

Recent paintings by
Paul Fenner



Opening Friday 20th January, 7-10pm.

Exhibition continues until 29th January 2016.

*Open Friday - 11am-2pm
Saturday, Sunday - 11am-6pm
or by appointment.*

Mercer Chance are proud to present an exhibition of recent paintings by **Paul Fenner**.

How can an artist capture the experience of modern life, of the individual adrift in a world of strangers? Walter Benjamin suggested that life in the city is so destabilising because we come into contact with *so many other lives*. It is not just the strangeness of others, our social isolation, our difference, but also the innumerate points of possible connection. So many different ways to live a life, so many forking paths, so many choices. The self is unquiet, provoked into doubt. In the city we cannot just *be*, we have to constantly establish a sense of self in a stream of change.

The peopled street is a stage, and fertile ground for the artist who has a vital urge for connection with others, yet a sense of estrangement which provides observational distance. Benjamin was troubled, but also inspired and energised by the city, walking the streets as a *flaneur* observer, noting thoughts for future use, letting the mind drift, propelled by a footstep rhythm.



In **Paul Fenner**, we see an artist who has immersed himself in the theatre of the street, filled sketchbooks with furtive glimpses, odd details, moving figures and quickly felt spaces - a sly and witty observer. Yet through his paintings he becomes so much more than that. He has resisted the seductive and civilised sensualism of the flaneur impressionist, to become a *rag-picker*.

The term *flâneur* carries connotations of a hip Victoriana dandyism - of a bourgeois stroller, eyes wide, glittering with city lights and naive novelty - which is true to Baudelaire's conception, if a caricature. The aim of transcendence through unmediated observation and deriving "the eternal from the transitory" reaches visual ecstasy in the work of the impressionists.

Walter Benjamin brewed up a meatier, twentieth-century critique of the flâneur in the consumer-capitalist situation; one who responds to the anaesthetic shock induced by modern city overload by becoming the mobile aesthete; embracing its sense impressions, cruising through and savouring a flow of sights, sounds and smells. This flâneur abandons themselves to wander the interior/exterior ambiguity of shopping arcades, internalising the language of commodities, using shopfront dazzle and flashing neon to initiate dream states. Thus, the flâneur aligns themselves with the vulgar shock of modernity, without actually challenging it.

Thankfully, Benjamin provides a counterpart to this smoothly passive flâneur, one who inhabits the street at a slower pace, who notices not just beauty, but potential in ugliness, one who collects the detritus and fragments of other lives and turns them to his own ends. The *rag-picker*.

This figure collects not only from street observation, but from the fringes of culture, holding scraps of literature, theory, images from films, art and advertising; hoarding anecdotes, overhead conversations and urban myths. The rags are almost collected arbitrarily, or unconsciously, yet when laid out, woven, or set in motion they take on a new life which expresses the desire of the picker, the artist, to understand their own mind through and within a larger social context. The public is made personal, and therefore the artist is not exactly an expressionist (making the personal public?) but rather one who channels the confused society that surrounds him and synthesises it through his own peculiar logic. It is not a deliberate search for meaning, but a form of play; surprising, serendipitous, strange, open-ended, sometimes even dangerous, yet somehow personally resonant.

Paul filters and re-presents the flow of modern life, partly as a means of discovering the permeability of the barrier between the self and everyone else; as he notes:

"Myself and what I am not converge on the surface".

Figures are both drawn from visual memory - carrying hints of narrative and particularity - and from a purely improvisatory energy, responding to the emerging abstract concerns of the painting and the feeling of making each mark. Moments overlap, scale is loosely bound, flatness and space coexist in ambiguous paradox. Perhaps these jumbled fragments could be mistaken for the ravings of a mad-man, if they weren't so unified by an artist's sensibility for colour, composition and touch, and warmed by a benign temperament.

Every person is conjured into the painting-space with a sympathetic and non-judgemental honesty, yet they are not simple, or inert, for they are all seen in motion, un-self-consciously going about their business and we feel that they each have a personal history, anxieties, a sense of purpose or hope which drives them. This is Ensor with the masks off, and yet, not any less mysterious, for in our postures, our behaviours, we can all be outwardly suggestive whilst being inwardly inscrutable even to ourselves.

In these paintings, Paul presents a slice of the human drama, a momentary cross-section of a dream-like world where everything is totally unexpected and ambiguous, yet just makes sense, with no further explanation. These are paintings to live alongside; they invite you to inhabit them, and come slowly to know them and reinvent them according to your own imagination.



text by Michael Chance.

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Paul Patrick Fenner was born in Southampton in 1989. He studied Fine Art in Newcastle and then London on the Royal Drawing School postgraduate programme. He currently lives in Norwich.

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