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# The Fulton Fish Market and the Soul of Naima Rauam

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

**"I take great pleasure** in getting to know something really well," Naima told me, "and having painted the fish market for so many decades, I feel I really do know it well. I know the nuances of fish, of building interiors, of light and how it falls on fish, how everything sparkles, how shadows swallow up a journeyman. I feel my soul resided there and when the market left the Seaport in 2005, dang if my soul didn't go with it..."

Some would argue that the soul of a sentient being is an invisible ray of light illuminating the darkness of one's inner self. Others say an inward gathering of

sparks. Still others believe the soul has no shape but takes on the forms of places and people we internalize, connect to, and love. Unbeknownst to her, Naima Rauam's journey of the soul took her from the Art Students League to the Fulton Fish Market in 1966.

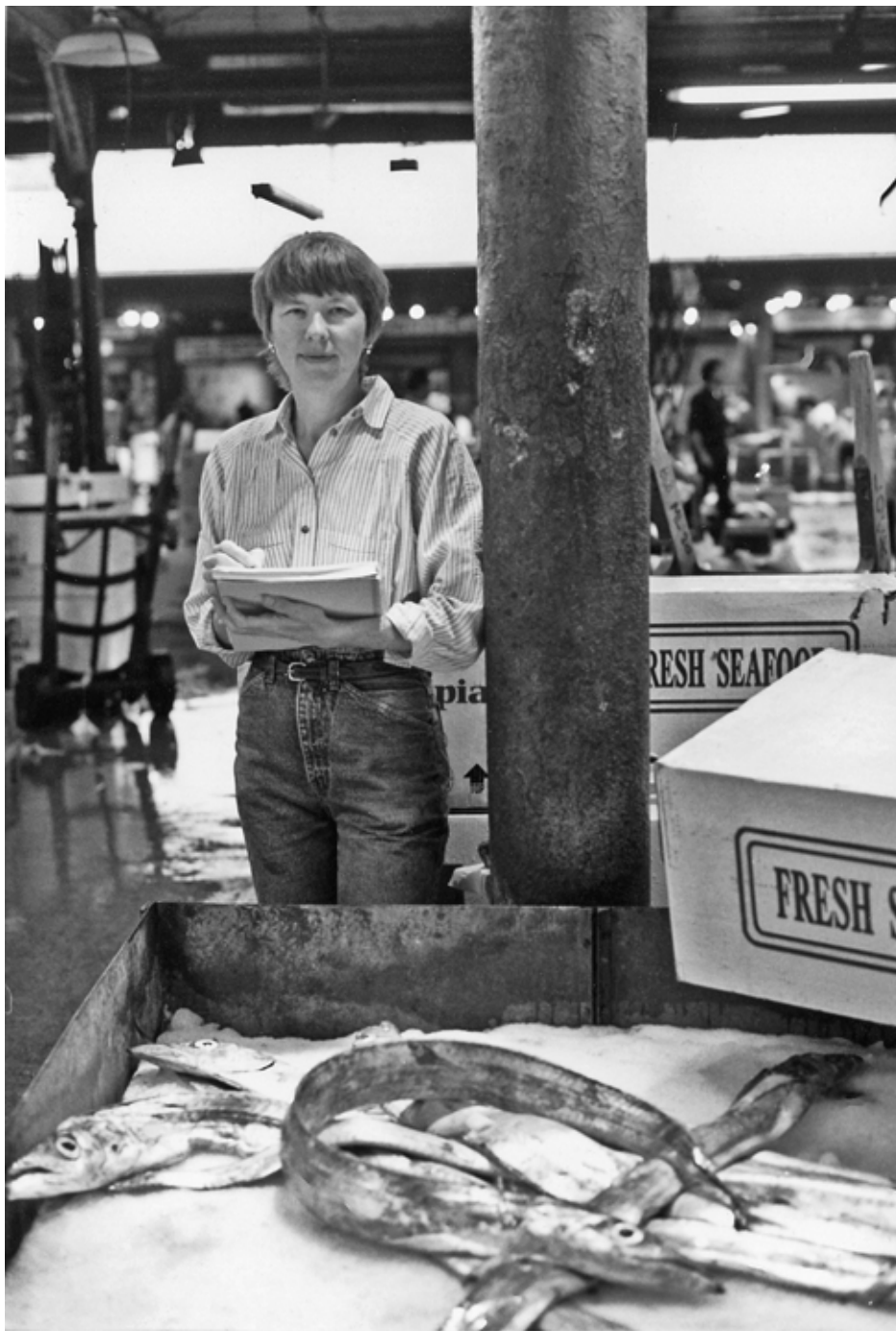
"I was studying at the Art Students League and had a class assignment to bring back an action painting. Someone said, 'go to the fish market, there's lots of action there.' So, I climbed on the subway and thought, gosh, all the fish are dead—there's no action there. But I had already invested my 15 cents on train fare, so I continued. As I walked

down Fulton Street toward the fish market, I encountered the most amazing activity."

Naima began painting the fish market at the age of 20, and when she settled permanently in New York, she moved first into the adjoining fish smokehouse on Beekman Street, where she "slept on the floor between my bicycle and computer, and my easel and art supplies. Outside I could hear all the guys in the morning and throughout the night, yelling and screaming and doing their fish thing. To me it was just a lullaby." Later, she moved her studio into the Market's fabled Tin Building.



*Fulton Fish Market*, Naima Rauam, watercolor. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.



Naima Rauam at the Fulton Fish Market. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.

“When the smokehouse was sold, I went to live on the Lower East Side. I would walk to my studio in the middle of the night, through dark and silent Chinatown, toward a distant glow, which was the market. I could hear a little bit of the activity as I got closer, and then, the roar as I came upon it! It was wonderful. I could be dragging, having roused myself from sleep at three o’clock, but when I got to the market,

its energy electrified me, and I was eager to get to work, to sketch and paint, and be part of the market.

“The market had a nightly rhythm to it. In the evening, I saw dark streets and the night sky, of course, with just a few bits of light here and there. Perhaps a second-floor office was illuminated,

or one storefront fish stand had some lights on. Then, little by little, more lights would go on, and by one o’clock in the morning the place was ablaze with spotlights and rows of fluorescents. Intense light was focused on the fish and the work areas, while just a few feet away there was darkness. It was so interesting to see... the journeymen, for instance, load their hand trucks in brilliant light and disappear with them into utter darkness.

“There was also ebb and flow to the activity, and every night was different. You never knew what the seas and rivers would yield, nor how much. Different fish, new displays, stacks of crates without rhyme or reason, these were fodder for my artwork. Every night I’d see new compositions for paintings. I couldn’t draw fast enough, couldn’t take enough photos, but I tried. I wanted to absorb everything about the market, the way it functioned, the way it looked—its color, its light. It was the light that really impressed me so much so that, now with the market gone... I’m more sensitive to light in New York City, and sometimes I walk around or drive around town at night just to visit the light.”

After years of talk, Mayor Giuliani finally managed to extricate the Fulton Fish Market from its moorings at the South Street Seaport. In 2005, the market moved to a new warehouse-like facility at Hunts Point in the Bronx.

“I go up there, and while I’ve done a handful of paintings, it’s hard to find inspiration. Downtown, in quirky little spaces cobbled together over 183 years, you had the likes of Al Fish and Joe Tuna dishing out their versions of the fish trade. In the new place, it seems like just so many guys in dark jackets, swallowed up by one immense space of white walls and white lights. Downtown, the fish market was a way of life. It had a soul. In the Bronx, it’s just a business.

*Next page: TAM Filet, Naima Rauam, watercolor. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.*







Journeymen's Fire, Naima Rauam, watercolor. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.



The Tuna Cutters, Naima Rauam, oil. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.





*Cold Snowy Night*, Naima Rauam, watercolor. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.



*In the Bronx*, Naima Rauam, pastel. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.





## Naima Raum, Painter

*"I take great pleasure in getting to know something really well, and having painted the fish market for so many decades I feel like I really do know it well – I know the nuances of fish and the interiors of these buildings and of the light and how it falls on the fish and how things sparkle and how the light and the shadows swallows up a journeyman. I got to appreciate how skillful they were – yes, it was a ballet of the hands. After they moved I would go to the Bronx market to look for inspiration and they're just guys in dark jacket instead of Al Fish and Joe Tuna. You had a soul here, up there you've got a business. The incredible fortune of doing things that most people just talk about in metaphor. We are actually anchoring ourselves. . . , and all those other pieces of language that adopt boat and water imagery. And so, that's 'why boats.'"* Naima Raum



## History

Naima Raum discovered the "electric energy" of the Fulton Fish Market in the 1960s as a student at the Arts Students League. It was where she had her first studio, moving into the fish Smokehouse on Bleecker Street where she "slept on the

floor between my bicycle and my computer and my easel and my art supplies. Outside I could hear all the guys during the morning and during the night yelling and screaming and doing their fish thing, and to me it was just a lullaby." Later she moved her studio into the Market's Tin Building. When the Fish Market moved to the Bronx in 2005, "dang if my soul didn't go with it. . . . But perhaps that's my purpose now, to keep the memory alive of what it was down here."



Naima is part of a new exhibit, *Waterfront Heroes*, cosponsored by City Lore, Long Island Traditions, and Staten Island Arts. If you feel about a place the way Naima feels about the Fulton Fish Market, please write to [steve@citylore.org](mailto:steve@citylore.org). Photo by Tom Pich.

So I say to myself, "well heck, I'm going to keep painting the old fish market. . . . Perhaps that's my purpose now, to keep the memory alive of what it was downtown."

Monet had his water lilies and Toulouse-Lautrec, the Moulin Rouge; Naima Raum has the Fulton Fish Market.

For Dick Zigun, it was Coney Island, where he opened his theater and side-show on Coney's fabled Boardwalk in 1981. A friend, Kathryn Adisman, once said to him, "I love that place."

"I am that place," he answered.

When we are in the places we truly love, perhaps our deepest selves find their bearings and can sense their own presence in place. This is the place where I am who I am—I can sense who I am in the world through this place.

Beneath the fishmongers with their hand trucks and what Naima calls the fish cutter's "ballet of the hands," lies an interplay of darkness and light, sparkle and gloom in the deeper and unseen arena of the soul. The fish sellers were scurrying about their daily hustle, but Naima was seeing the darkness and light, their shapes as they worked. They, too, could see it when they looked at her paintings, which a number of them purchased and others commissioned. There is something deeper going on below the quotidian that art has the power to convey. From the bits and pieces of the urban environment that reflect the light within us, we create an architecture for the soul. Naima put it more comically, "My *raison d'être* is a cod." ▼

Please email your thoughts, stories, and responses about the poetic side of life to [steve@citylore.org](mailto:steve@citylore.org). Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016).



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