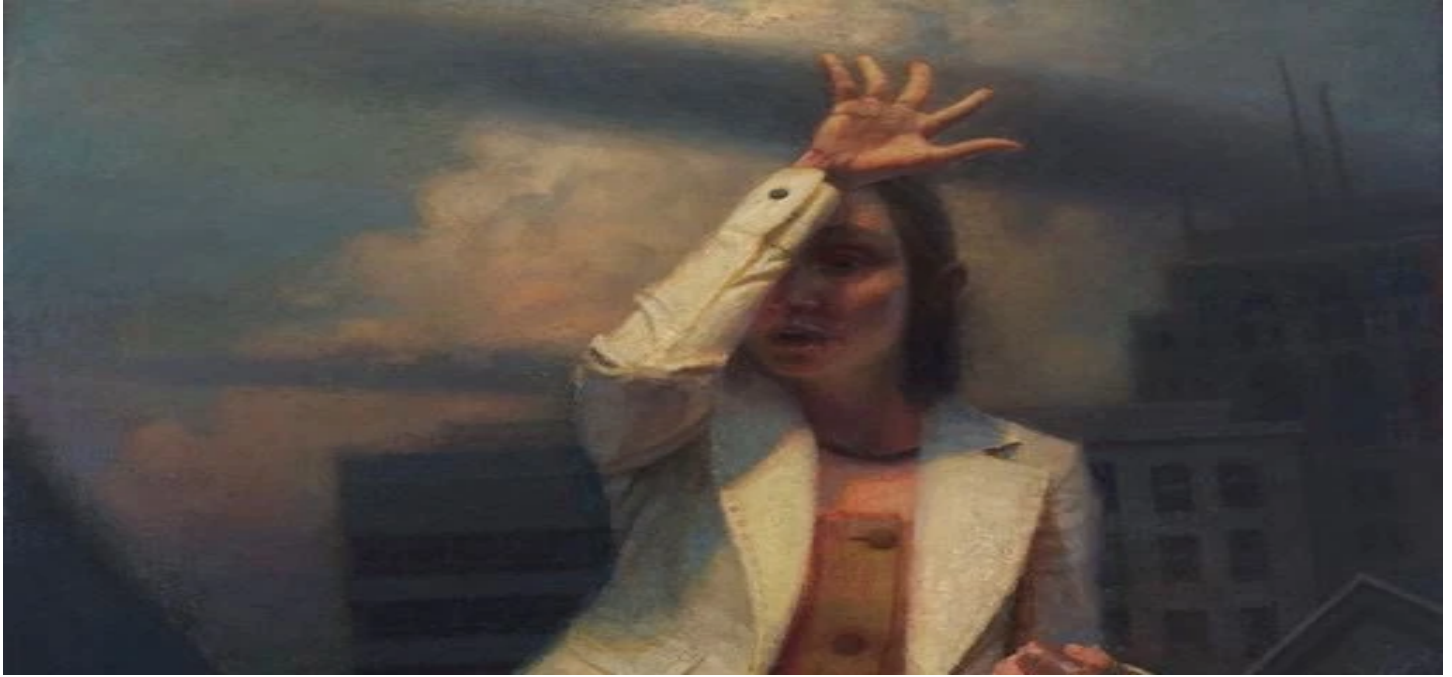


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Paul Fenniak's Fountain



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Much like their creator, Paul Fenniak's paintings feel like they don't fit in anywhere, at the same time telling the story of us all

Michael Pearce / MutualArt

Nov 15, 2023

He has a Ukrainian name, but Paul Fenniak's father was a third-generation son of a melting-pot farming family settled in weathered Alberta, and the echoes of his paternal heritage didn't ring through his childhood with the same clarity as the Netherlandish customs and culture his migrant mother carried to Canada from her homeland – Fenniak recalls a youth of Dutch faith and Dutch friends and Dutch formality. He was born among the inaugural vanguard of GenX's inbetweeners in 1965, never boomer but not quite punk. "Sometimes I feel very out of time," he says, "I don't know if I fit nicely into any generation..." But irony and alienation were the threaded themes that colored the ideas of his cohort as it entered its twenties, and they twisted neatly into his austere inheritance of the mood and modesty of the Dutch Reform community. Fenniak didn't fit well into the convenient post-modern conventions of mid-eighties art schools either, for they were obsessed with concept and politics and conceit and embarking on the idiotic project of de-skilling young artists. "I felt like an outsider because it was considered very problematic to paint figures," Fenniak recalls, "I kept hearing things from people who were reading *October Magazine* that it was a fascist thing to do. I knew I was supposed to immerse myself in the art world, but I felt rather detached from large swathes of it."



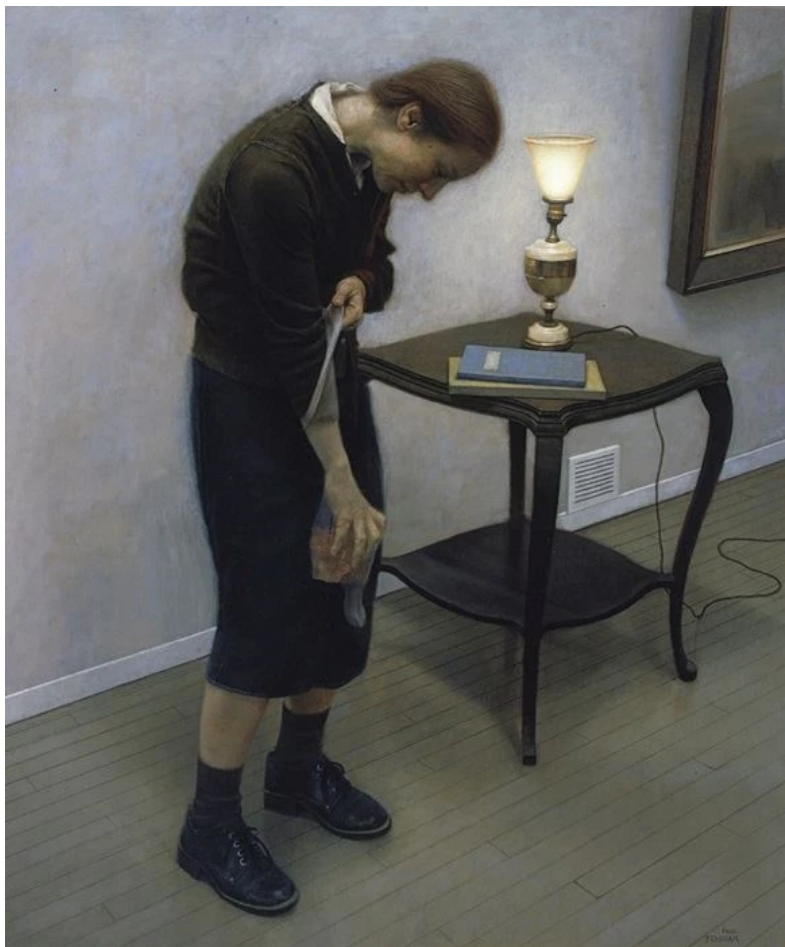
Paul Fenniak, *House by the Water*, 2023, oil on canvas, 32 x 40, © Paul Fenniak, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

Fenniak became a great figurative painter in the late nineties. He produced a stream of introverted portraits. Then the avatars and anonymity of the decade expanded the relevance of his estranged imagery of the reserved self-preservation of his private people, and works like *A Closer Walk*, *Visitors Day*, and *Paying for Tea* became the first of his masterpieces of solitary and taciturn people cast alone in gathered companies, sharing the slight scent of a vampire cult. Preoccupied pedestrians were frozen stepless in shocked inaction. A woman defended an anonymous blue box in the shield of her paranoid arms from imagined assailants. Another woman stopped and stared in solitary wonder at an ordinary sapling. A disinterested waitress clears as a blank and expressionless pair enact emotionless rituals of friendship. A huge suitcase indicates departure and absence. A park is imprisoned behind blank walls. A balding and goateed man stands awkwardly over a woman wrapping white cloth around her head, her hands white-gloved. Institutionalized. Alienated. Alone.



Paul Fenniak, *Paying for Tea*. 1999, 72 x 48

Fenniak painted the tense pulse and undercurrent of subdued and suppressed passions gripped beneath the tight mask of an impassive public face. He maintains, "I saw my art more in terms of psychology, later it became more about the uncanny or the spiritual, or the numinous." But there were dark passages to navigate on the pathway to the numinous. When a woman slipped a brick into a nylon stocking in Fenniak's *Interior (Half Brick)*, the gesture introduced a murderous threat of violence that seemed to infect the other paintings with a wristy twist of the slick dial of anxiety. "That came from a very particular source," Fenniak explains. "I was obsessed with a particular crime case that was made into a film not long after by Peter Jackson. It was a New Zealand murder case in the fifties in which these two teenage girls killed the mother of one of them by putting a brick in a stocking. I had this book called 'The Murderers Who's Who,' which was a ghastly collection of British and American 19th and early 20th century murder cases with these horrible sepia-toned crime scene photographs, and one of them was a picture of these two girls going to the magistrate's court after they'd been arrested, and they were my age at that time, around fifteen or sixteen, and I just couldn't wrap my head around that crime and that photograph. During the crime that brick came out of the stocking, and they had to pick it up and use it by hand. It was such a fairytale, schoolgirl idea. They were immersed in all sorts of fantasy stories, and I guess they thought it would be like that, but crude reality intruded at the moment and made it a whole lot more messy and awful."



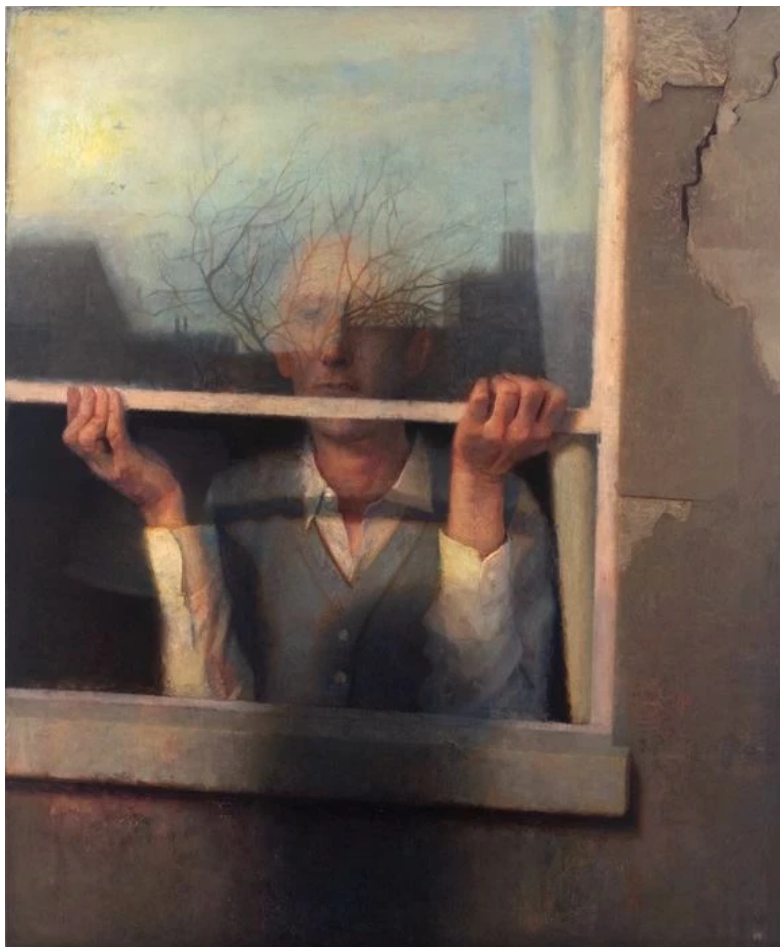
Paul Fenniak, Interior (Half-Brick), 1998, 36 x 30

What ethics are born of horror? Can the reactionary madness of the mob birth justice? In Fenniak's *Meeting*, a throng is packed into the composition like a manic lawcourt convened in a bus depot offering blue-plate faith healing, closure, and culpability served with a side of judgement. A solitary girl – the only abstainer from a crowd intent upon the vicious court of public opinion – sits on a bent-backed waiting room bench facing away from the action, while a reclining man in a pew at the front waits for either the restorative cure of laid-on hands, or the care of a vengeful judgement, his head pillowed on his partner's lap as his advocate speaks from prepared documents and a passionate and kneeling supplicant feeds facts from a binder of information. Fenniak muses, "There are a lot of childhood memories in that painting, I think, also merged with a sense of tribunals, at the front there's a stenographer, and someone's on trial. Maybe that's part of the mood of today, everyone's afraid of being cancelled."



Paul Fenniak, *Meeting*, 2019-20, 47 x 60, © Paul Fenniak, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

The crowds in *Late Visitors* and *Meeting* were both painted in 2019, before the Covid lockdowns sealed us in our homes, and isolated everyone beyond the measure of their individual burdens. In *Summer Evening*, the enforcement of social distancing and the emptied streets drove him upward to the high fire escapes and sash windows of the deserted city, where desperate neighbors met standing on the sills, waiting for dawn light to break onto the ledges, wrapped and shrouded in melancholy curtains high above the striped and wind washed pedestrian crossings. Soon, Fenniak returned to the solitary figure. In his *Window*, a man's head is halved by the sliding sheet of the glass, reflecting the winter trees and cold sky of the urban landscape. The deteriorating exterior wall around the window is crumbling, and though the shadow of a spectator places us outside looking in, the subject of our scrutiny is half hidden by the mirrored scene. *House by the Water* stripped the layers of human interaction still further, removing the figure and enclosing the lake house within a layer of protective plastic, any individuals within turning deeper inward and vanishing in lonely self-reflection, like fearful fog-wrapped vampires obsessed with the infectious appearance of the sun. We are the dead.



Paul Fenniak, Window, 2019-20, 36 x 30

But the magic threaded through the real world can't be suppressed, even in contemporary cities where the sacred water that once poured from primeval wells and springs in the ancient landscapes of the preternatural world vanished beneath the concrete streets. Urban engineers covered creeks and confined the living water, building bricked channels to shape the convenience and convention of the flow. A gridded web of pragmatic pipes set in plumb and line took form as the creeping compromises of development crushed the spirit of the land, but the transcendent magic lived, crawling through the cracks. The world is a mystery. "It's a confrontation with something outside of one's rational grasp, a combination of fear and fascination and beauty and terror, and increasingly what I found myself going to," says Fenniak. "Finding some kind of appropriate symbol, that's a real challenge, something that will touch all these things in a way that doesn't seem like a phony, easy gimmick."

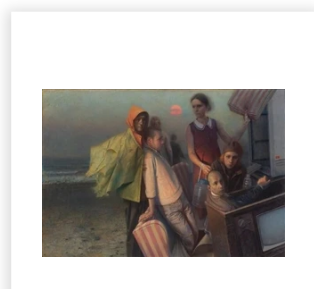


Paul Fenniak, *Fountain*, 2019, 70 x 30, © Paul Fenniak, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

These are the metaphysics of ambiguity. Emerging from the murky shadows of the crumbling city, in *Fountain*, Fenniak finds a sensibly-shoed woman wearing vintage white Chanel over a faded burgundy dress standing like a shaman clad in cotton shift with a thrift store grip to match beside a public drinking fountain, and seminal water spurts from the shining spout in gleaming gouts like the bloody offering of sacrifice. She raises her religious and righteous hand to draw down a golden light which wraps her in a tight dramatic beam, channeling the attention of the gods. Her spread fingers bend backward in an overhead parasol of tension, flagged by a dark cloud cutting a fluffy cumulus of sunset swelling upward toward the height of a lycanthropic moon. The gilded light isolates her from the shadow and loom of the city leaning behind her, and the windows of the blank warehouses and homes watch her with sinister malevolence, tensely waiting for the mystic moment when she genuflects before the fountain to gulp the holy water in the sensual culmination of the scene. Holy, holy, holy, the mystic moment of natural magic in the place of chromed and concreted modernity.

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