

## Belfast's Tell-tale Painter

Artist Linden Frederick has made a career out of fictionalizing realism just enough.

By Kyle Laurita

Feb 20, 2025



Linden Frederick is photographed in front of his oil-on-linen painting "Peace" in his Belfast Studio Jan. 28.

Photo by John Blodgett

In 2021, Linden Frederick began a painting of the McCrum potato processing plant, down by Belfast Harbor. The oil painting depicts the low, weather-stained building just as dusk is setting. A lonely light fixture in the foreground dances with steam issuing from overhead; an illuminated peace sign winks in the distance.

The attention given to the most minute details — down to the last windowpane — has led many to describe Frederick as a “realist painter” — Frederick included. But many of this artist’s works play with reality in subtle ways: a mannequin where there never was one, a chimney that didn’t exist. In “Peace” as well, Frederick has added a few details of his own, including the peace sign itself, which was an intentional addition. But a viewer seeing the painting for the first time might never realize the scene was anything but a faithful rendering, so close are Frederick’s brushstrokes, so minute his inclusions. In fact, upon seeing “Peace,” one would think they were glancing over the Belfast of today, except for the fact that the McCrum building burned down in 2022, throwing the painting further into the realm of the imaginary.

“That’s the idea,” Frederick said. “It’s triggering something in the viewer; they’re attracted to it and don’t necessarily know why.”



Linden Frederick discusses his work in his Belfast studio  
Jan. 28.

Photo by John Blodgett

Frederick grew up in Perth, New York, and has been painting professionally for over 40 years. He attended Houghton College and the Ontario College of Art, where he met his wife, Heather. He comes from a family of carpenters, and Frederick said he remembers spending much of his youth playing amongst the beams of his grandfather's barn, a barn that has stood since 1844.

“Somebody said, ‘Write about what you know,’” Frederick said. “And I apply that to painting. I paint what I know. A lot of buildings feature in my paintings, because I just understand how buildings go together. I just paint my upbringing.”

For the past 20 years, Frederick has been showing his work at the Forum Gallery on Park Avenue in New York, where “Peace” is now on display. He also has paintings in the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland and the Portland Museum of Art, as well as in many private collections, all contributing to his reputation for painting rustic, American moments. But it isn't just Frederick's technical ability or the inclusion of fictional details in his paintings that have compelled some to describe his work as having an “inspirational quality,” as Forum Gallery Director Robert Fishko said to the Portland Press Herald in 2017. Rather, Frederick's empty parking lots, his backlit army surplus stores, his corner gas stations and flickering motel vacancy signs intrigue. They don't just portray or depict or reflect — they ask something of the viewer.

In Frederick's show “Memoir,” which took place in 2004, he exhibited scenes from his hometown and the surrounding Mohawk Valley. Four of the paintings portray his childhood home in different light, during different seasons — Mother's Day, 2004; Thanksgiving, 2003. Seeing the paintings side by side, one sees the building where Frederick grew up in prism; refracted through time as well as tone.

“My paintings are inspired by the ‘edge of town’ kind of thing,” Frederick said. “It’s not so much about the location. People will ask me, ‘Where is this?’ And I’ll often say, ‘Where would you like it to be?’ Because it reminds them of something. And that’s what my paintings do; people bring their own experience or their own story to the place.”

In the book “Mohawk,” by Richard Russo, one of the characters, Mather Grouse, tells his daughter, “People sometimes get in the habit of being loyal to a mistake.” Mather Grouse, the iron-principled factory man of the Mohawk Valley, was full of these adages. For a stubborn old Samaritan, Mather Grouse saw that not everything was always as it first appeared; there was always a story behind even the most familiar of scenes. In some ways, this is what Frederick’s paintings allow for as well: an inkling of something more.

“[Russo] once said to me, ‘I write what you paint,’” Frederick said. “And I’ve wondered why writers gravitate to my work. I think, basically, it’s because I do imply that there’s a story.”

Frederick and Russo grew up 10 miles from one another in the Mohawk Valley. Although they never actually met until both were living in Maine, the two are now friends, and Russo helped Frederick with his 2017 book, “Night Stories,” a collection of 15 paintings with accompanying stories written by various celebrated authors, including Elizabeth Strout, Tess Gerritsen, Ann Patchett and, of course, Russo himself.

Working eight hours a day, six days a week, to call Frederick “productive” would be a bit of an understatement. Years ago, Frederick constructed the house in Belfast where he and his wife now live. And, besides his painting, Frederick also spends a considerable amount of time downstairs in his studio space, where he builds violins. This hobby, which Frederick described as something he “does for fun,” started in 2015, when he was living in Portland. Originally, he built classical guitars and cellos, but his workspace in Portland was too small for those larger instruments. So he switched, mentoring under Johnathan Cooper, a well-known violin maker in Southern Maine. To date, Frederick has built 48 violins, and his latest — a five-string variation — recently sold in Nashville for \$7,500.



Linden Frederick displays a “friendship fiddle” he has been building in his Belfast studio Jan. 28. He calls it that because it uses wood sourced from three different properties and two of his friends. The top is made from a “very, very old” piece of spruce removed from the renovated home of a friend next door; the neck is made from a red maple cut down on another friend’s property; and the sides and back are made from a Norway maple Frederick cut down in his own yard.

Photo by John Blodgett



Linden Frederick displays a cello he built in his Belfast studio Jan. 28.

Photo by John Blodgett

He seems drawn to such alternative designs — slight divergences from the norm. His cellos and guitars also often feature some alteration, some modification within the body or neck. About this, Frederick said, “It just appeals to my sense of ‘What if,’ instead of just doing the same thing. It’s very different from painting, in that there is a real tradition.”

While Frederick might posit that his take on instruments diverges from his take on painting, both seem to weave an element of unorthodoxy within the classical; to stitch reality and surreality together, creating narrative and prodding the imagination. Perhaps it is this synthesis that draws writers to his work: it begs a question; it begs a story.

---

## Kyle Laurita

Staff writer