

KURT SOLMSSSEN

Season of Light

By Meg Daly



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Pacific Northwest painter Kurt Solmssen captures Puget Sound light and atmosphere on his large-scale canvases. His latest work will be on display at George Billis Gallery in New York, October 31 to December 2.

Solmssen hails from Philadelphia, but has spent over three decades living in Vaughn, Washington, a small coastal town an hour outside of Seattle. It is the site of his grandfather's summer home, where Solmssen and his wife subsequently raised their children.

Solmssen's paintings feel like a cross between Edward Hopper and Fairfield Porter, but that's not to say that his work is derivative. Solmssen brings his own fresh eye and perspective to the subjects and landscapes he paints. In *Yellow Boat at the Haley Land Trust*, we encounter a yellow rowboat, a frequent motif in Solmssen's paintings. The boat was purchased by his grandfather and has been in the family for many years. It was painted bright lemon after having been lost in a fog once.

The boat serves as a potent metaphor, but like an artist's artist, Solmssen says what he loves about it are its visual properties and personal motif. "I realized



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- 1**
Lauren and the Yellow Boat (diptych), oil on linen, 50 x 118"
- 2**
Summer Interior, oil on linen, 60 x 64"
- 3**
Yellow Boat at the Haley Land Trust, oil on linen, 34 x 40"
- 4**
RG and the Yellow Boat (diptych), oil on linen, 50 x 118"

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that the bright yellow color in the blue and green Northwest landscape was a nice point of color," he says in a video on the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art website. "I liked the man-made curves of the boat," he continues. "Also the boat was important to me and my family history."

In 2021, Bainbridge Island Museum of Art held a major retrospective of Solmssen's work. He has had dozens of solo shows and been featured in many group shows since the 1980s. During this long span, Solmssen developed a signature voice while still allowing himself to play with style and subject matter. In the George Billis show, the yellow boat is sometimes rendered with looser brushstrokes than in other, tighter, paintings. Compare *Yellow Boat at the Haley Land Trust* with *Summer Interior* and we can see Solmssen exploring the interplay of realism and impressionism.

Whether his scene is indoors or outdoors, Solmssen paints in plein air. He



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sets up his canvases, which are sometimes very large, and paints the scene in front of him. He has said that, "The subject matter is important but the way they are painted is more important. That's why I paint directly from life."

For Solmssen, the paint itself and the way it sits on the canvas is essential to the emotional reaction of the viewer. He enjoys making large paintings to amp up the emotional impact.

The show at George Billis Gallery will include over a dozen new paintings. It will be an interesting opportunity for viewers to compare November light in New York City with the range of summer light in the Pacific Northwest. An opening reception will be held Thursday, November 2, from 6 to 8 p.m. ●

George Billis Gallery 527 W. 23rd Street • New York, NY 10011 • (917) 273-8621 • www.georgebillis.com