

Art in America

JANUARY 2005

Paul Fenniak at Forum

Nothing is simple in the young Canadian artist Paul Fenniak's mostly everyday scenes. Even when more than one figure is shown, each feels singularly isolated from the next and apparently unaware of what are largely banal surroundings. Fenniak's actors are locked into transitional poses in a manner reminiscent of Piero della Francesca, Dieric Bouts, Balthus or George Tooker. The artist plays with scale so that the distance between things is eradicated and spaces are warped. Using vertiginous perspectives, he infuses his compositions with dynamism and psychological drama, charging them with tension.

Fenniak is not interested in making beautiful paintings. His actors and their settings are often unappealing, and the facture is, in places, inconsistent and pasty. He succeeds, often brilliantly, in exploring troubled psychological states through a form of distorted naturalism.

Ultraviolet (2001), a vertical painting with a preponderance of dark beiges and light browns, shows a woman standing on a small mat as she tightens the belt of her raincoat. With a wary look, she leans slightly toward the left, as if to steady her balance in a hallway where walls and floor recede precipitously toward the right.

Particularly striking is the large horizontal *Cemetery Vandals (Autumn Rite)*, 2001, 72 by 97 inches. Towering, middle-aged men carrying tools and spray cans approach some grave-stones, apparently to deface them. The four men on the left are aligned one behind the other as if stuck together. The frozen poses are like those of studio models assuming classical



Paul Fenniak: *Cemetery Vandals (Autumn Rite)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 72 by 97 inches; at Forum.

stances. One figure, seated on a stela at the right, examines his eye in a hand-held mirror, as if he, like us, cannot quite believe what he is seeing. He appears a second time, in a semblance of continuous narrative, standing left of center clutching a hammer and looking off to his right, as if checking to see if the coast is clear.

The exhibition also included a penetrating bust-length portrait, *Man with Short Hair* (1999). This subject, with his long, rugged face, biting his bottom lip and glancing off to his right, seems filled with sorrow. Avoiding themes having to do with pleasure, Fenniak prefers the tougher strains of melancholia.

—Michaël Amy