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The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
January 1990

VERNON FISHER

January 19 - March 6, 1990

Vernon Fisher

MoMA exh. # 1540, 1/19/90-3/6/90

Project #20

Word and image add the exploration of complex and unexpected connections, including the two have been the essence of Fisher's multimedia installations for over a decade. By juxtaposing text with image, the artist engages a dynamic between two distinct forms of cognition—reading and seeing. As Deborah Shorrock in the exhibition brochure, "The pictures never directly affirm what the words, but act as a visual metaphor . . . while the viewer is decoding both language and image, and often crossing the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and illusion."

In the installation, Fisher has transformed the gallery walls by 1990. The blackboards—a consistent element in his recent work. Three of them, like walls are drawn with white paintstick. On one, chalk trays are filled is overflowing, some spilling to the floor. Half-grazed images, drawn from the artist's personal iconography, provide an evocative backdrop for the

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The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
January 1990

PROJECTS: VERNON FISHER

January 19 - March 6, 1990

The Museum of Modern Art continues its ongoing PROJECTS series with an installation by Fort Worth artist Vernon Fisher, opening on January 19, 1990. Organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, associate curator in the Department of Drawings, PROJECTS: VERNON FISHER is a site-specific installation that combines painting, wall drawing, three-dimensional objects, and original narrative. Titled Movements Among the Dead, the installation remains on view through March 6, 1990.

Word and image and the exploration of complex and unexpected connections between the two have been the essence of Fisher's multimedia installations for over a decade. By juxtaposing text with image, the artist arranges a balance between two distinct forms of cognition--reading and seeing. Ms. Dabrowski observes in the exhibition brochure, "The pictures never directly illustrate the words, but act as a visual metaphor . . . aiding the viewer in decoding both language and image, and often crossing the borderlines between fact and fiction, reality and illusion."

For the installation, Fisher has transformed the gallery walls to look like blackboards--a consistent element in his recent work. Three of these slate-like walls are drawn with white paintstick. On one, chalk trays are filled to overflowing, some spilling to the floor. Half-erased images, drawn from the artist's personal iconography, provide an evocative backdrop for the

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text. By erasing the images and preserving the residual markings, Fisher teases the viewer's notions of memory.

In Movements Among the Dead, Fisher focuses on nostalgia and contemplates human responses to death, alienation, and longing. The theme is introduced by the artist's text on the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov and his famous experiments on the conditioned reflex. While recounting Pavlov's training a hungry dog to salivate at the sound of a bell, Fisher alters the outcome so that Pavlov is forced to confront the dog's increasingly destructive behavior. Similarly, the viewer is provoked to face his or her own unexpected responses to the work and, in those responses, to find a personal interpretation.

Vernon Fisher was born in 1943 in Fort Worth, Texas, where he resides. He currently teaches at the University of North Texas in Denton. Fisher received his BA degree at Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas, in 1967, and his MFA degree from the University of Illinois in 1969. He is a recipient of several fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a grant from the Awards in the Visual Arts, also funded in part by the NEA. The artist has participated in numerous group and one-person exhibitions. A retrospective of his work was recently organized by La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and travels to the Houston Contemporary Art Museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

PROJECTS is made possible by generous grants from The Bohen Foundation and the Lannan Foundation. Next in the series is PROJECTS: CILDO MEIRELES, on view from March 16 to May 1, 1990.

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No. 4

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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
January 19–March 6, 1990

projects: vernon fisher



Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, south wall, 1990. Paintstick and acrylic on black latex, with chalk and chalk trays. Surveyor's level in foreground. Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

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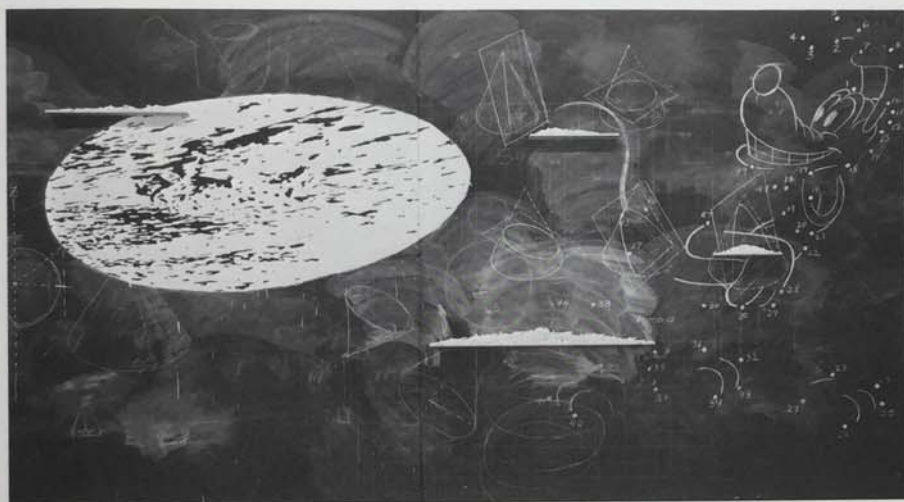
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vernion fisher
movements among the dead

Word and image, and the exploration of complex and unexpected connections between the two, are the essence of Vernon Fisher's work. For over a decade, he has created site-specific installations that combine painting, wall drawing, three-dimensional objects, and narrative texts he writes himself. His fictional narratives, complemented by painted or drawn and sometimes erased images, question and subvert conventional meanings. By playing the text off against the images, Fisher strives to achieve a



Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, south wall, 1990. Paintstick and acrylic on black latex, with chalk and chalk trays. Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

balance between two distinct forms of cognition, reading and seeing. The pictures never directly illustrate the words, but act as a visual metaphor and introduce imagery that provokes a multitude of disparate associations, aiding the viewer in decoding both language and image, and often crossing the borderlines between fact and fiction, reality and illusion.

This investigation of language in art reflects the influences of the late fifties work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, the concerns of Pop artists James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol, and the early sixties work of the Conceptual artists. It should also be seen in the context of the work of such California artists as Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari.

Fisher's installations reveal his interest in nature, culture, language, and the unconscious, as well as his fascination with the human relationship to nature, human emotional states, and the notions of the sublime, nostalgia, and memory. He believes that these have been contaminated and trivialized by a materialistic, insensitive world with dictated attitudes and responses to daily life and experience. Thus, his aim is to detoxify and restore their meaning by creating new contexts for them through words and images in unorthodox pairings or juxtapositions.

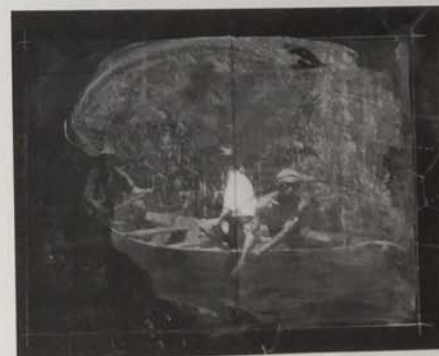
In his installation for The Museum of Modern Art, titled *Movements Among the Dead*, Fisher focuses on nostalgia and contemplates human responses to sorrow, death, alienation, longing for the unattainable, and, finally, conditioned but uncontrollable destruction and self-destruction.

The central conceit of the installation is divulged on one wall, in Fisher's written narrative on the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) and his experiments culminating in his famous discovery of conditioned reflex. Fisher's text contains part fact and part fiction. While recounting Pavlov's training a hungry dog to salivate at the sound of a bell previously associated with food, the artist comments on the significance of conditioning to the reflexes of the nervous system. Indirectly, he remarks on the relationship between humankind and nature. The description of the dog's increasingly destructive behavior discloses the vagaries of the artist's imagination. Pavlov presses himself against a wall in fear, forced to confront an unexpected reaction induced by his own experiments on the animal. Similarly, Fisher asks the viewer to face his or her own unexpected responses while viewing his work.

The installation is composed of four parts, reflecting the architecture of the gallery. Fisher has transformed the four gallery walls to look like blackboards—a consistent support element in his recent work. Blurring the lines between reality and illusion, the artist has drawn on three of the walls with white paintstick to imitate actual slate boards covered with drawings in real, white chalk. On one wall, chalk trays are filled to overflowing, and chalk spills to the floor.

This same, long wall is dominated by a white ellipse with an upside-down abstraction of a dalmation. The dalmation was projected at such an angle that it is elongated, and now, painted in, is indecipherable until the viewer looks through the surveyor's level. Positioned in the middle of the room and pointed at the dog's reflection in a parabolic mirror on another wall, the level reconstructs the image for the viewer, turning the oval into a circle and returning the dalmation to its natural form. This process of decoding the image is analogous to the one that takes place in the viewer's imagination while reading the text on Pavlov. Language and image function as two indispensable and yet interchangeable agents to push the narrative forward, beyond the written text and pictures that appear on the walls.

Featured on the adjacent wall, with the parabolic mirror attached to the top center of it, is a silkscreened image of explorers—a symbol for humans in an alienating environment, and a metaphor for the artist's, the viewer's, and Pavlov's search for clues to hidden, as yet undiscovered, meanings.



Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, east wall, 1990. Silkscreen on black latex, 48 x 66" (120 x 169 cm). Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

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The remaining, freestanding wall is positioned in such a way that natural light enters the dark space at one end of the room. A "doorway," about seven feet square, is blocked by a heavy, false-slate blackboard that looks as if the upper left-hand corner were broken off, allowing a view of the installation from the walkway outside the gallery and permitting an additional stream of light to enter the room.

Half-erased images on the blackboard walls, drawn from the artist's personal, iconographic vocabulary, provide a broad, evocative, visual backdrop for the text. Cones intersected by planes to form ovals; diagrams and renderings of brains; and schematic mountains intersected by cones, together create a visual and psychic landscape. By erasing the images and preserving the residual markings, Fisher teases the viewer's notions of memory and offers visual stimuli, encouraging participation in and a rapport with different components of the installation. The disjunction of images, the meanings of which remain in constant flux, allows the viewer to select those that correspond to his or her own emotions and perceptions. Through the interplay of word and image, the artist motivates the viewer to respond to his work and, by extension, his or her environment, intellectually, emotionally, and physically and, in those responses, to find a personal interpretation.

Magdalena Dabrowski
Associate Curator
Department of Drawings



Works 88: Parallel Lines. 1988. One of eight. Paintstick, acrylic, and latex on wall. Installation at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

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Bridge (installation)

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Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
January 19-March 6, 1990

projects: vernon fisher



Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, south wall. 1990. Paintstick and acrylic on black latex, with chalk and chalk trays. Surveyor's level in foreground. Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

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vernon fisher

movements among the dead

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projects: vernon fisher

Friday
January 19, 1990
6:30–8:30 p.m.
11 West 53 Street
New York

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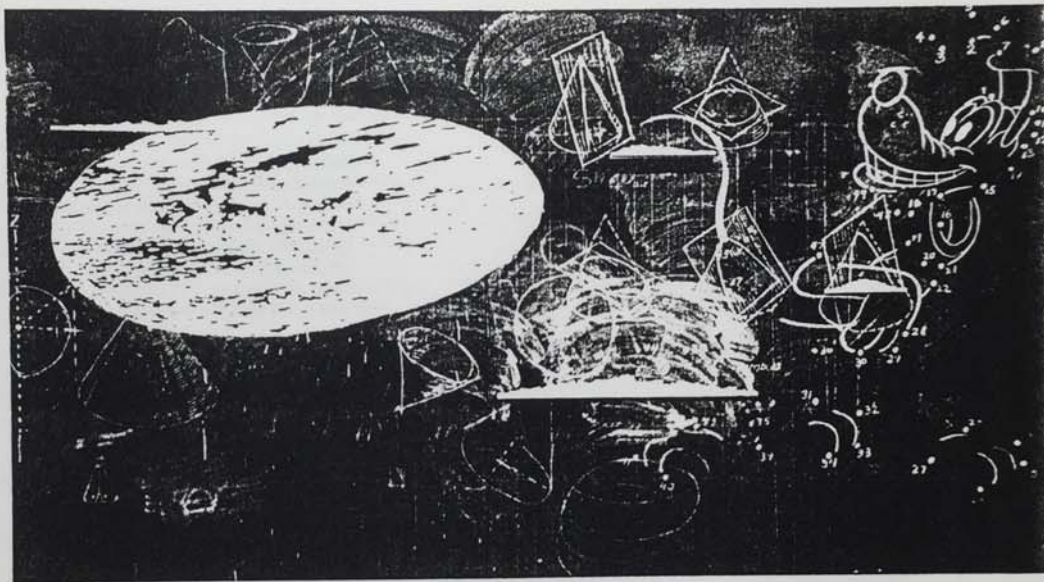
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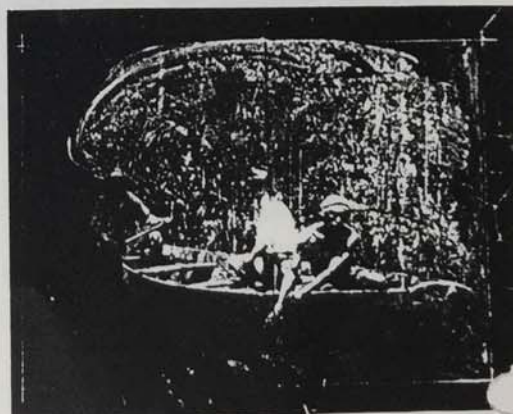
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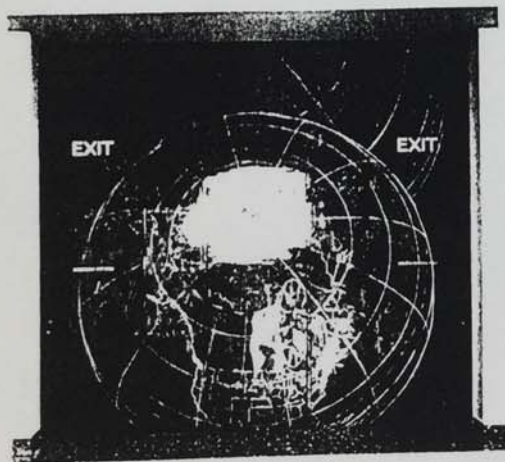
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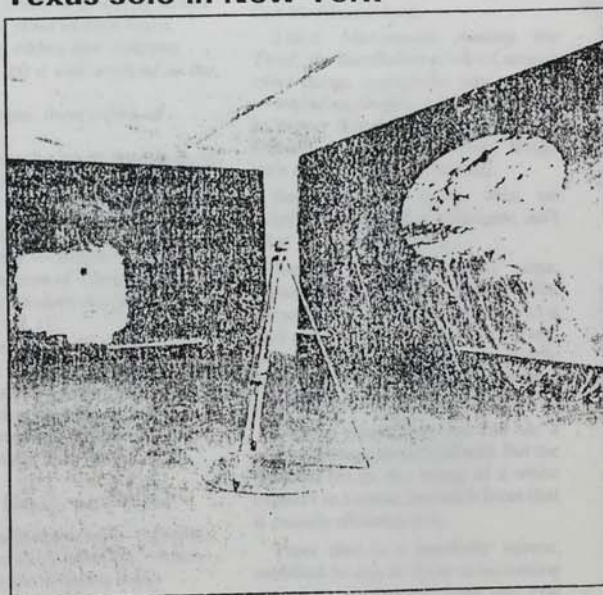
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THE HOUSTON POST
6 February 1990

Texas solo in New York



Kim Collins/Special to The Post

Vernon Fisher's paintings on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City constitute the first solo show at that venerable museum of an artist living and working in Texas. Fisher, who was born in Fort Worth, where he lives, is an internationally-known artist. His installation is part of the museum's "PROJECTS" series introducing new artists to the MOMA's public. The show will be on view at the museum, 11 West 53rd Street, through March 6.

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FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM
5 February 1990

ART

Fisher's work reaches out and touches

By JANET TYSON
FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

ARLINGTON — Vernon Fisher's art has a way of plopping stones into the pond of your brain, creating eddies that continue even after you've left it and returned to the rest of the world.

Now, as it happens, there's a lot of eddying going on.

Fisher has an installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, and one at the University of Texas at Arlington.

And the local presentation of his traveling retrospective — organized by the La Jolla (Calif.) Museum of Contemporary Art — opens at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth on Feb. 11.

Between the latter two exhibitions, viewers in the Fort Worth vicinity will have their best chance ever to get to know Fisher's work, which ironically — but in the art world it always seems to be so — is better known elsewhere than in his hometown.

As noted above, Fisher's wryly poetic work always has been remarkably engaging and resonant. It becomes a flexible cluster of reference points for decoding other aspects of life.

But his most recent work — which resembles old-fashioned blackboards covered with dusty, ghostly chalklike scrawls and added-on things like chalk trays, photographic screen prints and painted images — reaches out and involves viewers even more.

Almost, it could be said, to a somewhat

problematic degree.

For example, in New York, Fisher has a room in which the four walls have that blackboard look.

Titled *Movements Among the Dead*, the installation revolves, among other things, around the way animals — including people — are conditioned to expect things to be a certain way because they associate those things with certain signs and stimuli.

But more and more, what we perceive and are led to anticipate, isn't what really is happening.

Anyway, handmade chalk trays, mounted near the bottoms of the walls, are so loaded with chalk Fisher has let it spill onto the floor. There is a surveyor's compass on a tripod in the middle of the room that's about the first thing people approach upon entering.

Looking through it, you can see a screened image on the end wall. But the compass brings the image of a white explorer in a canoe into such focus that it entirely disintegrates.

There also is a parabolic mirror, mounted to one of those crisscrossing extenders, coming out from that end wall. It reflects another distorted visual element on the adjacent wall. That element is an ellipse containing an upside-down, abstracted, Dalmatian dog. Close by, on that same wall, is a dot-to-dot drawing of Pluto-the-dog, with some of the dots left unconnected.

Apart from that incomplete image, various aspects of the "chalk" drawings and notes on each wall have a look of being constantly drawn, erased and redrawn.

The whole work seems to be in a state of flux. And there are more than a few things for viewers to interact with and contribute to via processes of perception. So much so, that New Yorkers started picking up the chalk and adding their own little doodles to the installation.

Now, Fisher's work is meant to blur distinctions between art and everything else, which may or may not mean blurring other distinctions, as well.

For example: Where does what the artist does stop, and at what point does the viewer come in as part of the process?

Is it up to the artist to provide stimuli, ranging from ambiguous to perfect?

Vernon Fisher: An Installation

Through March 16: The University of Texas at Arlington Center for Research in Contemporary Art, Fine Arts Building, 600 S. Cooper St. Information: 273-3110

Also on view, through Feb. 16: *The New Narratology — Examining the Narrative in Image-Text Art*, curated by Maria Porges and featuring works by Jack Balas, Nayland Blake, Mark Alice Durant, James Morris and Margaret Crane/Jon Winet. Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Thursday; 6-8 p.m., Wednesday; 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Friday. Admission: Free

clear, that lead viewers to certain conclusions or expectations?

How much flexibility is built in that stimulus/response?

Ironically, the stimulus of Fisher's art seems to have led some viewers to anticipate that they could take part in processes they weren't supposed to part of.

The extent to which they follow the initial cluster of thoughts is known. Maybe they contributed some very pertinent observations to Fisher's assertions.

But that wasn't Fisher's intent. Did their doodling reveal some sort of fallacy about his art? Or did it work in his basic premise of stymied expectations?

Without answering those questions one way or the other, MoMA has provided little messages on the floor that, in essence, please do not touch the chalk.

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	MoMA Exhs.	1540.7

FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM
Page 2

Vernon Fisher in MoMA

Two years ago, Vernon Fisher was a young man, a student at the University of Texas at Austin, who had just moved to New York City to study art.

Now, he is a well-known artist, a member of the New York School, and a resident of New York City.

His work is a blend of the traditional and the modern, of the old and the new, of the past and the future.

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Which is what was done right off the bat at UTA, where Fisher has a three-wall installation at the Center for Research in Contemporary Art.

This installation, so blessedly close to home, was touted as a studio installation for the MoMA work.

But it really is a completely new constellation of images, with several likely overlaps in ideas.

In question is the evolution of a picture of comedian Bud Abbot being scared half-to-death by a skeleton. Abbot is standing, gaping out at us, while a bony hand clutches at his throat.

The paintings and drawings (and trays of chalk) are on three walls.

From wall to wall, and within the images on each, there is a sort of thigh-bone-connected-to-the-hip-bone progression that, we come to realize, is a rather fragile construct.

As ever, Fisher seems to be asking us why we see things the way we do, why we believe certain things that we see.

Stop and ask questions, he seems to say. And don't stop asking questions.

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ANTIQUES & THE ARTS WEEKLY
2 February 1990

Vernon Fisher Installation in MoMA Projects Series

NEW YORK CITY — The Museum of Modern Art continues its ongoing Projects series with an installation by Fort Worth artist Vernon Fisher. Organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, associate curator in the Department of Drawings, "Projects: Vernon Fisher" is a site-specific installation that combines painting, wall drawing, three-dimensional objects, and original narrative. Titled "Movements Among the Dead," the installation remains on view through March 6.

Word and image and the exploration of complex and unexpected connections between the two have been the

essence of Fisher's multimedia installations for over a decade. By juxtaposing text with image, the artist arranges a balance between two distinct forms of cognition — reading and seeing.

Ms Dabrowski observes in the exhibition brochure, "The pictures never directly illustrate the words, but act as a visual metaphor ... aiding the viewer in decoding both language and image, and often crossing the borderlines between fact and fiction, reality and illusion."

For the installation, Fisher has transformed the gallery walls to look like blackboards — a consistent element in his recent work. Three of these slate-like walls are drawn with white paintstick. On one, chalk trays are filled to overflowing, some spilling to the floor. Half-erased images, drawn from the artist's personal iconography, provide a backdrop for the text. By erasing the images and preserving the residual markings, Fisher teases the viewer's notions of memory.

In "Movements Among the Dead," Fisher focuses on nostalgia and contemplates human responses to death, alienation, and longing. The theme is introduced by the artist's text on the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov and his famous experiments on the conditioned reflex. While recounting Pavlov's training a hungry dog to salivate at the sound of a bell, Fisher alters the outcome so that Pavlov is forced to confront the dog's increasingly destructive behavior. Similarly, the viewer is provoked to face his or her own unexpected responses to the work and, in those responses, to find a personal interpretation.

Vernon Fisher was born in 1943 in Fort Worth, Texas, where he resides. He currently teaches at the University of North Texas in Denton. Fisher received his BA degree at Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas, in 1967, and his MFA degree from the University of Illinois in 1969.

He is a recipient of several fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a grant from the Awards in the Visual Arts, also funded in part by NEA. The artist has participated in numerous group and one-person exhibitions. A retrospective of his work was recently organized by La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and travels to the Houston Contemporary Art Museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.