JANET FISH
Working with Reflected Light
THE CAMERA

Which of the works shown here are paintings?
PORTRAITS, LANDSCAPES, AND still lifes—artists have painted these subjects realistically for hundreds of years. At the end of the 19th century, a new process—photography—replaced most realistic painting. Although many 20th-century artists still painted these subjects, they began using nonrepresentational styles to depict them. A few artists continued to paint realistically, but the modern way to depict reality was to take a photograph.

All the works shown here were done during the 1970s by three contemporary American artists. Chuck Close (who did the portrait of the woman, below right), Richard Estes (cityscape, above right), and Janet Fish (still life, left) worked in a style called Photo Realism. Photo Realists felt that photographic images had become more real to many people than actual objects and scenes. Photo Realists used paints and brushes, but saw the world through the lens of a camera. These works are paintings, but each has been so influenced by camera techniques that it might easily be mistaken for a photo.

Many of the Photo Realists like Close actually worked from photos. Like a camera, Close seems detached from his subject. Leslie—his huge, photographically detailed painting (right)—tells us nothing personal about his subject. Everything in this “portrait” is equally important and the focus of each feature changes as if seen through a camera lens.

In his landscape, Broadway and 64th (above), Richard Estes has used the panoramic effect of a wide-angle lens to capture the enormity of New York City. The sharp focus of every detail is another quality usually found only in a photograph.

Janet Fish never considered herself a Photo Realist, but her complex still lifes, like Wine and Cheese Glasses (left) and Dark Mirror (cover), have clearly been influenced by photography. Her tightly cropped images fill the entire frame, and the foreground and background are compressed as if seen through a telephoto lens. This effect emphasizes the varied patterns made by all the reflecting surfaces.

“When you look at a scene, you tend to scan it. As your eyes move, the vanishing point seems to move.”—Richard Estes

“When I made this portrait six feet high. I find that if a face is big enough, it’s hard to ignore.”—Chuck Close

“I feel as though I haven’t really seen an object until I actually start painting it.”—Janet Fish

Janet Fish, b. 1938. Wine and Cheese Glasses. 1975, 71 x 54”. Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana. Photo, courtesy of the artist.
Compare the nearly 200-year-old still life (above) with one (right) done last year by contemporary artist Janet Fish.

James Peale (1749-1831), Fruit Still Life, 1824, 14 1/2" x 17 5/8". The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas M. Evans.

EVER SINCE SHE can remember, Janet Fish wanted to be an artist. Born in 1938 in Boston, she grew up in New England in a family of artists—her grandfather was a painter; her mother was a sculptor. Fish studied sculpture at Smith College and went on to Yale, where she found that everyone in her sculpture class was working abstractly. Interested in capturing the beauty of the ordinary objects she saw around her, Fish began painting. With little encouragement, the artist painted realistically until she graduated in 1963.

The next year Fish moved to New York City, supporting herself with jobs in shops and offices. She lived and painted in a small unheated loft, taking showers at friends’ houses. She painted objects she found in second-hand shops, focusing on the way light plays on surfaces, how it reflects and breaks up forms. Her first paintings (cover; pages 2, 6), were mainly black and white; her current works (like the one on the right), are filled with colors so bright, the paintings seem almost to glow from within.

Fish’s paintings are very contemporary, but her work follows in a long tradition of realistic still-life painters. Earlier paintings—like the one above by 19th-century American James Peale—usually have a single main center of attention. Everything in this work leads the eye to its focal point, the bowl of fruit. The strong, simple shapes set in a dark, three-dimensional space give the work a solid, lifelike appearance.

Compare Janet Fish’s still life (right) with Peale’s. Although Fish never considered herself a Photo Realist, her work has many Photo Realist qualities. Cut Peach, Blue Vase has no single focal point. Every detail is equally important. Like Peale’s painting, Fish’s work is a still-life. But is it really “still”? Can you look at just one of the objects in this work, or is your eye forced to keep moving around the canvas? There are only six glass containers in this composition; why do there seem to be dozens?

We see Peale’s still life from one point of view—eye level. But the viewer seems to be hovering above Fish’s painting, giving the work a restless, dynamic feeling. The light source in the Peale is even and steady; the earth colors (browns, greens, tans) are muted and natural. In Fish’s complex and interconnected composition, the reflecting patterns of light and shadow shimmer like waves in a stream. The warm (reds, oranges, yellows) and cool colors (blues, greens, purples) contrast with each other so the whole painting appears to vibrate.

“The early realistic painters took ordinary objects and gave them an incredible suggestion of spirit beyond.”—Janet Fish

Photo: D.C. Moore Gallery, N.Y., N.Y.

Cut Peach, Blue Vase, 1993, 40" x 30". Photo: D. C. Moore Gallery, N.Y., N.Y.
matter of painting what you choose to see.”—Janet Fish

IS OF REALITY
TOWARD the end of the 1960s, Janet Fish was searching for her own painting style. She said, "Abstraction didn't work for me. I had to get out of my own head and into the outside world."

She painted landscapes and portraits, but worked so slowly she had trouble finding people who could sit still long enough. She tried painting vegetables, but these didn't last either. Glasses and bottles wouldn't decay, so she added a few to the still life she was working on. As the light came through her studio windows, morning changed to noon, then late afternoon, and the artist watched what happened to her glasses and bottles. She loved the way the light broke up the forms, so she gathered every glass object she could find and began to paint.

Fish was so happy with the results, she began painting glass containers of all sizes, shapes, thicknesses, and patterns. Some were filled with water and placed on mirrored surfaces. Light reflected back and forth through the glass, the water, and the mirrors. Compositions like Rain and Dusk (below) are realistic, but complex and hard to read because the light filters through and bounces off many distorting surfaces. Any change in the weather completely changes the colors and values. That's why, to this day, Fish keeps two paintings going—one for sunny days, another for clouds.

Fish works every day in her New York studio, "capturing the beauty of everyday objects." While her early paintings like Rain and Dusk are made up of ovals, straight lines, regular shapes, and a few muted colors, is there any color you can find in her recent work, Glass and Shells (right)? Can you find any solid shapes? The artist paints everyday objects, but they are not the subject of her paintings. As she says, "My real subject is the movement of light and color from one form to another."

Fish's still lifes are made up of fleeting, ghostly images and their reflections, which bounce from surface to surface. The artist uses lines—thick, thin, curved, dotted, short, continuous, slashing, diagonal—and brilliant colors to keep the viewer's eye moving across the canvas. In a recent painting, Jump (pages 8-9), the glittering glass objects in the foreground are as dynamic as the solid, active figures in the background. In her outwardly traditional still-life paintings, Fish expresses constant change, furious inner motion, and restlessness, qualities that characterize modern urban society.

"I want my paintings to have energy, a movement that goes across the entire surface."—Janet Fish
< Liquid Landscapes

Early 20th-century Dutch artist M. C. Escher was fascinated by the difference between two and three dimensions. He wrote about this print, "The reflections of the trees indicate a three-dimensional world above; the tire tracks and footprints in the mud below suggest the two-dimensional surface of the water."

Escher spent his career trying to visualize the concept of many different worlds existing in the same place at the same time.

Puddle (left) was an early attempt to express this idea. Here the artist suggests two simultaneous worlds by contrasting the negative space, vertical lines, and dots reflected in the puddle with the diagonal lines and textures in the road. Which area do you think represents two dimensions and which suggests a third dimension? In later works Escher added an additional dimension—fish swimming below the surface of the water.

What do you see here—a hole in the ground, or a reflection in water?


< Through the Looking Glass

One of the most famous reflected images in art history is the mirror (left) featured in a wedding portrait by 15th-century Flemish (Flanders was an area in northern Europe) artist Jan van Eyck (van eyeck). The depth, modeling, and detail Van Eyck was known for can be seen in the tiny but complete world reflected in this mirror.

In Van Eyck's time, two people could marry by exchanging vows in front of two witnesses. The artist has used legal script to sign and date the wall above the mirror, "Jan van Eyck was here, 1434." In the mirror, the artist and another witness stand before the bride and groom. This work, The Arnolfini Marriage, not only records the wedding, it serves as a marriage certificate.

The painting is composed around its focal point—the mirror. This round globe not only echoes the scene, but extends the space of the painting beyond the room in which it takes place. Many details also serve as symbols. The couple's pose emphasizes the importance of the wedding ritual; the burning candle is part of the ceremony, the dog stands for faith; and the sculpture in back is the patron saint of childbirth. (Most experts agree that the bride is not pregnant; the clothing and posture of the time make her appear to be so.)

Painted Reflections

Contemporary American artist Lidya Buizo works with reflected images in an unusual way. She creates them herself: Born in Uruguay, Buizo grew up with the simple, classic shapes of early South American pottery. The artist began working in clay, decorating her pots with painted designs. After moving to New York City, she incorporated the buildings and bits of blue sky she saw around her into her pottery. She painted the unfired surface, then fired and glazed it.

In their works, both Janet Fish and Lidya Buizo suggest worlds contained within worlds. The images in Fish's paintings are taken from everyday life but are so distorted, fragmented, and repeated that they lose any feeling of solid, unchanging reality. In contrast, the simplified planes and geometric shapes in Buizo's urban scenes have a classic and timeless quality. They appear to be reflections of the real world around them, but they aren't. Buizo's painted images reflect scenes that are only in the artist's imagination.

Is this jar's surface so shiny you can see a building reflected in it?


Scholastic Art 11
Eighteen-year-old Kris Green calls his Scholastic Art Award-winning drawing (below) a "self portrait." Like Janet Fish, Kris has combined a number of objects to create a still life with personal meaning. Kris is a senior at Carver Contemporary High School in Houston, a performing-arts school for gifted and talented art students. After graduation, he plans to pursue an art career. When he is not creating art, Kris plays varsity baseball.
How did you first get involved with art?
I've been drawing from the day I could pick up a book and look at the pictures. In school, I took any art class I could. And now I'm studying art at a performing-arts magnet school.

How did you come to do this award-winning still life?
It started as a class assignment. We were to develop a self-portrait using only objects and images. We had to collect seven to ten objects that said something about who we were. I used prisma color (colored pencils) to make the objects look as real as possible.

Where did the idea for the drawing come from?
I tried to think about what was important to me. I used a baseball and a baseball card because baseball is my favorite sport. I put in the Universal Studios sign and threaded film throughout the picture because I love movies. Back to the Future is my favorite film. The rosary beads represent my religion—Catholicism. And all the other objects are from my room. Everything was carefully arranged, not just thrown on the table. I'm a neat, organized person and I wanted the picture to show that orderly quality.

How did you get everything to look so real?
With a lot of hard work. After blocking in the composition, I approached the drawing with the idea of capturing every detail. So I took each object and worked on it individually. That way, I could concentrate on every part of each object. Adding highlights, shadows, and shading gave the picture a sense of depth. For instance, I wanted the film at the bottom to seem to come out at you. I didn't want any one object to dominate, so all the shapes and colors balance each other out. Each object leads your attention to the next one.

How did you do the drawing?
Once I picked out the objects I was going to use, I set up various arrangements and did quick thumbnail sketches. I decided on the final composition, then traced my rough sketch onto a piece of paper especially made for colored pencil. I then sat in front of the still life and drew everything in exact detail, just as it appeared in front of me.

Then what did you do?
When the drawing was done, I started with one object—in this case it was the Oldies. I removed all the other objects, finished this one and colored it in. I wanted to finish one object before going on to the next, so no one part of the drawing would be completely done. Seeing the whole object while I was drawing it allowed me to make it look more lifelike. When every object was done, I set the still life back up. I used highlights and shadows to tie the drawing together.

What was the hardest part of doing this detailed drawing?
The hardest part was when I took an object out of the still life to draw it. I always had to remember the object I was working on was only part of the whole composition.

How long did the project take?
It was very tedious and time consuming. It took nearly 80 hours to complete the drawing. And each image became more of a challenge as I went on.

Do you like to work realistically?
Yes, I have a realistic outlook, so I express myself best using detailed, realistic images. I've really never been able to paint or draw loosely. And I've never worked abstractly.

Do you have any advice for other students interested in art?
I love creating art. It's hard for people who aren't involved in it to understand that art is your life. It will take a lot of your time but will give you a great future. There are no limits in art. As an artist, you can create whatever you want.
PAINTING YOUR OWN IMAGE

Janet Fish expresses herself through the objects she chooses to paint—mirrors, glasses, vases, shells—all reflected in one another. In many of her still lifes (such as those on pages 2 and 6), the artist also includes tiny reflections of her own features. In this workshop, you'll paint a self-portrait that reflects something about yourself you'd like to communicate to others.

Use reflected images to create an unusual self-portrait.
Materials

- Drawing board
- 18" x 24" Sulfitc drawing paper
- No. 2 school pencil
- Palette (or flat surface to mix paint)
- Vinyl eraser
- Hand-held mirror/other clearly reflecting surfaces (hub caps, toaster, spoons, sunglasses, water, black television screen, etc.)
- Primary, secondary, black, white tempera color
- Container to hold water
- Toweling
- Variety of round and flat paint brushes
- Plastic wrap to cover palettes

Starting Out

First, decide what you want to tell people about yourself in your portrait. Choose a reflecting surface that is curved or has an interesting shape. As you look at your reflection in this surface, think of how you want to compose your self-portrait. Do several careful, accurate contour drawings of your head and shoulders. Consider cropping, slight distortion, and incorporating background areas and/or edges of your mirror or reflecting surface.

Step 2

Choose the drawing you think will work best as a painting and, using a few light lines, transfer it to the heavy paper. This drawing will be used as a guideline, so concentrate on essential shapes, accurate proportion, and correct placement. Details will be added when painting.

Step 3

Lay out your colors, water, and palette. Try and limit colors to two or three basic hues plus black and white. In painting a self-portrait, skin tones will be the most important color you use and also the most difficult to mix. Begin with white paint and keep adding darker colors until you get the correct shade. Skin tones (from deep brown to light pink) are warm. You can keep your entire color scheme warm (red, yellow, orange) or work with contrasts by using cool colors (blue, green, purple).

Some Solutions

When composing your self-portrait, think first about format. Will your face be tightly cropped to fill the page, or will the shape of the reflection frame it? Will the composition be symmetrical (same on each side) or asymmetrical (sides are different but visually balanced)? Will your point of view be from below, above, or eye level? Will you use flat, solid shapes with definite edges? Will your brushstrokes be loose and expressive? How will you use negative space, distortion, or background objects? Will your colors be of equal intensity (brightness), value (tints are light; shades are dark), and temperature (warm or cool), or will you use colors that contrast in all these areas?
CREATING A JANET FISH STILL LIFE

How would you take the following still-life objects—fruit, vase, flowers, shells, table, and window—and tie them all together into a painting? That’s what Janet Fish has done in the work on the right, Hunt’s Vase. Fish’s use of reflections, which pull the viewer’s eye from one object to the next, is one of the devices that make this painting so effective. Can you find other design elements the artist used in creating Hunt’s Vase, as well as some elements that she purposely did NOT use?

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Janet Fish, b. 1938. Hunt’s Vase, 1984. 56" x 36". Private Collection.