

FRIEZE

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The Artistic Athleticism of Louise Fishman

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Ballin' the Jack, Karma, New York, installation view

Artists have been mysteriously silent on the subject of sports – presumably because most of them can't play to save their lives. Louise Fishman is an exception: a high-school basketball star who became a great artist. (Another is George Bellows, who had a brief stint as a semi-pro baseball player.) You sense that the paintings in 'Ballin' the Jack', Fishman's latest outing at Karma, New York, are the work of an ex-jock – firstly and most obviously because, aged 81, she's suffered no discernible dip in stamina. Even the least of her new works – some of them large scale oil-on-linen, some modest watercolours – have a cocky, intuitive sweep, while the best pair intuition with a thoughtful visual sensibility.

Although Fishman's style is typically described as 'gestural abstraction,' her paintings test the limits of that phrase. Born in Philadelphia but based in New York since the mid-1960s, Fishman owes plenty to the abstract expressionists, but she sets their inventions to her own tune. Canvases like *Unbinding* and *Too Much, Too Much* (both 2020) have a snarl that recalls Willem de Kooning at his angriest. (In the 1970s, Fishman did a whole series of 'Angry' paintings.) But the kind of rage she expresses is more slow burn than fury: the anger of someone who's used to hiding their emotions in plain sight.

Fishman is often compared to ab-ex pioneers like Franz Kline – see *Mantra* (2020) or the painting that gives the show its title, *Ballin' the Jack* (2019) – but, at her best, she's the better artist. The rough alienation Kline achieved to great fanfare Fishman assumes matter-of-factly. She does more and makes it seem like less. Her new work hints at an endless, tormented struggle but, like the athlete she used to be, she bears its weight lightly.