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Robert Fishko, *Director*



Paul Fenniak returns to mentor young artists

BFA alum talks development, artistic education

November 23, 2018 | Brittany Giliforte



Fenniak's Hotel Corridor. Credit: Photo supplied by Paul Fenniak.

Ask any artist: a creative career is no easy task. Paul Fenniak is an exception.

Fenniak, BFA '88, returned to Queen's on Nov. 22 to share his experiences and offer advice to young artists. He gave a lecture in the Fine Arts department, talking about his artwork and career, and offering advice to young artists.

His career started early. From seven years old, Fenniak was fascinated with painting. Unlike artists stuck on a piece's message, he was more interested in the physical painting, and its textures and brush strokes.

"Seeing Rembrandt in Amsterdam when I was seven years old, I was obsessed by the paint textures on the sleeve of *The Jewish Bride*," Fenniak told *The Journal*. "As a kid, I remember being struck—not by the pictures themselves so much as by the physical qualities of them." It sparked his interest in painting.

However, it wasn't until much later that he made his first effort.

When Fenniak was in high school, his art teacher inspired him to pursue his passion as a career, not only a pass time.

"I had one good art teacher who really used to be on top of things who kept a stack of art magazines and was really enthusiastic. He was important," Fenniak said.

This teacher was the first of many creative mentors for Fenniak.

Throughout his education in the arts, teachers guided his continued success and challenged him.

For one, he recalls a professor at Queen's who prompted him to research foreign artists for an essay. It's how he found his anti-realist, anti-minimalist style.

"It was because of that professor and his insistence that we look at more obscure artists that I discovered a taste for a certain kind of figurative art instead of abstract art," Fenniak said. "Queen's turned my attention to a vein of work that I stayed on ever since."

Through this assignment, his professor challenged him to try a new style.

He soon developed his distinctive dream-like painting figures and scenes that stuck with him, and led to his success.

Fenniak currently works almost exclusively with oil paints, re-creating the thick, broad stroked textured look he fell in love with in his youth.

The texture is only one aspect of his approach to creating what he refers to as "hypnagogic experiences."

"It's a kind of experience where you're half between sleeping and waking," Fenniak said. "It's the middle space."

"I'm interested in making work about inner experiences by paradoxically using close observations of the outside world to talk about what's going on inside people."

Fenniak's work blurs the lines between dream-state and reality. He thrives on the ambiguity. It allows him to create an instability that truly confuses viewers.

He wants the viewer to feel like they're on unsteady ground. Despite this, Fenniak doesn't want his art to have a message.

"A message? No. I have no interest in saying something rhetorical, there's no conclusion I wish to present. It's all about trying to create the opportunity for an intimate experience. A sharing of an experience," Fenniak said.

Sharing experiences is something

Fenniak prioritizes in his artwork. He's given a few lectures to students in the past, but always tries to give them hope and valuable advice for the future.

This time around, Fenniak told his students to seriously consider how they're going to live, and to establish a support system.

"That's a very cynical but practical piece of advice," he said.

While he's aware of the many challenges that students graduating from Fine

Arts face, he can't be more proud of them for pursuing it.

"When I look at how difficult it is, how much the odds are stacked against young artists, or artists period, it makes me just love them all the more for doing it.

It's such a heroic sacrifice in a way. Someone's got to do it," Fenniak said.

<https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2018-11-23/visual/paul-fenniak-returns-to-mentor-young-artists/>