

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Honoring This Week's Cover Artist: Ben Fenske

BY DAVID TAYLOR

On this week's cover of *Dan's Papers*, we have the 2020 oil painting "Girl, Morning" by Ben Fenske.

Born in 1978 to a working-class Minnesotan family, Fenske dreamed of becoming an artist and was greatly inspired by the works of major Russian painters that he was introduced to in his teens. He sought classical art training at the Bougie Studio in Minneapolis, founded by former students of renowned artist Richard Lack, and continued his studies at the Studio of Joseph Paquet and the prestigious Florence Academy of Art.

It was at the Florence Academy in Italy where he, at age 21, met Laura Grenning, founder and owner principal of Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, who was there working on a film. After leaving the academy and taking some time to earn money building roads, much like the other men in his family, he stayed in touch with Grenning, sending her images of his developing works.

"He would email me paintings, and every single one of them showed great promise, but they were teeny, like 6 by 8 inches," Grenning says. It wasn't until a Florence Academy alumni show years later that a Fenske painting made Grenning stop and recognize that he was ready to take on the art world. "It doesn't happen very often in a dealer's life when you're looking at a room of art and something just jumps out — to the point where I got a physical reaction. I ran across the room to this painting."

Grenning bought the painting and offered him his breakout solo show. "I gave him his solo show, and we've been selling out since then," she says, noting that Fenske has become her gallery's top earner in terms of dollars made from the sale of his paintings.

"Technically, he is an incredible draftsman, but he doesn't draw with his paintbrush, so he's very accurate in his expressive brushstrokes," Grenning explains. "This is one of the most distinguishing techniques of Ben Fenske: his accuracy for color and light, the hue, lightness and darkness, but he's not fussy with the paintbrush. It's almost like an abstract painting. If you squint at the paintings or put them way far away from you, they look like a photograph. Up close, if you were to hold up your hand in a four-by-four-inch square, it looks like a complete



"GIRL, SUNLIGHT" BY BEN FENSKE

abstraction. In many ways, I would attribute this lack of fussiness and very focused drive for accuracy and naturalism as one of the reasons his work is so easy and wonderful to live with."

Included in *American Artist* magazine's list of the Best 25 Living Artists in 2012, Fenske has held true to his admiration of Russian art throughout his career. He took courses at the Russian Academy of Art, was invited to join a plein air painting trip to Russian landscape painter Isaac Levitan's hometown and worked with Grenning to create the *Russian-American Painting Alliance*, a 2016 art residency and exhibition that repaid the kindness of his Russian artist friends by allowing them a place to stay and paint in Maine and in Sag Harbor.

"In the mid-20th century, classically trained Russian painters ... when they were free to paint what they wanted, they were often out in the countryside, but they were so good at figures that they would paint figures in nature, figures in their daily lives, out of doors," Grenning says of the artists that inspired Fenske. "This distinguishes him from a lot of my other

classical painters in that he's interested in painting a more naturalistic subject. He's much more interested in painting them naturally and in daylight."

Fenske has been working and living in Sag Harbor and the Florence area for over a decade. Grenning Gallery has maintained a strong relationship with him since 2007 and manages about 95% of the art that he sells. There's always something of his on view at the gallery, and he's given an annual solo show, usually in August. His contemporary paintings are popular with collectors and with artists for featuring "a lot of movement, a lot of life and a lot of breath," Grenning says.

"He's known as a bit of an 'artist's artist,' because a lot of painters will contact me to barter to get one of his works. He has a huge following of amateur artists who never buy art and have never bought art, but they have to own one of his little sketches," she says, adding, "One year, when he came — and his works come in a big wooden crate — he took the crate apart and built a little rowboat so that he could paint a scene of Sag Harbor from the water. He's a very hands-on person."

Fenske has dabbled in sculpture, creating a series of metal wild boars, one of which can be seen on Madison Street in Sag Harbor. He's even taken to teaching via the New Masters Academy online school, where he's created 58 hours of streamable painting lessons.

"He's not afraid to show people his process," Grenning says of his generous online coursework. In closing, she adds, "I consider him one of the finest painters of this generation."

To see more of Ben Fenske's art and inquire about purchasing works, including the art featured on the cover, visit grenninggallery.com.



BEN FENSKE AND LAURA GRENNING WITH HIS WORK AT GRENNING GALLERY



"FRESH APRICOTS" BY BEN FENSKE