



PAUL FENNIAK

“Art in one sense dispossesses us of our habitual perception and restores to reality a dimension that necessarily escapes our conceptuality and our control. It makes the world strange.” (Rowan Williams)

It is popularly assumed that realist painting dishes up a commonsense view of what is real by simply attending to appearances. It relies on our habitual perception. But another, stranger kind of realism, although it also pays close attention to ‘normal’ appearances, takes some further steps, and ends up in an unpredictable place — not confirming our comfortable notions of what we already know but making us suspicious of them, making us aware of their inadequacy.

My recent paintings have been influenced by my reading of short fiction in this vein, primarily by the British author Robert Aickman, as well as several others such as Arthur Machen and Walter De la Mare. Although his work is often tagged with the label “Weird Fiction” Aickman’s preference for understatement tends to give his stories the tone of a sober kind of realism, even when he is describing rather strange events. He writes of unremarkable ordinary people who gradually experience the dissolution of the comfortable worldview they’ve been depending on all their lives. It eventually dawns on these characters that everyday reality, the makeshift structure we live within, is far more fragile than they thought and is breaking down owing to the intrusion of events and experiences that refuse to fit into its framework, revealing a larger, indecipherable reality. Time, space, sounds, appearances, and behavior become slippery and unpredictable. The stories slowly acquire an uncanniness, a hypnagogic quality (halfway between waking and dreaming), uncomfortably mixing aspects of the known and the unfathomable. Most potent perhaps are those moments when the first cracks start to appear in the walls of the protagonist’s mental fortress. Things still look familiar but something fundamental has changed, as if everything has been somehow possessed.

In my recent paintings I have tried to find images that evoke such moments, not by illustrating episodes from these stories but by seeking visual means to the same hypnagogic ends. Making use of a painterly idiom more or less derived from 19th century Naturalism (although mixed with more modern improvisatory methods as I describe below) I try to establish an initial feeling of familiarity which then quickly starts to erode as one looks closer. The subject of these paintings is the unreliability of perception and the fragility of our lives — or more specifically, the fragility of those common conceptions of the way things are that we rely on in our day-to-day existence.

In Aickman's stories the characters' encounter with the ungraspable leaves them, if not devastated, at least irrecoverably disoriented. They have been forced into a vivid awareness of how little we can ever know of all that actually exists and have therefore lost their sense of control. But there is another kind of response in certain writings of Arthur Machen. For him it is our everyday way of seeing that is frightful and bleak, not the disruption of it. That disruption, though fraught with risk, can possibly reveal a hopeful vision of a larger, richer world that was always there, unnoticed all around us, offering an escape from a constricted utilitarian existence.

It would seem therefore that a confrontation with the unknown might elicit either response: horror or hope — or some odd blend of the two. I have tried in my work to combine a deep sense of apprehension with hints of an elusive kind of 'ecstasy', to use Machen's favorite term (from the Greek *ekstasis*: a removal to elsewhere). In my experience it is those paintings that manage this strange intertwining of dark and light that make the most profound impression. The deepest beauty has a hint of terror, a sense of harmony under threat.

I hope my paintings will draw the viewer into a certain frame of mind, one that can resist the urge to pin down and control, that can find an unexpected solace in brooding over things that bewilder.

A note on method:

"Artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time." (Mikhail Bakhtin)

It is not hard to make a superficially odd or strange image, but it is another matter to find one that convincingly feels like the actual occasions in our lives when our normal modes of understanding begin to prove inadequate. I believe it requires a painterly method that allows for the operation of the unconscious through the periodic relinquishing of control. That is, it can't be pre-conceived but, to be truly surprising, must be discovered along the way. This is how I proceed: As I look at the motif and try to paint a resemblance I am also simultaneously watching what's happening in the paint itself, looking into the ever-shifting, endlessly re-worked surface for the emergence of something other than mere accuracy of representation — any mark, shape, gesture, distortion, juxtaposition, suggestion of an image, or quality of light that can operate as a sort of symbol, that through its shadowy affinities and associations will express the mood and evoke the atmosphere I'm seeking. It is within that mass of half-formed imagery and abstract marks that I find (if I am responsive enough) intimations of the uncanny.

– Paul Fenniak
January, 2022