



Tess Parkins

# Roly Fenwick: an artist from God's Country

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*Roly Fenwick: A New and Greener Light.* Exhibit to March 31 at Museum London, 421 Ridout St. N., 661-0333. *Roly Fenwick: In Addition.* Exhibit to February 2 at the Michael Gibson Gallery, 157 Carling St., 439-0451.

The new year is shaping up to be a significant one for London painter Roly Fenwick. Not only is he exhibiting his work at Museum London this month with *A New and Greener Light*, but an exhibit of his work is also showing at the Michael Gibson Gallery.

*A New and Greener Light* features selected work from the past ten years in both oil and watercolour. The show is the result of a collaborative effort by Museum London and the Tom Thomson Memorial Gallery in Owen Sound, where the show was displayed last year under the title *From Big Bay*. Curator for the exhibit is Ted Fraser, who contributed an excellent essay to the catalogue.

*In Addition*, the show at the Gibson Gallery, features work which could not be accommodated in the Museum London show. However, it stands as a distinct and complete show in its own right. Since the Gibson Gallery is a commercial gallery, the work in this show is also for sale. Twelve oil paintings and ten watercolours comprise the exhibit.

Fenwick is well known to Londoners not only for his skill as a painter of landscapes but also for his position at the University of Western Ontario — he was a professor of art there for twenty years. But don't expect a lot of theoretical jargon and artspeak from Mr. Fenwick. He would prefer to bypass the talk and get down to the business at hand, and that is painting.

Fenwick admits that talking about his paintings is difficult for him, and he confesses, "I don't explain my work very well." Oh, that we all could be so inarticulate. He may not speak easily about his work, but his ability to express elusive and intuitive concepts in concrete terms is enviable.

Fenwick frequently uses language of an almost poetic nature in talking about his canvases and watercolours; in fact, hanging beside one of the paintings at the Gibson Gallery is a poem by Robert Frost, one of the artist's favourite poets. Fenwick speaks of "blood roots" and "biological faith" and "soul-link"; colourful word pairings that reveal much about his way of thinking. Fenwick is a man of the land. He does not paint or voice the superfluous. He is a painter of landscapes, but they are stripped down impressions of a region that is, literally, the artist's identity.

Fenwick counts six generations of family hailing from the Owen Sound area — "God's country", as he calls it. He always painted and drew, even as a child, and that interest led him to study painting at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. After a short stint as a stock-

broker, Fenwick spent two years as Art Director for Simpson Sears Catalogues before being invited to a professorship at UWO's visual arts department. He retired from that position in 1989. His work has been shown consistently for the last 40 years in galleries and muse-



Hydro Cut 1998c

ums all over Canada.

Having embraced various styles and themes in his work over the last few decades (including a foray into surrealism and ten years — ten years! — of doing paintings of fish on handmade paper)

Fenwick has now settled into the study of trees. Not that there is anything settling about the work. In fact, some of his paintings are downright ominous. His palette for much of the work at Museum London is very dark, and the movement that is suggested by his brushstrokes is often chaotic and even a little menacing. His paintings represent not a static, benign picture of nature, but illustrate the processes of change, decay, and destruction — sometimes at the hand of nature, other times, as a result of human progress and development.

But not all of Fenwick's work is dark. The later pieces in

both shows, particularly from the last two years, convey a more peaceful mood. The trees in this series are portrayed as columns, with titles like "Glyptic Column" and "Encoded Column". The paintings in this group of work often feature just a portion of a tree trunk, divorced from its surroundings. Fenwick often places the tree smack dab in the middle of the canvas, a breach of compositional rules that gives the painter a chuckle.

Fenwick's relationship with his subject is an intimate one, no doubt the result of long summer days spent "in the field" around Big Bay and on the shores of Georgian Bay, not far from his birthplace. It is well-mined territory, artistically speaking, as anyone familiar with the Group of Seven can confirm. However, Fenwick's watercolours and oils have a much more personal identity than the Group of Seven's ever did. Fenwick considers his paintings of trees "self-portraits".

Summers Fenwick spends at Big Bay, painting watercolours on location and retiring to his cabin in the evenings. Occasionally he'll meet with artist friends to critique one another's work. But Fenwick doesn't just wander around in the great outdoors until he finds a "pretty landscape" to paint. He needs to feel a connection with the area before he decides to paint it. Fenwick makes the distinction between scenery, which has a descriptive purpose, and landscape, which includes consideration of the forces that were and are at work to create a particular scene. Landscape is not just a literal representation of what one saw, but is about "getting below the surface," he says.

For Fenwick, the process of digging deeper is a difficult one. "I don't enjoy painting," he reveals, "I have to do it." Painting for Fenwick "is a field of personal battles," as he struggles within the formal constraints of painting to produce what he calls not so much a scene, as "an image of an experience." Back home in his London studio, Fenwick will take his watercolour studies from the summer and

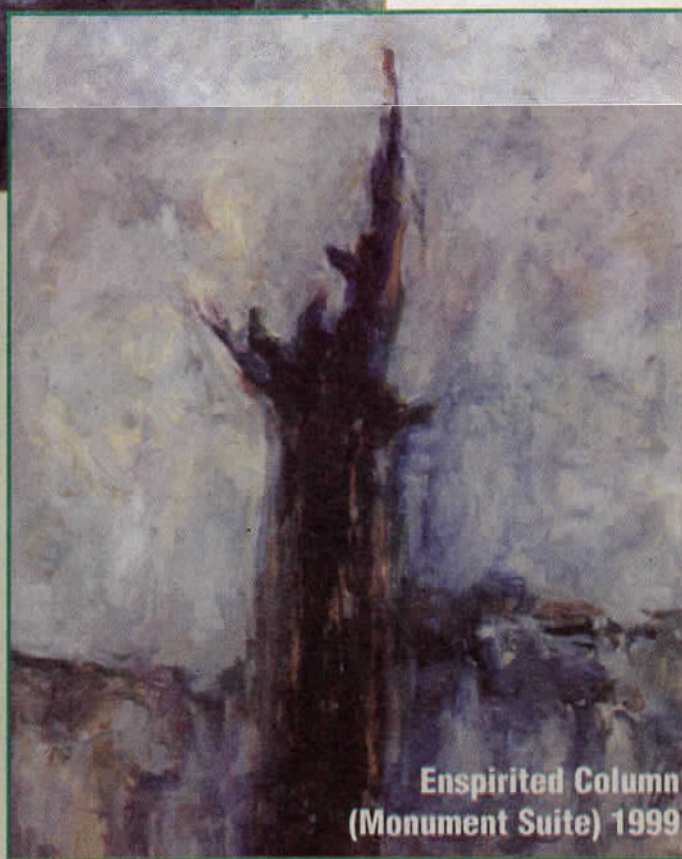
begin to refine them in oils.

He admits that he enjoys both media equally, but his struggle for expression is most often undertaken with canvas and oils.

Fenwick is not the picture of a tortured artist. In fact, his even-tempered, calm disposition belies no hint of the struggle within. When he admits that he is compelled to paint, he does so with a shrug and a laugh. His lean figure and the lines on his face tell of a life spent out-of-doors hiking, walking, quietly observing. He is equally at ease with a fishing rod or a paintbrush in his hand. An admitted loner, he prefers the company of trees to people.

Perhaps we should take this outer placidity as our proof that in the battle between Roly Fenwick and his inner demons, Fenwick is coming out ahead. Or maybe it is the peace of a man who found his calling early in life and still finds challenge and joy in it. As he approaches his 70th birthday, Fenwick's enthusiasm for his work remains

Enspirited Column  
(Monument Suite) 1999



undiminished, his direction, clear. And that is perhaps as grand an accomplishment as his body of work.

Cover photo of Roly Fenwick by Allison Kennedy.