
A Quiet Absorption: Paul Fenniak's Realism

The cool early morning light casts an eerie stillness over the swimming pool in Paul Fenniak's painting *Short Cut* (2006). The protagonist, a young woman with mousy brown hair and a sturdy build, carries a satchel and hunches forward mid-stride along the right edge of the pool. She looks toward the background of the painting, away from the viewer and across the water. Perhaps she is taking a surreptitious detour through this closed and empty space on her way to school. Fenniak skillfully captures the bluish dawn, the sun raking across clean, calm water, the gentle hint of breeze waving the pennants across the width of the pool. The setting appears ordinary in its comforting, suburban familiarity, but Fenniak's painting depicts an astonishingly haunting and uncannily quiet moment in the midst of an otherwise normal routine. In anticipation of being noticed, the girl poses peculiarly. With her crouched stance in this horizontal expanse of space, where one could not easily hide, the girl attempts to be unseen. Absorbed completely in either a seemingly innocent adolescent transgression or a more furtive escape, she nervously avoids any witnesses and is oblivious to being beheld by the viewer of the painting. This voyeuristic and enigmatic glimpse into a character's private moment reappears as a common theme in Fenniak's paintings. His works depict figures engrossed not necessarily by an action, chore, or conversation; rather the individuals all appear somewhat isolated and consistently pre-occupied by thought.

Although Fenniak paints two characters in *Summer Night, Iceland* (2006), neither one engages the other, nor directly addresses the viewer. The man saunters down a brick ramp onto a patio, and both of his feet float off the ground. The young woman also hovers above the path as she leans forward and balances on the railing. Both figures appear distracted by something out of the picture's frame. He gazes up at the sky; she peers to her right. The viewer yearns to know what could be holding their attention and if the two will acknowledge one another. Not only are the two characters divided by opposing gazes, but they also appear in separate, yet strangely close physical zones. The wall between the walkway and the houses in the background compresses the stagelike foreground of the scene. The man briskly strides at an astonishingly steep and dynamic angle, made

more unsteady by his upward stare. The woman also holds a precarious pose, perching between his clear course and the swath of dandelion-filled lawn in the lower right. Such noticeable separation and lack of eye contact with either each other or with the viewer makes the social connection between the figures ambiguous. The woman's playful gesture and the close proximity of the couple in a relatively private and enclosed space indicate that they are not strangers, but, like the girl in *Short Cut*, they appear to be alone. Moreover, Fenniak revisits the odd physicality of that character. Just as the young girl seems poised to dart alongside the pool, these two figures appear paradoxically still in the midst of movement.

Fenniak repeatedly offers his viewer fastidious studies of light, from the meticulously detailed play of the morning sun cast on the glassy surface of the water in *Short Cut*, to the soft, gray-violet evening in *Summer Night, Iceland*. Such attention to the effects of light is seen again in the gleams and reflections on the folds and peaks of the transparent plastic bag in *Rupture (Love Scene)* (2005). The main character looks attentively, even lovingly at a bag of clothes. Her curious way of holding it does not suggest that she is accomplishing a chore; rather, she affectionately caresses the bag. As she stands behind the almost anthropomorphic bag of clothes, which has been given its own seat, the painting takes on the effect of a traditional portrait of a couple. It is impossible to know exactly whose garments are in the bag, but a lover's presence is implied in this sack of clothes. Given the woman's fond, but forlorn gesture, as well as the painting's evocative title, which suggests that some type of disruption—perhaps the viewer assumes that the bag is torn and that a literal tear, symbolizing an emotional rupture, or separation, from her absent partner—has occurred. Oblivious to the viewer's interpretations of this intimate, even awkward, scene, the woman focuses all attention on the bag and its symbolic counterpart.

Because of the engrossed mental states of Fenniak's figures, his portraits seem to offer unclear narratives and intense character studies. The viewer seeks to understand the particular social dynamics at play, but the drama transpires only in the characters' minds. Fenniak again pairs a man and a woman and offers an allusive title in *Kitchen (Ways of Escape)* (2002), and again, the painting evokes the theme of intimate distance. The man is turned away from his female companion, who does not seem to be simply watching him take off a sweater. As she grips her coffee mug and leans against the wall, this woman looks distracted and strangely absent from the scene. Although a breeze blows through the window, a mass of papers is about to fall off the table, and the man is engaged in a relatively ordinary

action of undressing, the scene is preternaturally still. The window may be open, but in opposition to the title, the emotional and physical setting does not seem to allow for any way to escape the tension, conflict, or simply the tediousness of the couple's domesticity. The closed door at left, the narrow space between the countertop and the table, and the additional boundaries of the rug and the right-hand wall form a grid that seems to lock the figures in place.

Almost all of Fenniak's figures affect a vague, distracted kind of looking, one of inwardness and preoccupation rather than active, engaged seeing. The sitter in *Early Morning* (2005) also has a far-off stare and a perplexingly askew facial expression. With a post-pubescent figure, a furrowed brow, and childlike clothing, this awkward adolescent presses her thighs together and angles her legs outward to allow for enough clearance to lift her feet off the ground as she sits on a playground swing. Her physical appearance seems similar to that of the figure in *Short Cut*, and given the time of day depicted in each painting, one scene seems to be a continuation of the other. Such activities in public spaces (sitting on a playground swing and running past an empty pool), which usually warrant social interaction, here, in the empty, early morning, underscore the girl's solitude. Fenniak's girl on the swing calls to mind one of the most famous paintings of a similar subject, Fragonard's rococo painting *The Swing* (1767). While Fragonard depicts a young woman enraptured in romance, frivolity, sensuality, and sexuality, Fenniak contrasts such gaiety with an anxious solitude. Unlike the girl in *Early Morning*, the central character in *The Swing* is not alone; rather, she is accompanied by a chaperone and secretly flirts with a beau hidden in the bushes. Counter to Fragonard's lighthearted scene of romance and pleasure, Fenniak's viewer has no easy access to his character's psyche or an explicit narrative. Instead of gazing at a companion, the girl in Fenniak's painting obliquely stares at a brick wall to her left. Although she, too, like several of the other paintings' subjects, is outside, she is situated in a relatively narrow, compressed space. Corresponding to the apparent heaviness of her body and, one assumes, mindset, she is not depicted in motion; instead, she is restricted by stillness.

The emphasis on inward mental states rather than on dramatic action in Fenniak's paintings echoes—with the art-historical, "antitheatrical" tradition of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting—the Realist movement. In Realism, reality is not merely depicted naturalistically. Realist artists, such as Gustave Courbet or Jean-François Millet, painted figures in the midst of concentrating on the immediate task or thought at hand. In contrast to conspicuously and



unconvincingly engaging in an action or emotion, Realist characters appeared to “forget” and ignore the viewer. Fenniak’s quiet and compelling scenes revive this historical movement and successfully convey a kind of truth of his characters’ minds and bodies. The figures don’t seem to be unabashedly posing or performing. Instead, Fenniak conveys humans in their most complicated, unconscious, and self-absorbed moments.