

BELOW

Bedroom With Sun

2010, oil, 32 x 39. Collection
Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor,
New York.



The Interiors & Figurative Work of **BEN FENSKE:** A Critical Look at Raw Talent

Two *American Artist* editors review the work of an up-and-coming artist and offer their opinion on why this young painter is one to watch.

by **Allison Malafrente and Michael Gormley**

Editors at *American Artist* have the privilege of seeing a wide variety of work from artists all over the country and world, but we are often in the unenviable position of having to choose among great talent when it comes to commissioning feature articles, booking instructors for our events, or selecting winners in juried competitions and shows. As we keep our eyes and ears open in the ever-expanding world of representational art, we often catch a

glimpse of a painter whose vision and style say something so powerful that even professional writers struggle to put it into words. Such was the case when my editorial director Michael Gormley and I saw the work of Ben Fenske, a young American artist who grew up in Minnesota and has lived in Florence for the last five years. As we both attempted to articulate what it is about this painter that stands out, we decided that we'd like to put our thoughts into writing, starting



ABOVE
Sunny Day
 2009, oil, 28 x 36.
 Private collection.

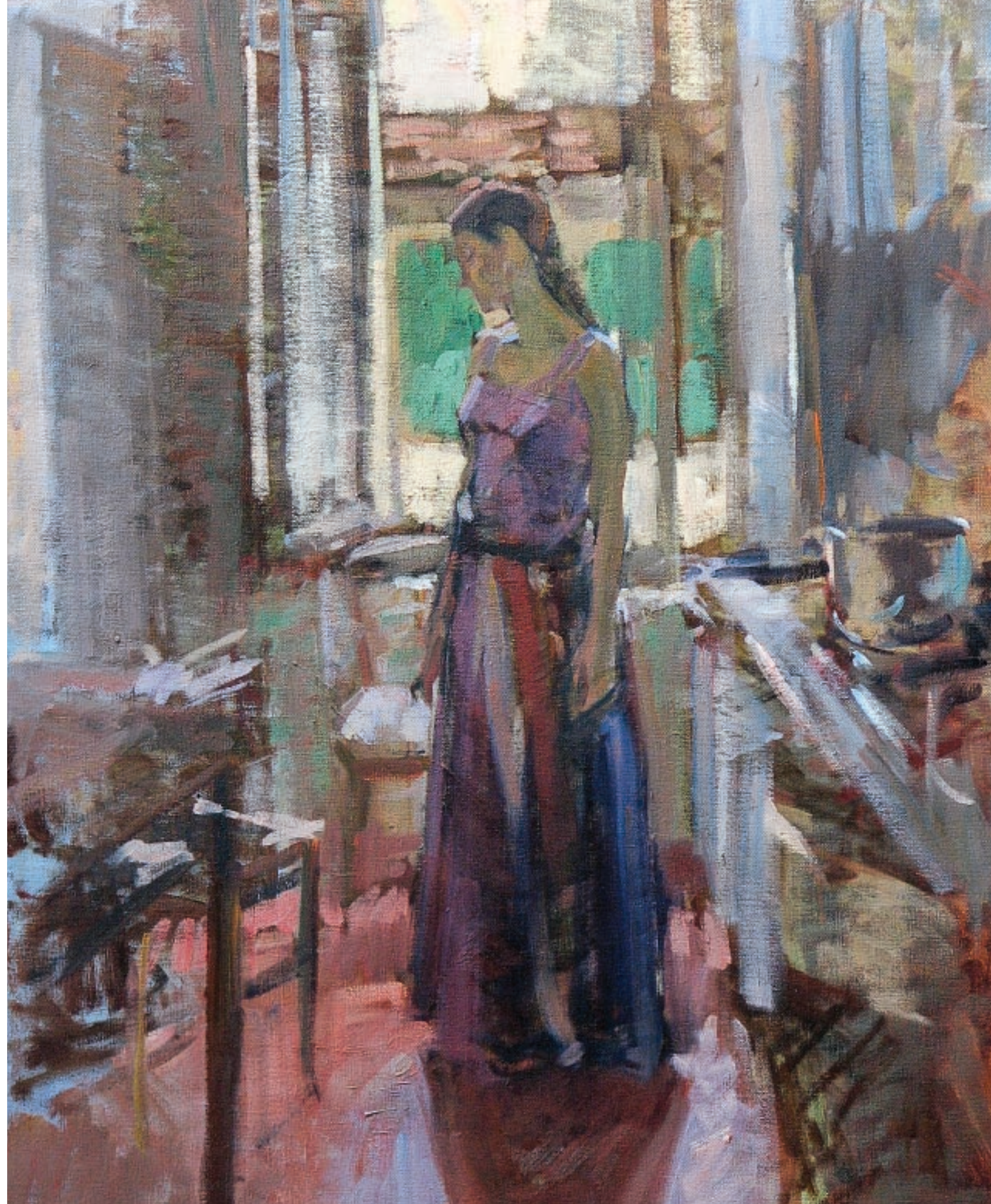
OPPOSITE PAGE
Cary in the Kitchen
 2009, oil, 30 x 24.
 Private collection.

a new feature in *American Artist* that offers an honest assessment of work we feel is worthy of your attention.

The first time I saw Fenske's paintings was through online reproductions of his work posted on Grenning Gallery's website. He had come highly recommended through an artist-friend who knew I was searching for a style that resonated with me as a student of art. I had always had a tremendous amount of respect for the Renaissance and academic artists, but as much as I admired their work, I knew I personally could never draw or paint with as much technical precision and patience as that tradition requires. I also strongly identified with the Impressionists and their looser, light-filled approach to creating an overall impression of a scene, but I still had not had that "A-HA" moment of affinity with a particular style. Then, early last summer, I discovered the work of the late 19th- and early 20th-century

Russian painters—particularly the portraitists Repin, Kramskoy, and Serov and landscapists Levitan, Shishkin, and Savrasov—and I was blown away. To me, this was the best of both artistic worlds: it was structurally and technically sound but there was also this brilliant sense of light, life, angst, atmosphere, and emotion in the brushstrokes that made me believe wholeheartedly in what they were saying. That is the exact response I had when I saw Fenske's solo show later that summer at Grenning Gallery, in Sag Harbor. It was the passionate light and color of Van Gogh, the painterly poetry of Levitan, and a control and command of all aspects of painting that is distinctly all his own.

I think Fenske is able to strike this extremely difficult chord of technical accuracy, uninhibited brushwork, and emotive subject matter for several reasons. One, I dare say, is raw talent. One look at his paintings in person—take *Bedroom With Sunlight*, for instance—





and you will quickly concede that paint is in his blood and likely flows out of him with instinctual ease. In fact, one of his former teachers at The Florence Academy of Art commented that it wasn't long after Fenske arrived at the school that they began to realize he was simply unteachable, that's how strong his artistic ability and understanding was. Second, I think the path he has chosen to take with his training has set him up for great flexibility and potential as a painter. Because he spent two years receiving a strong academic foundation in drawing and painting at the Florence Academy of Art, by the time he sought instruction from Russian artist Semyon Bilmes he was already starting to realize that he could direct his traditional training toward a more personal style and vision. And third, Fenske is relentless in his pursuit of becoming a better painter, constantly pushing himself past his comfort zone and rarely accepting work that isn't exceptional—whether it's his own paintings or the paintings of others. He uses the artists who have

stood the test of time as his benchmark, and as far as he's concerned he hasn't even begun to scratch the surface.

Although I'm not a professional critic—I will leave the more conceptual and aesthetic commentary to my editorial director—what I do know is that our eye rarely deceives us, and I see great promise and an unmistakable place in the future of American art for this young, original painter.

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.

Allison Malafronte first introduced me to Ben Fenske's work this summer while she was researching an article for our October "Landscape & Nature" issue. She was reporting on James Daga Albinson's recently opened Hamptons Studio of Fine Art and the tradition of painting on the East End started by such legendary artists as Homer, Chase, Moran, and Hassam. I later met both Fenske and Albinson at the Salmagundi Club, in New York City, and was impressed by

their devotion to their plein air practice and the rigor of their workshops.

Fenske's work spans a wide range of genres, from landscape, to figures and interiors, to still life. All of his subject matter is handled with a broad and gutsy painting style that is both deeply emotive and formally advanced. Fenske however, an intelligent young man of few words, presents a character quite at odds with the charged works he recently showed at Grenning Gallery. He is reticent on the subject of his art and prefers that the work speak for itself. I do learn from Fenske that he resides half the year in Florence and that he began his artistic training at the Florence Academy of Art, the true bastion of restrained classicism and Gerome-inspired academic formalism. I imagine his stay at the academy short, yet poignant—the turning point in his development that demonstrated to the young artist what he was and what he was not.

Fenske is a romantic. The lineage of his practice does not descend from



Raphael but rather Tintoretto. Like this great master of color and speed, Fenske is a brash handler of the brush, and he harbors little regard for restraint. This expression of raw emotion stands out considerably from the new practitioners of this century's realism. The preference for this generation has clearly leaned toward a search for certitude. Perhaps because we live in such uneasy times, our youngest artists have beat a hasty path to a working style that is focused on capturing photo-like detail. However, an interesting paradoxical art emerges from this investigation: painstaking efforts to yield verisimilitude do not necessarily arrive at truth, they simply depict appearances. Contrarily, Fenske dares to show his hand. His mark making evidences an authentic humanness—what one sees in Homer's art. His paintings carve a way in: into form, into the landscape, into people's psyches; and that opening allows us to see the artist's passionate and honest search what is real.

It is important to take a look at Fenske's brushwork to understand what he is after—up close each stroke asserts its expressive independence, each is a discreet mark defining its own edge and placement in space. As these independent strokes break over one another they



OPPOSITE PAGE
Walking In
2009, oil, 40 x 49.
Private collection.



ABOVE LEFT
Jessica Empain
2010, oil, 78 x 39. Collection Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, New York.

ABOVE
American Girl in Florence
2008, oil, 78 x 39. Private collection.

TOP
Sleeping in the Sun
2010, oil, 24 x 36. Collection Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, New York.



LEFT
My Room
 2009, oil, 32 x 40.
 Private collection.

BELOW LEFT
The Break-Up
 2009, oil, 36 x 43. Col-
 lection Grenning Gallery,
 Sag Harbor, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Cary's World
 2009, oil, 30 x 24.
 Private collection.

indicate plane changes and build form—a form, however, that is unbounded and open; hence his brushwork simultaneously breaks and defines his subjects with form-building color rather than form-filled color.

Fenske's art is akin to the works of the Russian master painter Sergei Bongart, and our own Weekend With the Masters instructor Daniel Pinkham. Both are adept at this color as form-building technique, a painterly strategy that collapses the acts of drawing and painting into a single act. All three artists appear influenced by a tendency to work directly from life and en plein air, and their work evidences the concordant development of a rapid-response painting technique born from the desire to capture fleeting effects and momentary observations. Although Fenske, Bongart, and Pinkham sacrifice high finish with this painting style, they gain tremendous expressive power in return.

Margarita Pazmany, one of Bongart's students, in speaking about the artist's work states, *"Sergei Bongart was above technique. ... as with poetry that touches the heart. He never had to think to create art. His work was a direct, honest reaction to whatever he felt inspired to paint. His flowers, you can smell; his summer landscapes, you can feel the warm sun; and his winter scenes, you can feel the crispy cold air. ... Sergei's power of expression is all poetry!"*

I see this same poetic impulse in Fenske's work, particularly his vacated interiors. Though lacking figures, they evidence human inhabitation and offer



a quiet repose that invites our exploration. The painting titled *My Room* offers such a view: the artist depicts his personal space—the room contains little in the way of clutter or possessions, but the mood is not Spartan; rather it evidences a spirited minimalism, a contentment not based on the material. This is a room belonging to a traveler at ease with little; or perhaps this room is symbolic of our shared human condition, a view into the transient, spare, and solitary existence that is life.

An empty room is full of absence and implied solitude. Perhaps it is absence that Fenske is actually seeking to portray. Waiting, leaving, isolation, and a romantic sense of restlessness and loss are all symbolized in Fenske's works. Figures enter empty rooms, as in *Cary's World*; travel alone along solitary roads as in

About the Artist

Ben Fenske grew up in Minnesota and studied with Joseph Paquet at the Bougie Studio, in Minneapolis, before moving to Italy to train at the Florence Academy of Art in 2005. After two years at the academy, Fenske went on to study with Russian artist Semyon Bilmes and eventually moved back to Florence, where he currently resides. The artist spends part of the year in Sag Harbor, New York, where he teaches at the Hamptons Studio of Fine Art and exhibits in solo and group shows at Grenning Gallery. He has also shown his work at Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, in New York City; Ann Long Fine Art, in Charleston, South Carolina; and Solomon Gallery, in Dublin, Ireland, and is currently represented by Grenning Gallery. For more information on Fenske, visit his website at www.benfenske.com.

Walking In; or hang their heads in grief on kitchen tables as in *The Break Up*. If in fact Fenske is concerned with exploring the isolate nature inherent in the human condition then I will conclude that he has discovered not only a compelling

story worth telling but also a corresponding painting technique ideally suited for this poignant investigation. ■

Michael Gormley is the editorial director of American Artist.