



Bayside Porch, 2016, oil on linen, 50" x 70"

Kurt Solmssen **REAL WORLD**

Kurt Solmssen is a painterly imagist who portrays a gentle and idyllic universe. His landscapes are self-confident and natural—infused with an elegant simplicity. Solmssen's paintings—seemingly created effortlessly—are a paean to the preciousness of life's ordinary moments.

The works are evocative and captivating, intimate and accessible—wooing the viewer into a rich realm of memory and nostalgia. There's a sense of personal connection: Solmssen often invitingly peoples his paintings with family and friends. He also often incorporates simple architectural elements in and around his home on Puget Sound in Washington State. His work presents a world of reality that is personal to him and yet is resonant too of a broader reality shared by many who view his art.

Solmssen's work, while generally characterized as realism, is generously enhanced by abstraction in a somewhat impressionistic manner. One can almost tactilely sense the warmth of

Solmssen's summer sun, luxuriate in the variegated colors of his shadows, or anticipate the coolness of the misty, multi-hued light of a winter's day over the water.

Solmssen is particularly sensitive to the complex qualities of hue and his paintings are often saturated with a rich luminous palette. At the same time, Solmssen's use of color can be extremely subtle. In his depiction of liminal times, such as sunrise or sunset, or for winter scenes, Solmssen often uses desaturated colors—some might put forth the word "neutral." But Solmssen's use of "neutral" colors is not indicative of the absence of color. Indeed, Solmssen demonstrates a very sensitive use of the nuances of atmospheric tonalities and the subtleties of his works are often likened to those of James Abbot McNeill Whistler.

In all his works, Solmssen juxtaposes lights and darks in a palette that includes both earthy and more intense and robust colors. Very importantly, Solmssen consciously uses his facility with

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color to consistently convey both a mood and a deeply felt personal sense of place.

Solmssen's paintings seemingly echo of treasured memories and intimate moments. His light-filled landscapes are replete with quiet symbols of peaceful domesticity: a verandah overlooking a placid waterfront, a young woman reading a book while nestled in a wicker chair, an exuberant clutch of bright yellow springtime forsythia, a young mother holding her newborn child in early morning light, or an iconic yellow boat that perhaps touches on fond, treasured childhood memories. Solmssen's world is infused with a subtle magic, yet it's a credible world that one, on a deeper level, believes to be the "real world." In the works of Kurt Solmssen, the emotion of mythic "place" and sense of memory elegantly supersede physical geography.

Indeed, the work of Solmssen is mythic—not in grandeur of scale, but in capturing a place of timeless peace and comfort and, in its own ways, recounting the joys of life's mysteries. The

artist brilliantly entices the viewer to participate in the works—providing just enough narrative to enable the viewer to transform each painting into a personal experience. In Solmssen's works, one becomes aware of an almost sacred sense of time and place—using commonplace images to tap into half-forgotten memories and idyllic, beloved moments in our own lives.

Solmssen's paintings have a strong commonality with those of Fairfield Porter—described by leading critic, Hilton Kramer, as “an American classic”—in that Solmssen's deft imagery suggests a reality above and beyond the observed world. To achieve this end, Solmssen continually reduces the imagery to essential aspects—creating a nuanced portrayal that incorporates both realism and abstraction—all with a finely tuned color sense that is at once bold and complex and yet nurturing and soothing. Like Porter, who was strongly influenced by the abstractions of Willem de Kooning, Solmssen uses imagery as a key to enter the paintings—a key for both the viewer and the painter. The narratives of Solmssen's paintings provide an entrée for the painter—with his expressive brushwork calculatedly using both sharp, crisp lines and brushy, more impressionistic strokes—to continually explore the rich capabilities and qualities of paint.

A Philadelphia native, Solmssen began his personal artistic journey at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. There, surrounded by nationally



Boat Houses, 2016, oil on linen, 24" x 36"

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revered collections of works of 19th and early 20th century masters as well as exhibitions of contemporary works, he trained with noted 20th century artists. Subsequently, Solmssen studied at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1986.

As a painter, Solmssen has always found working out of doors—*en plein air*—to be ultimately most rewarding. Very influential to Solmssen's development were two American Impressionist landscape painters from the New Hope, Pennsylvania Art Colony: Edward Willis Redfield and Daniel Garber—both of whom championed direct painting in the out of doors. This love of working in the actual environment still reigns today in Solmssen's work and, indeed, is undoubtedly a major source, if not the underpinning, of its quiet strength.

Perhaps echoing Redfield's noted reputation for lassoing his canvases to trees, Solmssen has devised an unusual technique that actually makes his large canvases perform as outdoor easels to enable him to directly create his paintings in the natural environments that he prefers. Working even when the weather proves challenging—be it in heat, rain, or winter snow—Solmssen paints rapidly to capture both time and light and the essence of the moment. The brevity of the fleeting light—often as little as three hours—energizes the moment and helps him to fully focus, engage, and paint with intensity and passion.

Gary Faigin, art critic and co-founder of the Gage Academy of Art in Seattle, Washington wrote of Kurt Solmssen's work: “Though a realist, Kurt Solmssen does not so much record what he sees, as use his surroundings as a point of departure for poetic homages to



Marcia and Forsythia, 2016, oil on linen, 46" x 50"

waterside life, the delights of color and light, and the joys of the loaded brush. His paintings are rich, fluid, and celebratory. Obtrusive elements—either human or natural—are kept out of the frame of view, or ... edited away. The family activities are always calm and genial."

Throughout his artistic career, Solmssen has been strongly influenced by the atmospheric transformations of the color of light over bodies of water—from Philadelphia's Schuylkill River, to the Mediterranean Sea off the rugged cliffs of Costa Blanca in Spain, to his long-time waterfront residence in Washington State. In 1987, Solmssen and his wife moved permanently into his family's former vacation home in the hamlet of Vaughn, Washington. Overlooking the vast watery expanses of Puget Sound—an inland extension of the Pacific Ocean—the cottage and studio are nestled in a rustic and romantically wooded environment.

In an interview with artist and critic Larry Groff, Solmssen said, "... the seasons are so extremely different out here in the Northwest. We have so much fog and mist and gray weather in the winter, and then the summers are like Fairfield Porter, like New England clarity. So, just for that reason, the paintings are very different generally. Unless the sun comes out in the winter, we have

a very low horizontal light, which is beautiful... There is a kind of abstract, minimalist beauty to the Northwest landscape, and I try to capture that."

With this orientation, Solmssen captures the bright, water-reflected Pacific Northwest light in all seasons. Throughout the year, this richly hued light casts dense emotive shadows and gently reflects upon the water, on the area's immense evergreen trees, and on the simple, comfortable-looking waterfront structures. To some, Solmssen's work may seem reminiscent of Edward Hopper's paintings of individuals in their local surroundings. Solmssen's lyrical paintings, however, are devoid of the melancholy or anxiety one often associates with Hopper's work. Instead, the individuals Solmssen depicts seem approachable, like a family member or a good friend. Viewers can often interject themselves into the paintings with ease.

To hone his painting imagery, Solmssen creates countless sketches to assess, refine, and reduce a scene to ultimately redact a painted image. While the paintings are fresh, direct, and vital, their simplicity is due to Solmssen's constant thinking and rethinking his visual ideas—often over long periods of time. An excellent draftsman, Solmssen has long used sketching

and drawing to document his view of life and to better hone his reductive, depictive skills. The physical motions involved in sketching often inform the gestural qualities of the actual paintings.

In recent years, Solmssen began creating diptychs, which in his case are really very large paintings—perhaps ten-feet long—created in two parts. These paintings, such as *The Cherry Tree*, are, in truth, illusionistic, as one could not actually experience the wide expanse of the image in real life, without turning the head. Remarkably, Solmssen actually "bends" the image for the viewer—painting it from two different angles. This conscious artifice helps to capture a panoramic vista for the viewer. In using this form of calculated unreality, Solmssen actually enhances the viewer's perception of "reality"—allowing the painting to visually achieve the image the viewer tends to mentally construct and perceive.

The painterly skill and expertise of Kurt Solmssen is apparent. His works, with masterful brushstrokes and charged colors, create a welcoming "real world" of bliss and of gracious, gentle memories relatable by a wide audience.

— Justin Ferate, *New York City*



Low Tide, Carr Inlet, 2016, oil on linen, 48" x 70"