized by a soft light that evokes a feeling of timelessness, simplicity, and peace, like the still point in Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton" of *The Four Quartets*.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

Where past and future are gathered.
Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

The word *twilight* also means a time of life when something is slipping away, suggesting a feeling of longing. An Eliot scholar explains, it is imagination “that plants in us in the first place the idea that the turning [of time] may be robbing us of our only chance to live, unless we find out that at the center of every turning there is a still point, and that we move toward that point in whose stillness there are held all the turnings that seem so helter-skelter to us.”¹⁶

Shadow of Night, 2012

Searchers

Though Fisher suspects there is no certainty, he acknowledges “there is a world, however messy, that I want to account for, and the messiness is part of the accounting.” He explains that he “favors a high noise to signal ratio,”

meaning he is focused on the noise of life rather than the clarity of any signal. He wonders, “What is the motivation to seek signal out of the noise?”¹⁷ From our conversations, I would say the motivation is a search for something—the type of search that you cannot avoid or ignore.

With his work, Fisher desires, among other things, to express a feeling of facing more than the mind can take in. His viewpoint is shaped not only by coming of age during the dawning of postmodernism, but also by a childhood shared with a younger sister who lived with an intellectual disability, resulting from an accident in birth.

*Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*¹⁸

At some point, Fisher realized he too fell short of knowing the common cultural codes by which we understand situations, that understanding is not fixed or even shared. Also early on, Fisher experienced his natural skepticism in the face of apparent fact and the jarring juxtaposition of humor with sorrow—elements that would resonate with him going forward in literature, film, and art.

Nevertheless, uncertainty is where hope lives in Fisher's work. Barbara Smith reasons, if an artist refuses to make assertions, while continuing to use language, then he must necessarily remove from language its power to assert. “For only a statement, not a word, can lie or delude.”¹⁹ This is what Fisher does. Another way to remove power from language is by silence, but that is not what Fisher does. He acts. He *seeks* to say something.

I Am No a Monster, 2015

Smith describes the skepticism in 1960s avant-garde painting, paralleled in poetry, as assuming there was no overall design or purpose in nature and the only thing to know about man came from observation and experience. Yet, T. S. Eliot writes in his poem “East Coker” of the *Four Quartets*, quoted by Smith:

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.

Thus, we have a grappling with the modes of knowing, whether by observation, experience, language, or “a new and shocking valuation of all we have been.” Smith wonders, “What if the poet's problem is precisely that he does not know what one *should* say? What if silence and certitude are equally impossible? One answer was given by Yeats, who wrote, ‘we sing amid our uncertainty.’”²⁰

END NOTES

- 1 From a lecture series, "Literature as Prophecy," on classic, medieval, and modern literature, by Dr. Robert Alexander.
- 2 Jacques Maritain, "Art for Art's Sake," *The Responsibility of the Artist*, University of Notre Dame Jacques Maritain Center, <https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart2.htm>.
- 3 Bob Clampett, "What's Up Doc?" *Draw the Looney Tunes: The Warner Brothers Character Design Manual* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), 166.
- 4 Frances Colpitt, "Introduction," *Vernon Fisher* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 9–10.
- 5 Personal communication with Vernon Fisher, April 17, 2018.
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- 7 Robert Barron, "The Mind of Fear," *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 19–20. See also Thomas McEvilley's introduction in *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–8.
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- 15 Smith, 260.
- 16 Thomas Howard, "One Foot Up, One Foot Down," *Chance or the Dance?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 45.
- 17 Personal communication with Vernon Fisher, May 20, 2019.
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- 19 Smith, 254.
- 20 Ibid, 242.

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The Code of the West

By Dave Hickey

*“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators, Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?”
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply “They are merely conventional signs!”
“Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes! But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank”
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s bought us the best—a perfect and absolute blank!”*

— Lewis Carroll

The Angle of the Light

Once we get out of town, we find ourselves generally feeling pretty good about having nothing more stressful to do on a Monday morning than to drive two hundred miles of west Texas highway. It’s going to be a warm, clear September day. Later, we’ll stop off at the ranchhouse to borrow Larry’s copy of Coleridge’s *Table Talk* and maybe have lunch with James. Then, if we still feel like it, we’ll drive into Archer City and have a look at the “last picture show,” but for now, as we drive west and north out of Fort Worth, we are satisfied to enjoy the morning cool and the sunlight, which at this hour rakes across the landscape at enough of an angle to kick up shadows and bestow upon the yellow-green prairie the illusion of incident.

We have been talking about the blessing and curse of growing up in the west, about the first thing you learn, which is that the world you live in, and the words you live by, do not fit, that they never have and never will. And we

decide that this wouldn’t be so sad if it weren’t for the *second* thing you learn: which is simply that the west is a real poor place—where things break and don’t get fixed, and people do too—where the relationship between nature and culture is so self-evidently and radically dysfunctional that you can hardly imagine it otherwise.

On the other hand (and probably because it’s such a nice morning) I suggest that there’s a brighter side to all this. If you are an artist or a writer under present cultural conditions, I propose, this knowledge gives you a leg up—so much so that it’s hard not to feel a little patronizing toward your east coast pals. They have had to acquire the wisdom you have as birthright out of books written by Frenchmen who seem to be very concerned at the prospect of living once again in a biblical universe, in a world of the word. Vernon suggests that this is probably because modernism was a somewhat more pervasive phenomenon in France than it had been in west Texas.

I have to agree with him and we decide that, for ourselves, modernism was an experience akin to one of those intense but transient adolescent obsessions—like mescaline or science fiction. We had grown up in what, for all intents and purposes, was a colonial, high Victorian culture; so, when modernism presented itself to us, we took it for what it appeared to be: nothing more and nothing less than the first stage leaving town. Needless to say, we took it. But, fortunately for us, no sooner were we out of town and beginning to quarrel violently with our fellow travellers, than the damn stage broke down and everyone ended up milling about on the shoulder of the road. Our fellow travellers seemed surprised that so eschatological a vehicle could itself come to the end of its road, but we were not. Things break and don’t get fixed. We knew that.

Vernon thinks the death of modernism has to do with the way we look at the stars. We used to see them as an image of our future, he says. *Ad astra*, and like that. Now, we know how long that light has been travelling, that we’re looking back into the past, into the childhood of the universe.

As it turns out, we are discussing the last days of modernism on the first day of dove season, so most of our fellow travellers on the highway are intrepid hunters. There are a few locals in pick-ups with gun racks, but mostly it's groups of three or four urbanites in camouflage gear, bristling weaponry. They sit shoulder-to-shoulder in new model sedans. Their drivers don't deign lift their forefingers off the steering wheel to acknowledge you as they pass.

"Real estate clowns," I say, as a shiny Buick swishes anonymously past in the other direction.

"The thing about west Texas," Vernon says, "is you can generally tell what's going on if you know the signs. Three or four guys in a new model sedan. They don't lift a finger and give you the little wave. You know they're city guys, foolish and heavily armed."

"If they're white," I say. "Three or four black guys in a new model sedan, you know it's a coke boat on the LA-Dallas run. They usually give you the little wave, though."

"But they're equally heavily armed," Vernon says.

"*Everybody* is heavily armed," I say. "Nature and culture are not on friendly terms out here."

"Nature doesn't care," Vernon says.

"Well, culture sure as fuck does!"

We spot a gray, windowless cinderblock building coming up on the right. It sits in the center of a yellow gravel parking lot into which the surrounding mesquite scrub is making irregular inroads. It's a butcher shop. Hanging off a pole over the front door there's a sign that says, *Custom Killing*.

"It's nice to be home," I say.

Vernon gives this a grim little smile. He lives here.

I tell him that I have decided it was not so much the alienation of nature and culture. It was the fact that neither nature nor culture offered any kind of refuge. This, I think, is what propelled us so swiftly toward postmodern attitudes. In the northeast, we could have taken refuge in relatively benign and nurturing culture. In the southeast, we could have found some comfort in a spectacular and comparatively beneficent nature. In the west, once you survive adolescence (if, indeed, you do), both nature and culture offer an equally malevolent prospect. Your choice is between the bone-dry, dead silent Big Empty or Christian real estate, custom killing and smash-mouth football. "They both suck ponies in Cuernavaca," I say.

"But you see," Vernon says, "That's what modernism looked like to me, initially: a refuge from both nature and culture. That's how I ended up in Sherman, Texas, painting these mindlessly beautiful pictures of the abstract sublime in a converted army barrack."

"They weren't that bad," I say.

"Maybe not," Vernon says. "A few people liked them. Henry Hopkins came up from Fort Worth and put some in a show. I even sold a few. But then in 1973 I got this NEA grant and, I don't know, somehow the more people liked them, the less good I felt about them."

"Fear of success?" I say.

"I don't think so. Maybe fear of lettering in the wrong sport and having to play it forever. It was just this growing awareness that I wasn't doing the right thing, that I wasn't using all of my skills or answering any of my questions."

"Also, as I began to get acceptance and approval for what I was doing, I began to realize that, at some level, that's what I was doing it for—to get approval—that out of my own

alienation and insecurity, I was acting like some bumpkin trying to assemble a fancy wardrobe to wear at the country club. Pretty paintings, you know, very respectable, and I'm not really like that or, rather, I didn't want to be like that.

"So, in a way, getting that NEA stopped me dead in my tracks."

"That's reassuring," I say.

"It was something, anyway," Vernon says. "You see I'd taken some time off to paint and I just sat there. I didn't want to do what I'd planned to do and, for a person as work-oriented as I am, that was a terrible feeling. I'm real *responsible*, you know, and it was like I'd been paid to do this job I couldn't bring myself to do. I have to give Peter Plagens credit. Quite seriously. He helped me break out of it."

"He came up to look at the work and, it's not like he was negative, he just encouraged me to try other things, to use the grant for myself. I can see now what he did. By not liking my work that much, and by being honest and kind about it, he gave me permission to not like it that much either. I really do owe him and you should put that in your essay: Thank you, Peter..."

"...for being an asshole and withholding approval," I say.

"Exactly," Vernon says.

"Somebody's got to play defense," I say.

"Not on the Cowboys," Vernon says. He's still disconsolate about their ignominious defeat the day before, but he goes on to tell me about his first efforts at making art with no thought of or hope for approval. "I was trying to be spontaneous, you know, and for somebody as obsessively *conscious* as I am that's all but impossible. I kept on doing my vinyl paintings, of course, being Mister Responsibility, but I would also go off in the other room and be spontaneous making those little books I showed you, like the *Tennessee*

Pieter Bruegel, **The Fall of Icarus (La chute d'Icare)**, c. 1555

Song Book and the *Nazi Songbook*, with floppy epoxy pages with single words on them that I thought were appropriate.

"I can see now that these were really dialectical activities that came out of my growing dissatisfaction with painting. It's strange, just about the time people started liking them, I began to feel like the heroic pretensions of abstract paintings were a bit much. On the other hand, nothing could have been more anti-heroic than these little books. So, even though I was trying to divide my time between the books and painting, I found myself getting more and more involved with the books. They seemed to be really mine.

"You know that Auden poem," he says, "Musée des Beaux Arts,' where he talks about Bruegel's *Icarus*—about how everything seems to turn away from Icarus' disaster—the ploughman in the field—the people on the boat—how the sun keeps on shining? Well, I've *always* liked that poem, but I think when I was sitting up in Sherman making abstract paintings, I probably identified with Icarus—with his romantic aspiration and tragic fall—while the everyday world went on uncaring.

"Somehow, though, making those books was the beginning of a transformation. Now I identify with Bruegel, arranging and juxtaposing and counterpointing all those disparate sublime and ridiculous activities."

*In Breughel's Icarus, for instance:
 how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster;
 the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure;
 the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing
 into the green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that
 must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.*

— W. H. Auden

I observe that by any mechanical or aesthetic standards Bruegel certainly turned out a more reliable product than Icarus.

Vernon says that, at that time, he felt like he was taking himself too seriously and his art not seriously enough. "I was doing those vinyl paintings at the time. Cutting out brushstrokes and sewing them onto the vinyl support."

"That's fairly anti-heroic," I say. "I mean, you were subverting that AE gesture in much the same way Lichtenstein did with his Ben Day Brushstrokes."

"Yeah, but that was just saying I knew what was wrong but I didn't know what to do about it. Except complain and make jokes."

"You were mocking abstract painting because it had let you down."

"Something like that."

"Cynicism is the aggressive side of disappointment."

"It's just not very interesting to do. All it says is that you want everybody to know you're smarter than your art."

"At that time, you were."

"Now, my art is smarter than I am. At least I hope so."

"I think it's smarter than me too," I say.

"You know what I mean," Vernon says.

"Actually I think I do. Now you're standing back like Bruegel, arranging the words and the images and the abstract patterns. You've even got twenty or so versions of Icarus splashing down in the guise of sea planes, parachutists, atomic bombs, swimmers, rafts...."

"*The Descent of Man*," Vernon says.

"Right," I say, "but relatively soft landings."

"It's a sign of uncertainty, but now I contextualize all those scraps of partial knowledge."

"Well, what happened when you discovered, as I am sure you did, that you can contextualize *anything*?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're putting words and images and systems into contextual collision with one another and generating these largely illusory fantasies of meaning. You must know by now that *any* combination of narrative, image and object that you contextualize is going to generate an illusion of meaning. So, how do you decide which combination is *best*?"

The Fall of Icarus (after Bruegel), 2014

There are obviously some yes-no decisions being made in your work.”

“Of course there are. I figured that out early on. Any combination will *feel* like it means something. I just try to get the combination that feels right to me. I really don’t know how they’ll go together when I’m making the things or writing these stories. Even when I put them together, I’m not sure how they’ll resonate. I can’t or they won’t. I don’t know,” Vernon shakes his head, looking frustrated. He jerks the steering wheel a little so the car wobbles.

“It’s very secret. Somehow I always create these situations where I’m working in the dark—where I don’t know what I’m doing until I have done it. Even with those vinyl paintings, you know, in order to sew on the brushstrokes I had to turn the painting over and work from the back—so I didn’t know what I was doing until it was done. I think it’s probably a sickness. I make up these rules that don’t make sense and then follow them to the letter and then adjust things to taste. I just have to do it that way. I don’t know why.”

“It’s a way of objectifying and detoxifying intuition,” I say readily, “of eluding consciousness, of teasing yourself out of thought, to use Keats’ phrase.” I tell him how I used to do the same sort of thing by writing poems with randomly preselected vocabularies and preset systems of rhyme-words. “There are those of use who are, uh, radically *conscious*, you know. People for whom, under ordinary conditions, act and analysis will always be all but simultaneous. So we develop extraordinary conditions, we design these strategies and set up these procedures to keep our minds occupied so that, hopefully, while our analytical faculties are otherwise occupied our hearts will speak. So then we can step back and listen you know, for the first time, to what we actually have to say.”

“You’ve obviously thought about this,” Vernon says.

"I've thought about everything," I say. "It's a form of procrastination."

As we are passing through Jacksboro, Vernon comments on the once-legendary status of the Green Frog Cafe and its cornucopian pie rack. In recent years it has sadly gone the way of the Dallas Cowboys. Since, by chance, I happen to be well-informed on the fall of the Green Frog, I relate the tragic story of its original owner who, over the space of fifteen years, built the Green Frog into the *La Grenouille* of west Texas eateries, only to be induced by a local entrepreneur to sell out for a considerable sum of cash and, having done so, found himself so bored that he fell among evil companions, gambled away his money and today drives one of Jacksboro's two garbage trucks—and, it is said, drives it very well. The Green Frog, however, has never recovered its former panache and, if you eat there, you may gaze upon the once-legendary pie rack which now stands shining and empty along one side of the room, like a memento mori.

Vernon is not visibly touched by this story, but just west of town, he points out a weed-strewn pasture with a rusting tractor abandoned in the very center of it, as if its owner, confronted with a broken tractor halfway through a day's work simply threw up his hands and walked away. And kept walking.

"Things break," he says.

"And don't get fixed."

The Moral of the Story

At this point, since narrative tends to leave art-readers unrequited in their search for tidy sound bites and capsulized generalizations, to save your asking as you read along, or to save your reading along if it's all you wanted to ask, I take some time to give you The Moral—by which I mean my version of

Vernon Fisher's moral. (My own moral, it should be obvious, is "Always Give 'Em What They Want.") So..

Here's the problem: between the undifferentiated flow of personal experience and the undifferentiated flow of natural phenomena human beings have interposed an information haze, an undifferentiated flow of incongruous behavioral, verbal, visual and mathematical languages which overlay and interpenetrate one another. Taken individually, as modern artists have tended to take them, these information systems tend, by definition, toward completion and closure. They "frame" what they describe and invite us to read that description as meaningful; modernist aesthetics further encourage us to read these descriptions as "authentic"—as "real" in and of themselves. But to mistake the completion and closure implicit in a *description* of Nature or Experience for any *actual* completion and closure is clearly neurotic, dangerous and ultimately either suicidal or pornographic—since complex artistic systems in Western culture utilize the psychic discomfort generated by designed discontinuity and delayed gratification as a formal device. So, to accept the modernist invitation to confound the structures and boundaries of art for the structures and boundaries of experience is to impose upon oneself again and again a kind of psycho-sexual death which is the analogy of formal closure. Yet, to abandon these systems of description and organization is to slip into a state of undifferentiated flux which only amounts to another kind of ego-suicide.

So, since we cannot "believe" our languages on the one hand or do without them on the other, our only alternative between chaos and closure would seem to be a state of acute linguistically sensitive awareness in which we labor to *detoxify* the myths of completion inherent in our visual, verbal and mathematical languages, while continuing to employ them to keep chaos at arm's length. The other alternatives (to take a metaphor from Mark Twain which underlies so much of Fisher's work) are to drift with Huck and Jim along the river of preconscious sensation or to try,

like Tom Sawyer, to impose some narrative mythology upon experience and to end up, likely as not, being shot by our own dreams.

Fisher has created ominous emblematic versions of these two radical alternatives: first, in a piece called "Jon Moses," he draws an extended analogy between the formal closure achieved by the final words of a long novel and the psychic death implied by the final moments of a marriage; secondly, in a story called "Earth's Moon," he portrays the narrator in the aftermath of some emotional and physical trauma experiencing a terrifying vision of undifferentiated flux, of a universe of pure phenomena without language, value or distinction.

Vernon Fisher's aesthetic response to these two terminal alternatives has been to make an art which encourages linguistic sensitivity without rewarding it. By treating designed discontinuity and delayed gratification as ends in themselves, he creates an art which eludes formal closure at all costs and seeks unity in a feeling-state characterized by a sustained awareness of irresolvable ambiguity and inconclusiveness.

As a general rule (which like most general rules is never specifically appropriate), Fisher's work consists of imperfectly analogous juxtapositions of three imperfectly distinct kinds of phenomena (the personal, the social, the natural), described by three imperfectly distinct information systems (the literary narrative, the iconographic image, and the cartographic grid).

So, in any given work we are likely to encounter fragments of subjective experience organized in short, epiphaneic modernist narratives juxtaposed with photographic and cartoon media-images of encoded social behavior (Ernie Bushmiller's Nancy and Aunt Fritzi function as the nuclear social unit), juxtaposed with images of undifferentiated nature (the ocean, the desert, the sky) usually organized by the imposition of grids, numbers, color codes and other forms of scientific subdivision, but occasionally

The March of Folly, 2016

rendered according to the equally rigid conventions of the 19th century landscape painting. (In keeping with Fisher's feelings about seeing the "past" in the "distance"—these deep space illusions tend to function as icons for memory.)

These orders of imagery all subvert and interpenetrate one another to deflect closure, but, looking over the breadth of the work, it is possible to detect certain hierarchies of "power" in the images: a literary image, for instance, tends to dominate a two-dimensional image which tends to dominate a three-dimensional illusion which tends to dominate a real three-dimensional object. And this is, I believe, an ideological hierarchy, implying that images gain power or "toxicity" as they become more artificial.

Having laid out this little Guide Michelin of Vernon Fisher's universe, I would be the last one to deny that all of these distinctions and strategies arise from a serious philosophical confrontation with the world, but it helps to keep in mind, I think, that this philosophical confrontation arises from a very simple problem: how do you cope with the darker side, the toxic aspect of the things you love to do, which in Vernon Fisher's case is to write stories, make pictures, and paint abstract paintings? Fisher's answer, which seems a reasonable one to me, has been to devise a strategy by which he allows the stories and pictures and paintings to detoxify one another.

In his studio one day, I'm looking at a painting called *Objects in a Field* (1986) in which a red image of an observatory is inserted into a grisaille painting of a photograph of a parachutist coming to earth. Perhaps sensing something quizzical in my expression, Vernon walks up to the painting and points out a passage where the curvature of the parachute segues into the grey sky which in turn segues into the red observatory image.

"I love this part," he says, "as painting." He pauses, looks at the painting again, then continues. "There's a pretty good chance you know, that I invented the whole thing as an excuse to do this one passage."

The Dance of Consciousness

Vernon Fisher and his wife, Julie Bozzi, live in a white-brick house on a quiet street in a pristine forties neighborhood in west Fort Worth. The neighborhood is nearly all brick houses with trimmed lawns, clipped shrubs and straight sidewalks down which ladies with blue hair walk their terriers and along which, in the slanting light of morning and evening, the paperboy rides his old-timey Schwinn—the kind with the big tires and the fake fueltank between the crossbars. It's a quiet neighborhood and, morning and evening, you can hear his newspapers flopping onto the concrete porches over the hissing of the lawn sprinklers. The only stylistic anomaly Vernon and Julie have introduced into the neighborhood is the swimming pool in their back yard—and that is only anomalous by the strictest, most academic, definition of the local style.

It's a modest pool, anyway, and no one who knows Vernon would ever accuse him of installing a swimming pool as a status symbol. As a *symbol*, yes, but a *status* symbol? Never. There are rules of decorum among the locals, and codes of behavior with which Vernon is perfectly in tune, being the sort of guy whose idea of extravagance is to buy two of the same shirt, in different colors. When he and Julie got a second car, they got the same car in a different color, sort of. Their first car was gray. The second one was beige.

The swimming pool, however, unavoidably is bright turquoise and that evening, after our return from Archer City, we are sitting on the patio under the white aluminum awning, just looking at it. Vernon has turned on the underwater lights so, as the gaudy, "late romantic" sunset gradually drains from the sky, the water in the pool seems to take on its own blue-green refulgence, a beacon of coolness in the darkening air, a target for Icarus.

Julie is sitting with us, and Katie Sherrod, who lives down the street, and we are covering the world with words. Or, more

precisely, like Adam's editors, we are rearranging the words that already entitle the world into more amusing combinations. We have started off with movie-TV combinations like *Godfather Knows Best*, *Best Little Whorehouse on the Prairie* and *Leave Her to Beaver*. There is some exegetical discussion about the validity of *Heckle and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Vernon says Heckle and Jeckle were originally movie cartoons. I say quibble, quibble, they have their own TV show and anyway Jekyll and Hyde were originally literary characters, but I think he's probably right. It has to feel just perfect to really be funny.

After that we move on to the "Sequential Numeral Film Festival," and after getting out of the gate fast with *The First Man on the Moon*, *The Second Time Around* and *The Third Man*, it gets a little tougher. The silences get longer. We all sit there in the semi-darkness, gazing at the pool, sorting through our interior title indexes. We make it up through *The Seventh Seal* to *The Tenth Victim* before losing interest and shifting over to double features. Julie comes up with an historical double: *Helen of Troy* and *The Last Time I Saw Paris*. I offer an agrarian triple: *The Good Earth*, *The Bad Seed*, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Katie retires the cup with *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Die Hard*.

At this point I tell Vernon about an autistic teenager back in San Diego who has a peculiarly occidental manner of ordering his life. During the week the kid works in a bike shop but he uses his Saturdays to pursue an alphabetical, serial and cartographic romance with the Pacific Bell Yellow Pages. He began his project with the first listing under "A," then, the next week, he moved on to the first listing under "B," and so on through the alphabet, then back to the second listing under "A," etc. Every Saturday he makes a selection, which he then locates on this big map of San Diego upon which he plots the best route from his house to that location. Then he hops on his bike and, following the course he has plotted, rides out to whatever place of business he has located. He spends about five minutes sitting there on his bike just looking at it. Then he rides home in time for supper. Next week, same procedure.

Objects in a Field, 1986

"His parents," I say, "say that he has trouble relating to other people. I figure, if he could work in some lasers, he could get a grant from the NEA."

Vernon thinks so too, if the kid got a good "grant writer." In any case this tends to confirm Vernon's growing suspicion that we live in an autistic culture. (We have just driven up to Archer City, borrowed a book, looked at a burned out movie house, gone to the Dairy Queen and driven back.)

I tell him I want to apply for a grant to colorize *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*. Vernon wants one to do *My Dinner with Andre* in claymation.

Then we just sit there in the warm darkness, smiling to ourselves and gazing at the pool. So far no amazing boy has fallen from the sky into its bright water but we are willing to wait. The lights shining up through the surface make crinkly moving shadows on the white underside of the awning above our heads.

The Mysteries of the Deep

Sitting there, I wonder if I'm not being a little overly "poetic" about the pool. Probably so, I decide, but on the other hand, it's hard to imagine anyone linguistically sensitive enough to respond to Vernon Fisher's work who would be literal-minded enough not to read some significance into this pool, who could not imagine Icarus plunging into it—or Gatsby floating face down on its green light of permission. I tend to regard it as the antitype of the empty pool in *Stockton* (2010) that Vernon painted from a photograph of an actual defunct swimming pool in Fort Stockton, Texas. But it's a more complex symbol than that, and not just an occasional one.

All of Vernon Fisher's work, like his back yard, is literally awash in fluid, crowded with bodies of water—oceans, lakes, ponds, puddles, rivers, creeks, not to mention swimming pools, tubs, basins, bowls, urinals, coke bottles, coffee cups, tire ruts and snowflakes—and so resonant are these narrative and visual evocations that, with very little effort at all, you can generate nearly as many respectable etiologies for this obsession with liquidity as there are instances of it.

At the most primary level, of course, it is a cultural proclivity—evidence of the straightforward worship of moisture characteristic of all desert cultures. Dry land peoples tend to pamper and anthropomorphize bodies of water the way widows do puppies, and it is not for nothing that the primary locus of public wonder within a five hundred mile radius of Vernon's house is Philip Johnson's mogul/pre-Columbian Water Garden where one may descend a stairway of free-standing pillars rising from rushing water into a rectangular declivity and stand there like an inhabitant of Islamic Paradise totally surrounded by walls of bright crashing water. It is an exquisite refuge from the dry silence, the domed sky and the circular horizon which define existence on the dry ocean bed which is west Texas—a country from which the benediction of moisture

has been so theatrically withdrawn that you can't walk a pasture without kicking over some fossilized reminder of the prehistoric ocean. It is this condition, I've always suspected, which explains the popularity in local pulpits of the biblical metaphor which reminds us that, in its spiritual dimension, the Deluge has never receded, that we live in the midst of a "fallen nature," in a submarine world of reality.

In Vernon's case this local typology could easily find some resonance in the ideological contretemps he remembers growing up with a Baptist mother and a Methodist father—two sects fiercely divided over the proper administration of the Water of Life—the Methodists favoring anointment, the Baptists (as their name implies) insisting on total immersion.

I no longer regret having spent most of my youth in a desert, though at the time I thought it hard not to be living among that Nature described by the poets I loved. Of course, I knew in a general way that lizards and rocks and dry weather were nature too but they weren't what I had in mind; and our striking events—earthquakes, dust storms, cloud bursts gullying the fields, three day north winds—were acts less of Nature than of God. ...

The desert did not like us. Sometimes, especially at sunset, it was beautiful, but its beauty was not responsive in any way; it was just there; sometimes after supper we would sit on the front porch and awe at it. Yet neither did the desert dislike us.

— George P. Elliott

A "modernist" critic, of course, would explain this obsession with fluid as an essential metaphor deriving from a painter's involvement with his medium, or explain it in terms of a writer's paranoid awareness of the prelinguistic flux, counterpoised by his formal instinct to enclose it. A Jungian would probably take it as evidence of a masculine artist's post-modern (and prenatal) concern with achieving some rapprochement with the feminine—counterpoised by his dread of it. Then he would probably cite *Dune* (David Lynch's art-deco paean to viscosity) as another example. And neither of them would be wrong.

Iconographically, however, I think Fisher's contrapuntal images of ocean and desert are better understood as part of the dialectic of the romantic imagination, along the lines described by W. H. Auden in *The Enchanted Flood*. Auden proposes the sea and the desert as the polar extremes of the romantic idea of the wilderness, symbolized by the shell and the stone (two images which appear with some regularity in Fisher's work), and embodied by the archetypal roles of Ishmael and Don Quixote (two characters who appear in numerous ironic guises throughout Fisher's stories).

Further, Auden's dialectic of imagery is not incongruous with Gertrude Stein's *Geographical History of America*—a text which has, I believe, a good deal of contemporary cultural resonance and relevance. Miss Stein is, after all, one of the patron saints of all serious art in the American west, and in her *Geographical History* she develops an allegory of consciousness which equates the sea and desert in a vision of landscape as destiny:

...the flatter the land oh yes the flatter the land but of course the flatter the land and the sea is as flat as the land oh yes the flatter the land the more yes the more it has may have to do with the human mind.

This little emblematic model goes on to equate negative space with consciousness and (by using the mapping grid as a metaphor for language) to equate travel with thought,

Terry Allen, **The Spanish Theory**, 1972

and the macro-microcosmic landscape it implies, I believe, provides a meta-language which connects Fisher's work with that of any number of his chronological and geographical near contemporaries.

All through the work of artists as disparate as Fisher, Ed Ruscha, Terry Allen and Chris Burden, for instance, there are cartographic images which transpose sea, air and land into a semantic universe of surface and volume and use that linguistic landscape as a metaphor for mind. As maps, grids, high-angle landscapes, blackboards and scale-models these images provide a conceptual universe across which, and through which, words and thoughts (often in clear but

just as often in the guise of cars, boats and planes) move in complex allegories of location and dislocation for which the master narratives are those of exploration and flight: "exploration" being the archetypal behavior for getting lost in order to find something—for abandoning the map of language in hopes of reconstituting it in a more meaningful way; "flight" being the archetypal behavior for getting lost to avoid being found—for abandoning the map of language to elude its appraisive and prescriptive consequences.

Also, in Fisher's work especially, both of these behaviors are undercut by the idea of being lost not only between the map and the world it describes, but between different maps as well, and their contradictory demands—like the two boys in "Cross Country" racing through a landscape which is both land, sea and idea, crossing boundaries marked by furrows, fences, roads and waves toward a bright, blank screen which seems to present things with the possibility of meaning yet in fact only reflects the sun shining behind them:

We ran along the tracks, then leaving the tracks, climbed through a fence and ran across the plowed fields. We slid and skated across the black furrows, our shoes so caked with mud we could hardly lift them, taking the hills straight on so as not to slip down but falling anyway on almost every slope. With every fall we got up more slowly and the pace wasn't the same as before.

We ran on and on and finally, topping a rise, saw a drive-in movie theatre and the road beyond. We jogged down and as we slowed to approach the fence, Jerry gasped, "We really don't have to do this. We could stop."

We climbed through the fence and as we stepped onto the graveled surface of the drive-in, the sun broke through down under the clouds and the screen lit up like a huge reflector.

"I know," I said and we began running again, up and down and over the rippling inclines of the drive-in like two sea birds gliding over sunlit ocean waves.

A Bridge of Signs

The text of *Cross Country* is cut into a diptych image of two drive-in movie screens. It hangs on the wall in the den of Vernon Fisher's parents' house in Granbury, Texas, where, in strict observance of custom, Vernon and I are having some hot apple pie and a big glass of cold milk. While Vernon chats with his dad about these people who have leased the property west of town and let it run to weed, I am remembering the time Richard Betts of the Allman Brothers Band complained to me about another journalist: "I took him to my home town," Dicky said. "I showed him my *gran'mama's* house and the fucker didn't even pay *attention*. He went back to New York and wrote about ten thousand words about me doing cocaine!"

So I am paying attention to Vernon's folks' house and to Granbury—which is a small town about half an hour south and west of Fort Worth. Vernon's father ran a dress factory

Edward Ruscha, **Ice Princess**, 1990

here until his retirement, and Vernon grew up here. But it was a different place then. Then, it was a river town nestled into a broad bend of the Brazos River shadowed by willow, cottonwood, scrub oak and chinaberry—about as close to the Hannibal, Missouri, Fisher read about in Mark Twain as you could get and still be in Texas. But it *was* still in Texas; so they dammed the Brazos River in the late sixties, drowned half the trees in the western state and changed Granbury into a lake town, which is about as different from a river town as you can get. Now there are vacation homes on the shores of “Lake Granbury” and power-boat docks and tourist attractions like the “Opry House” downtown where Crystal Gayle and Eddie Rabbit have been known to hold forth.

There are still remnants of the old river town, of course. And, although the clapboard Victorian homes that line the streets (having been transformed from fact into language by the tourist industry) now look “quaint” and tarted-up, the old railroad trestle bridge beneath which Vernon played pirate as a boy still spans the shallow fork of the Brazos that winds through willow and cottonwood into the lake. Vernon pointed it out to me as we drove into town and now I am looking at a painting of it that hangs on the wall beside *Cross Country*.

That painting of the railroad bridge has been there as long as Vernon can remember. It is the first work of art he ever encountered. Painted by a girlhood friend of Vernon’s mom, it portrays the rigid trapezoidal geometry of a trestle bridge slapped onto a setting of abundant, rough-and-ready, out-of-the-tube-green vegetation. Since I have only moments before seen the original, I can attest to its verisimilitude—which is really not so surprising since west Texas presents the fledgling artist with a rough-and-ready, out-of-the-tube world roughly commensurate with his skills. (People will tell you that, landscapewise, God practiced on west Texas, then moved on after his rookie season; so you look at the space rather than the things there since there are not many things of much consequence.)

Artist Unknown, **Granbury Bridge**

As we were passing the actual trestle bridge coming into town, Vernon told me that this painting of it was sort of a talisman for him, and I recognize the image. Its cross-braced grid appears again and again in various guises throughout Vernon’s work, functioning, more often than not, as a metaphor for the transparent artifice of man’s imposition of his own systems on the natural world. It is a peculiarly resonant image if you have lived at all in the west—because out on the flat, any structure that intrudes into the sky for

more than a story or two takes on some variation of that trestle’s transparent geometry.

Bridges, windmills, oil derricks, radio towers, even the better fences, all have that frail, trapezoidal cross-braced grid. It tells you first that what the wind cannot blow through, it blows down. Secondly, it tells you that whatever structures man might construct to inhabit this flat emptiness aren’t really going to amount to doodly squat—which encourages the

perception of “culture as toy” reflected in Vernon’s repeated references to Tinker-toys and Erector sets. The false receding perspective perpetually hinted at by the ascending trapezoid also tends to exacerbate this sense of transient artifice. The illusion that everything is tilting away from you intensifies your consciousness of the curvature of the earth, which really doesn’t need any enhancement. Standing about five hundred yards away from a field of old-style permanent derricks with the sunset shining through them, it’s easy enough to believe that the earth is a sphere about five hundred miles in diameter to which you are affixed more by whim than by gravity.

After finishing our pie, we chat with the Fishers for a while, move some boxes around for them and then, taking the long way home, stop by Mr. Fisher’s property west of town to see if everything’s okay. After unlocking a complex series of padlocks and unwinding considerable chain from the gate, we drive in, climb out of the car and stomp around in a proprietary fashion. There is a single shed in the center of one of the pastures (which have indeed gone to weed), and someone has loaded it up with hay and left a scruffy band of about five horses more or less to their own devices.

Vernon and I indulge in a little west Texas bitching about people who don’t take care of property, who neglect their animals and (worst of all) don’t take care of their tools! There is a rusting wire-stretcher lying in the weeds next to a partially repaired interior fence. This is easily as annoying and upsetting as coming across a murder victim in a New York alley, especially since the wire-stretcher’s not even broken. But since it’s not our wire-stretcher and these are not our horses and the property is leased, there’s not much we can do. So we just look at the flat, narrow view for a while, listen to the silence and feel the dry summer grass crunching under our boots. It feels crisp. The ground feels solid. Vernon tells me about the first drawing he ever did.

“I was about five,” he says. “It was of a rattlesnake coiled up by a prickly pear.”

“A plangently arcadian image,” I say.

“My mom had to help me with it,” Vernon says.

After that we talk about his Tom Sawyer boyhood and about Tom Sawyer in particular.

“I’ve already been thinking about Tom,” I say. “You both share a passion for complication for its own sake.”

“For art’s sake,” Vernon says. “I did read those books a lot, though, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*.”

“I don’t doubt it for a minute,” I say, and remind him of his story called “When I Was a Kid.” In it Vernon confesses to never realizing that Easter eggs were hidden to be found and thus located next to some adjacent object. “If you’d remembered your *Tom Sawyer* you’d have known that. Tom explains at some length how pirate treasure is always hidden *next* to something.”

“Well, I hadn’t read it *yet*,” Vernon says, “when I couldn’t find the Easter eggs. Actually, reading it was probably how I figured it out.”

“The pleasures of the text,” I say.

We climb back into the car and on the way back into town, Vernon talks about the most common misperception of his work. “Some people,” he says, “just can’t believe that some aspect of the work isn’t *right*, you know. Isn’t sincere. They think that there’s one aspect of it that’s *true*—either the text or the images or the grid, or whatever. They want to believe that the true part is there to subvert the untrue part.”

“But all the parts are equally toxic,” I say.

“Or equally sincere,” Vernon says. “You’re not supposed to stop anywhere. It’s the activity I’m interested in.”

“The dance of consciousness,” I say.

“Why not?” Vernon says.

When we get back to town, we stop off at Vernon’s studio for a few minutes and then retire to a north side Mexican restaurant called Loredos. We walk into the big, bright room. There are piñatas of TCU Horned Frogs hanging from the ceiling. “New building,” I say.

Man is the symbol-using animal inventor of the negative, separated from his natural conditions by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy and rotten with perfection.

— Kenneth Burke

“Been here about two years,” Vernon says. “Did you notice the outside?”

“The *faux* French provincial roof?” I say. We slip into a booth. “Right,” Vernon says. “Now look across the street.”

I do and there is a Dairy Queen over there with the same little fake red roof-skirt around it.

“Da-da Da-da Da-da da-da,” I go, doing the Twilight Zone theme.

“You know,” Vernon says, “to this day, when I see that sort of thing, I can’t help feeling like there’s some sort of intelligence at work. That there is some *program* in place, you know, that I can’t quite get a handle on.”

“I hope not,” I say.

“Me too,” Vernon says. “Sort of.”

A Raft of Meaning

As the final section of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins, Huck Finn, having faked his own death and survived an alternately violent and idyllic flight downriver in a raft with Jim, a runaway slave, finds himself, through a series of extravagant coincidences, in Louisiana under the roof of Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas, who have mistaken him for Tom whose arrival they have been expecting. Meanwhile, Huck's downriver companion Jim has been captured by Tom's Uncle Silas and now languishes in chains in a shed outside the house.

At this point, to further complicate matters, Tom Sawyer does indeed arrive on the scene and, finding his persona presently occupied by Huck, quickly takes on the guise of his egregious cousin Sid. Once this deception is in place, Tom and Huck (in the guise of Sid and Tom) set about the business of freeing Jim from captivity—a task which Tom (with genuinely sociopathic fervor) insists on tricking up with all the trappings and intricacies of a romantic adventure along the lines of Dumas or Defoe—*The Black Tulip*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, etc.

In Tom's view, it is not enough to simply free Jim from his very real captivity and from his very real and urgent danger of being sold downriver. It must be done with style, according to the "rules"—in this case the literary conventions which govern the liberation of unjustly imprisoned nobility in order to insure acceptable levels of clandestine complexity, sublime pathos and swashbuckling excitement. When Huck suggests that simply ripping a board off the shed so Jim can slip out would work, Tom replies, "Work? Why certainly it would work!" But he's more interested in how it will play. "It's too blame simple; there ain't nothing to it.... It's as mild as goose milk." And so, after a little more bewildered grousing, Huck and Jim (like two innocent undergraduates confronted by the authority of *Artforum*) acquiesce to the dominant cultural mythology and accept Tom's insistence that things must be done and spoken of in a certain manner in order to make them meaningful.

The Freudian Body, 2018

If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air.... Egotism itself which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative... Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind.

— Oscar Wilde

What then ensues is one of the most anxious and aggravating sequences in all American literature, and one which modernist critics, to a man, insist on regarding as a perverse and noncanonical aberration (and quite rightly so from their point of view since it effectively calls into question the “authenticity” of the preceding sections of the book dealing with Huck and Jim’s arcadian idyll on the raft). It is, however, the section of the book which most closely approximates the cognitive tension in post-modern, picaresque novelists like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and T.C. Boyle; it is also the passage which Twain himself preferred to read aloud from the book, and one of the earliest efforts I know of an American artist trying to come to terms with the toxicity of romance laid over an alien nature and the disastrous consequences of confusing the world with one’s imagination of it.

In this final section Tom insists on constructing around Jim’s escape a Byronic high-romantic mythos with props like a “climbing-rope” (made from a stolen sheet) baked in a pie (although Jim is in ground-level custody) and a plant to be grown in the cell and watered by the prisoner’s tears (which Jim allows he hardly ever sheds). Tom then seeks to intensify

the emotional ambience of the adventure further: first by aggravating the conditions of Jim’s custody by the introduction of spiders and rats into his cell and secondly by extravagantly elevating Jim’s social stature, in aid of which, he insists on messages to be written on bark with a pen shaved down from a spoon, the texts of which Tom has to compose himself and actually write out for Jim to trace since the runaway slave can neither read nor write. One of them reads as follows:

Here, homeless and friendless, after thirty-seven years of bitter captivity, perished a noble stranger, natural son of Louis XIV.

In support of this outrageous conceit he then proceeds to compose for Jim a coat of arms which, as he describes it, seems a peculiarly post-modern image:

“On the scutcheon we’ll have a bend *or* in the dexter base, a satire *murrey* in the fess, with a dog, couchant, for common charge, and under his foot a chain embattled, for slavery, with a chevron *vert* in a chief engrailed, and three invected lines on a field *azure*, with the nombril points rampant on a dancette indented; crest, a runaway nigger, *sable*, with this bundle over his shoulder on a bar sinister: and a couple of *gules* for supporters, which is you and me; motto, *Maggiore fretta, minore atto*. Got it out of a book—means, the more haste the less speed.”

It gradually becomes obvious what Tom is doing. He is covering the world with words, painting a decadent and obsessively semiotic culture over a primitive and preliterate nature, generating a legendary past and a technicolor present out of words and signs and iconic props, creating a totally alien emotional environment for their radically indigenous adventure. For color, in the absence of any duplicity among the conspirators, Tom even invents a traitor to their cause to heighten the drama—composing a secret letter exposing their own plot to the local farmers.

As a result Jim’s ultimate escape, while remaining heart-breakingly ironic, is indeed as theatrical and hair-raising as any romancer might wish (Twain, like Fisher, being much

attracted to having his cake and deconstructing it too). The nearly fatal consequence of all this theatre, however, is that, although the boys and Jim escape, Tom is wounded in the leg by a shot from the pursuers he himself has incited, and Huck must sneak into town and obtain a doctor under false pretenses. And, naturally, in the process of doing so, Huck Finn (as is his nature and function), while literally lying to the doctor, tells the metaphorical truth about Tom’s situation—and, by extension, about the situation of nature and culture in the west. When the doctor, in response to Huck’s initial obtuse and infelicitous explanation, asks again, “How’d you say he got shot?” Huck replies,

“He had a dream...and it shot him.”

This essay was originally published in Hugh M. Davies and Madeleine Grynsztejn, *Vernon Fisher* (La Jolla, CA: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989 © Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego). Copyright © 1989 by Dave Hickey. Images copyright © by the respective artists.

Exhibition Plates

The Map, 2019

“Give me the map,” she said. The man had collapsed to a sitting position on the sand. Sweat dripped off his nose onto the map. “Give it to me before you fuck it up.” She tore the map from his hands.

Spread out across the hood of the truck, the map was a snarl of clotted lines and text. There were volcanic peaks, highland deserts, depressed deserts, rugged parabolic dunes, all individually and obsessively illustrated. Dozens of colors for land elevations. Different colors for zones of precipitation (not much), zones of arable land (even less), zones for extremes of temperature. She looked out at the empty horizon. Tried to remain calm.

She found an encouraging blue line, followed it for several inches until it terminated in a small, irregular spot marked: *sometimes water*. Thought of the canteen, half-empty, inside the truck. She located a web of meandering lines resembling the dry wadis they had crossed earlier situated in a large coral-shaded area. “Hey, we’re in the pink,” she joked. The man clutched his knees, rocked back and forth on the sand.

“Somewhere.”

But the layers of information were endless. There were hundreds of intricate drawings depicting the kinds and areas of natural vegetation. Illustrations of animal life from the largest mammal down to insects smaller than a fly. There were particulars on mineral deposits, surface transport, political divisions, population density, religions, something called the Purity of Revolutionary Aspirations. There were statistics on crime, on wealth, jobs, job satisfaction. Not everyone liked their job, it turns out. There were celebrity profiles and interviews with the recent dead.

She traced the location of towns and villages along a road—black beads strung along a winding black thread. Beads with names like Abu Bahr, Abu Njaym, Abu Tij. None of the names were familiar, and there were no names in the areas of coral.

American Landscape, 2018

95	Am	Er	53	20	7	57	60	16	20	15	124
Americium (243)	Erbium 167.26	Iodine 126.90	Ca	I	Ca	N	La	Nd	S	Ca	P
			Calcium 40.078		Calcium 40.078	Nitrogen 14.007	Lanthanum 138.91	Neodymium 144.24	Sulphur 32.065	Calcium 40.078	Phosphorus 30.974
											Einsteinium (282)

What a Cat Sees, 1985

Animals see differently than we do," she said. "They don't see color or form, only movement." So I took my cat out into the garden where it was raining. She loves the rain. I took her out into the garden to see what she saw. Red roses with bright green stems. A scene from *Porgy and Bess*. A flat screen of watery dots. Da da da da da.

Twilight of the Gods, 2019

CLOWNS

Fig 23

21

MUSN

33

9

20

D

E

A

T

H

Creek

Salv

31

6

17

18

fig.14

8

30

31

30

RAT/mouse

JEEP

SEA LEVEL

69	53	3	32	43	9	90	124	64	119	16
Tw	I	Li	Gh	To	F	Th	E	Go	D	S
Twilitium	Iodine	Lithium	Ghostium	Tocosium	Fluorine	Thorium	Elementium	Gonerum	Deludium	Sulphur
166.93	126.90	6.941	72.64	(98)	18.998	232.04	(292)	157.25	(247)	32.065

84 Sparrows, 1980

14 Words, 1991

PINE

BREAD

RAIN

CLAY

Speckled Trout, 1996

so that $H \cdot h = \int_{\partial A} h \cdot \nabla \frac{1}{r} \cdot \mathbf{n} \, dA$
 Since this is true for any h , we can write
 that the effective magnetic field is

Losing your mind is not the same as misplacing something. It is more like the slow surrender of territory, losing it a step at a time, in increments. A kind of resettlement takes place — you have new neighbors, so to speak. Neural pathways are altered, new paths worn in the grass by people who don't keep up their lawn, who park their beat-up van in the front yard and piss in the street. Who borrow things and don't return them. You try to be accomodating, but it isn't easy. They party day and night with their biker friends, blast *Megadeth* non-stop from the stereo and laugh at your complaints. Chill out, Dude, they say. Everyone is Dude, or man. They install a refrigerator on their front porch and crushed beer cans fill their yard and spill over into yours. Their children break your windows (accidently, of course), leave their bicycles in your driveway, copulate in the back seat of your Volvo. During the course of the day you find yourself in a murderous rage. Who are these people?

These are well known results

8
 let H be a harmonic function, and
 form the scalar product
 of the

these are less well known

Mona Monalisa, 2013

Mona Monalisa

XOXO, 2014-16

125	8	125	8
X	O	X	O
Xanaxium	Oxygen	Xanaxium	Oxygen
(253)	15.999	(253)	15.999

Time Falling Objects, 1989

Hope & Glory, 2005

Being and Nothingness 2, 2016

4 Be Beryllium 9.0122	49 In Indium 114.82	120 G Goallium (292)
122 A Angstium (294)	60 Nd Neodymium 144.24

102 No Nobelium (259)	90 Th Thorium 232.04	49 In Indium 114.82	120 G Goallium (292)	7 N Nitrogen 14.007	99 Es Einsteinium (252)	16 S Solphur 32.065
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List of Plates

Cover
Descent of Man, 2014
 Acrylic, enamel, plywood, cast polyurethane, honeycomb aluminum
 52 x 56.5 x 1.75 inches

6
Chalk Spills, 2000
 Oil on cast fiberglass
 6 x 48 x 15 inches

7
The Eternal Return, 2013-19
 Acrylic and oil on canvas
 48 x 56 inches

10
O Brave New World, 2017
 Acrylic on canvas
 60 x 60 inches

11
Waiting for Lolita, 1986
 Oil on porcelain, plywood
 24 x 29 x 16 inches

13
Shadow of Night, 2012
 Oil and acrylic on canvas
 48 x 56 inches
 Collection of Michael and Tami Lang, San Diego, California

13
I Am No a Monster, 2015
 Oil and acrylic on canvas
 45 x 54 inches
 Ackerley Collection, Houston, Texas

16
Private Africa, 1995
 Oil and blackboard slating on wood
 92.5 x 93.5 x 4 inches
 Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas

19
 Pieter Bruegel
The Fall of Icarus (La chute d'Icare), c. 1555
 Oil on canvas
 29 x 41.5 inches
 Collection of the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Bruxelles

20
The Fall of Icarus (after Bruegel), 2014
 Acrylic on canvas
 60 x 60 inches

22
The March of Folly, 2016
 Oil and acrylic on laminated paper
 42.75 X 44.25 inches
 Collection Carl Niendorff, Dallas, Texas

23
Objects in a Field, 1986
 Oil and charcoal on canvas
 96 x 96 inches
 Collection of Michael Krichman, San Diego, California

24
Stockton, 2010
 Oil and acrylic on panel
 74.25 x 80.25 x 4.26 inches
 Collection of Jeffrey and Walton Goldring, New Orleans, Louisiana

26
 Terry Allen
The Spanish Theory, 1972
 Mixed Media
 40 x 30 inches
 Collection of the Belger Arts Center, Kansas City, Missouri

26
 Edward Ruscha
Ice Princess, 1990
 Acrylic on canvas
 Unframed 68 1/8 x 68 inches
 Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum purchase made possible by a grant from The Burnett Foundation

27
 Artist Unknown
Granbury Bridge

29
The Freudian Body, 2018
Acrylic on laminated paper
42 x 47 inches
Collection of Claire Barry, Fort Worth, Texas

35
The Map, 2019
Vinyl lettering on wall
12 x 16 feet

37
American Landscape, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
50 x 56 inches
Ackerley Collection, Houston, Texas

39 and 41
What a Cat Sees, 1985
Metal primer and epoxy on nickel-plated steel
22 x 28 x 12 inches

43
Twilight of the Gods, 2019
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45 x 54 inches

44 and 45
84 Sparrows, 1980
Acrylic on canvas and paper, gelatin silver photograph
94 x 252 inches

46 and 47
14 Words, 1991
Cast Hydrostone, steel, and enamel on aluminum
68 x 15 x 9 inches

49
Speckled Trout, 1996
Oil on blackboard slating, wooden trestlework
59 x 84 inches
Collection of Lisa and Chuck Brown, Dallas, Texas

51
Mona Monalisa, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
61 x 61 inches

53
XOXO, 2014-16
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 84 inches
Ackerley Collection, Houston, Texas

55
Time Falling Objects, 1989
Oil and blackboard slating on wood
110.5 x 119.5 x 5.5 inches
Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Michael Rubel and Kristin Rey

57
Hope & Glory, 2005
Acrylic on canvas, cast and painted polyurethane
Overall dimension 40 x 47 inches

59
Being and Nothingness 2, 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45 x 54 inches
Collection of Danna Orr, Dallas, Texas

Vernon Fisher

Vernon Fisher was born in 1943, in Fort Worth, Texas, where he continues to live and work. He was educated at Hardin-Simmons University and received an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois in 1969. His multi-media art, which combines his narrative texts with painting, drawing, sculpture, and found objects, has been exhibited widely in one-person and group exhibitions. He has created many museum installations, including those at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; the Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois. He represented the United States in the Fifth India Triennial, New Delhi, India.

In 1989, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego organized a mid-career survey of his work, which travelled to the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas; the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas; and the Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida.

In 2010, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth produced *Vernon Fisher: K-Mart Conceptualism*, a career retrospective, which was accompanied by the monograph, *Vernon Fisher*, published by the University of Texas Press, Austin.

Fisher has earned numerous honors and awards including three Individual Artist's Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; a Louis Comfort

Tiffany Foundation Grant; an Award in the Visual Arts, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Arts; and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.

His writings have been anthologized in *Navigating by the Stars*, published by Landfall Press in 1989.

Vernon Fisher is a Regents Professor of Art, Emeritus, at the University of North Texas where he taught for twenty-eight years. He received the College Art Association's Distinguished Teaching of Art Award in 1992.

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