



NATIONAL  
GALLERY  
OF CANADA

# THE VOYEURISTIC WORK OF KAREL FUNK

Tina Reilly

September 1, 2016

Magazine



Karel Funk, *Untitled #3*, 2003, 34.3 x 34.3 cm. Collection of Annie and Matthew Aberle. © Karel Funk, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Praised by the *New York Times* as “outstanding” and “suffused with an unexpected spirituality,” Karel Funk’s paintings have been purchased by the likes of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. The Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) show *Karel Funk*, on view until October 2, is the first major survey of Funk’s oeuvre in Winnipeg, where the artist continues to live and work.

The exhibition covers the trajectory of Funk's career since he graduated from Columbia University's Master of Fine Arts program in the early 2000s. "It highlights all the narratives I've worked on," said Funk in an interview with *NGC Magazine* this past spring. "In fact, I'm finishing a new painting even now."

Funk is known for making highly realistic paintings of post-adolescent young men whose gaze is turned inwards, away from the viewer. His work reflects his own experiences of anonymity in close proximity to others on the subways of New York City. "Living with large crowds gave me a strong sense of invaded personal space. You end up looking at people very closely and objectively, with a non-sexual gaze. It's a modern experience where you're a voyeur into people's lives, even if just for a second."



Karel Funk, *Untitled #61*, 2014, 47.0 x 50.8 cm. Claridge Collection, Montreal. © Karel Funk, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Funk's subjects are usually clad in outerwear such as Gore-Tex®, often with a hood. In some portraits, the subject's face shows within the hood, with eyes closed. In others, the subject's face turns away from the viewer. In still others, the Gore-Tex® shell is bundled or knotted and there is no discernible person inside.

WAG curator Andrew Kear has arranged Funk's work to reflect the artist's movement towards the elimination of a human presence. "As you move through the decade," Kear told *NGC Magazine*, "Karel contorts and distorts the figure, so the suggestion that there's someone under there is undermined. The exhibition gradually closes off the viewer's access to the people."

Funk's art practice began in 2003, when he became interested in finding a bridge between contemporary life and historical painting — portraiture in particular. He decided that the hood was the perfect bridge. "My work references the modern synthetic jackets that we wear today and, at the same time, the hoods that you see in historical portraits." Funk points to *Untitled #3*, which depicts a young man in profile, as a particularly successful reference to historical painting, with a nod as well to a contemporary milieu. A few of the portraits in the show do not include hoods. "Those works have more of an urban gaze to them," says Funk.



Karel Funk, *Untitled #10*, 2004, 40.6 x 40.6 cm. National Gallery of Canada. © Karel Funk, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

The WAG show includes twenty-four works, drawn from collections across Canada and the United States. The exhibition includes *Untitled #10* (2004) from the National Gallery of Canada, which shows a hooded young man whose eyes appear closed, and whose face is tilted downwards. Kear considers the work a fine example of Funk's early period, "where you begin to see the hood cover the person's face." When he made *Untitled #10*, says Funk, he was focused on rendering the imperfections and details in the subject's skin. "I wanted to try and get it looking just right. I can also remember working quite a bit on the shadow across the subject's forehead."

Funk has always been a committed Realist painter, with a particular affinity for the work of masters such as Chuck Close. Funk's father was an architect in an era when everything was drawn very precisely by hand. "I've always been interested in trying to make things look real," he says. At the same time, Funk shrinks from any suggestion that his work is intended as photorealism. "In person, you can tell immediately that they're paintings and not photographs."



Karel Funk, *Untitled #58*, 2013, 49.5 x 43.8 cm. Courtesy of the Artist, 303 Gallery, New York and Galerie Division, Montréal. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The exhibition includes a recent body of work in which Funk paints still lifes, referencing Dutch vanitas art of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which artists evoked the fleeting nature of existence with elements such as skulls, rotting food, dead hares, and faded flowers. In a twist on vanitas symbology, Funk paints plastic objects into his still lifes, suggesting that — unlike the perishable subject matter of conventional vanitas work — these items will outlive humanity, because they are made with petroleum products. “They’ll be in landfill long after we’re gone,” he says.

***Karel Funk* is on view at the Winnipeg Art Gallery until October 2, 2016.**

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina Reilly is President of Lightning Media Inc., an Ottawa-based professional writing firm.

## RELATED ARTICLES



### EXHIBITIONS

#### A TOUCH OF SERENDIPITY: CHAGALL & WINNIPEG

(<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/a-touch-of-serendipity-chagall-winnipeg>)

Winnipeg would never have known of the relationship between famed 20th-century artist Marc Chagall and Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt, a former director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, had it not been for a complicated...

August 2, 2016



### EXHIBITIONS

#### CHRIS CRAN'S HUMOUR, RIGOUR AND REVERIE

(<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/chris-crans-humour-rigour-and-reverie>)

Over the past forty years, Chris Cran has wandered far and wide, following tributaries through Photorealism, Pop art, Op art and abstraction, making forays into self-portraiture, landscape, still-life and...

May 17, 2016



### YOUR COLLECTION

#### THE RELEVANCE OF REALISM: JOHN HALL AT THE KELOWNA ART GALLERY

(<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/the-relevance-of-realism-john-hall-at-the-kelowna-art-gallery>)

An exhibition at the Kelowna Art Gallery is challenging perceptions and prejudices about Realist art. John Hall: Travelling Light. A forty-five-year survey of paintings examines the career of Kelowna-based...

May 11, 2016