Paul Fenniak's Haunting and Psychological Paintings of Figures
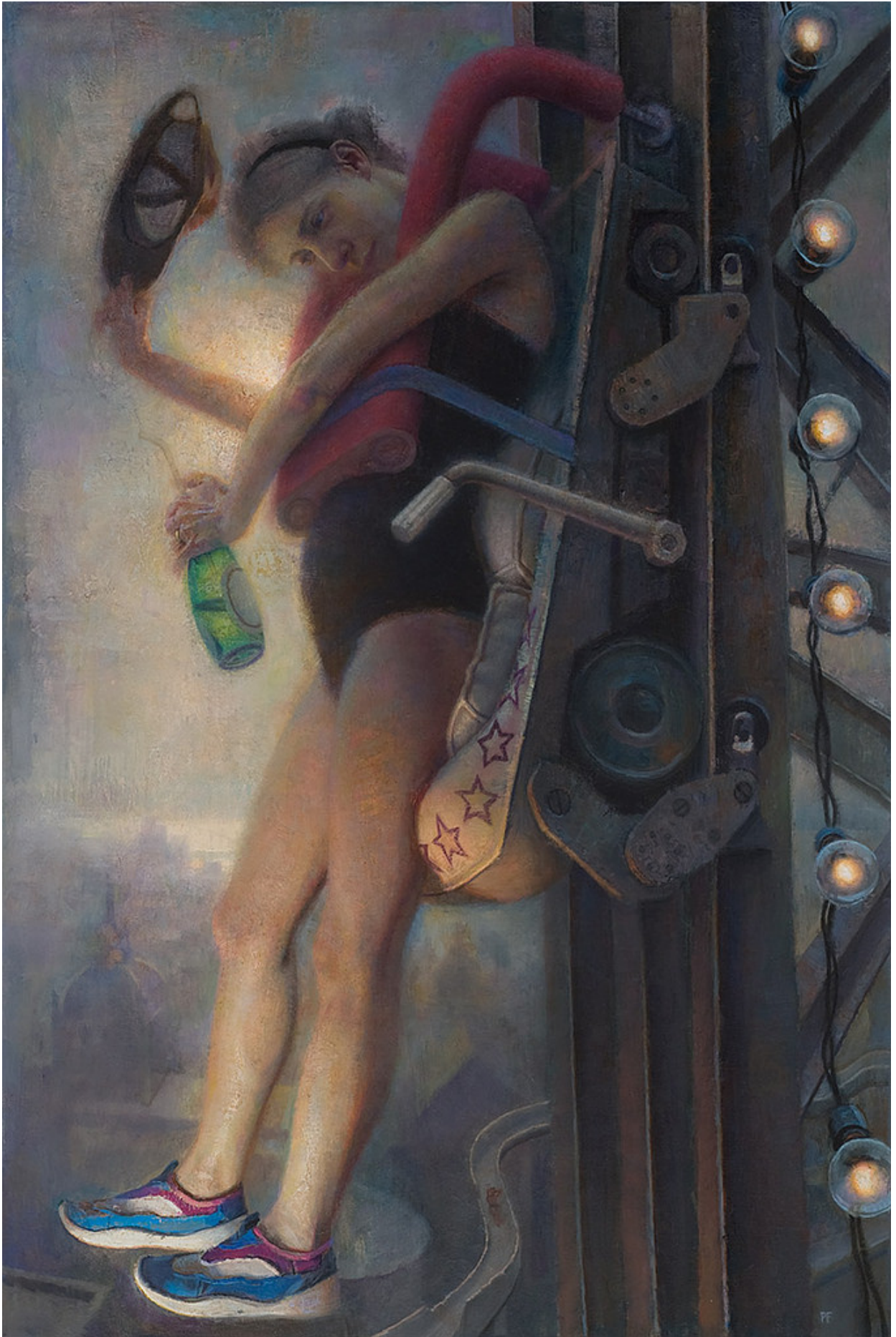
by Caro Posted on March 2, 2016

Canadian artist Paul Fenniak paints with a careful eye on the natural appearances of things and through his process of painting, he arrives at a deeper expression of the human spirit. He has been considered "a master of the psychological realism" for his haunting portraits of people in random every day places like the beach boardwalk or on their lawn, often appearing detached or lost in their own inner world. And although his scenes offer us something familiar to grab onto as the viewer, ultimately, we can't quite reach his subjects emotionally and are left to "invent".

While Fenniak's inspirations includes masters of expressionism and symbolist painting, he is coming from a place that is utterly contemporary. He has referred to examples of 19th century artists like James Ensor and Francisco Goya for their sense of realism and portrayals of intimate scenes, which leaves room for exploring another person. For his latest exhibition at Forum Gallery in New York, Fenniak continues to paint scenery where the intimate and personal are key points of each piece.

"Theme Park Patron"

One painting in the show "Theme Park Patron" for instance, portrays a girl caught up in an inflatable device on a carnival ride, set against a softly painted cityscape. The scene is fatally flawed because the girl can slip out of her device at any moment, but also finds a sense of longing in her face and transience in the quickness of the ride itself. Other works like "Unsettled Dust" see Fenniak experimenting with texture, reducing his use of detail and applying the paint more thickly.

"Unsettled Dust"

According to Fenniak, embodying the complexity of being human is something that in part comes with the experience of painting from life: "With enough manipulation, with light effects, things are not just a description of the outside world but they begin to symbolize something else- a subjective experience," he says. "I'm not trying to create a psychological thesis about it, I'm just trying to get images that are true to those feelings, true to those experiences."