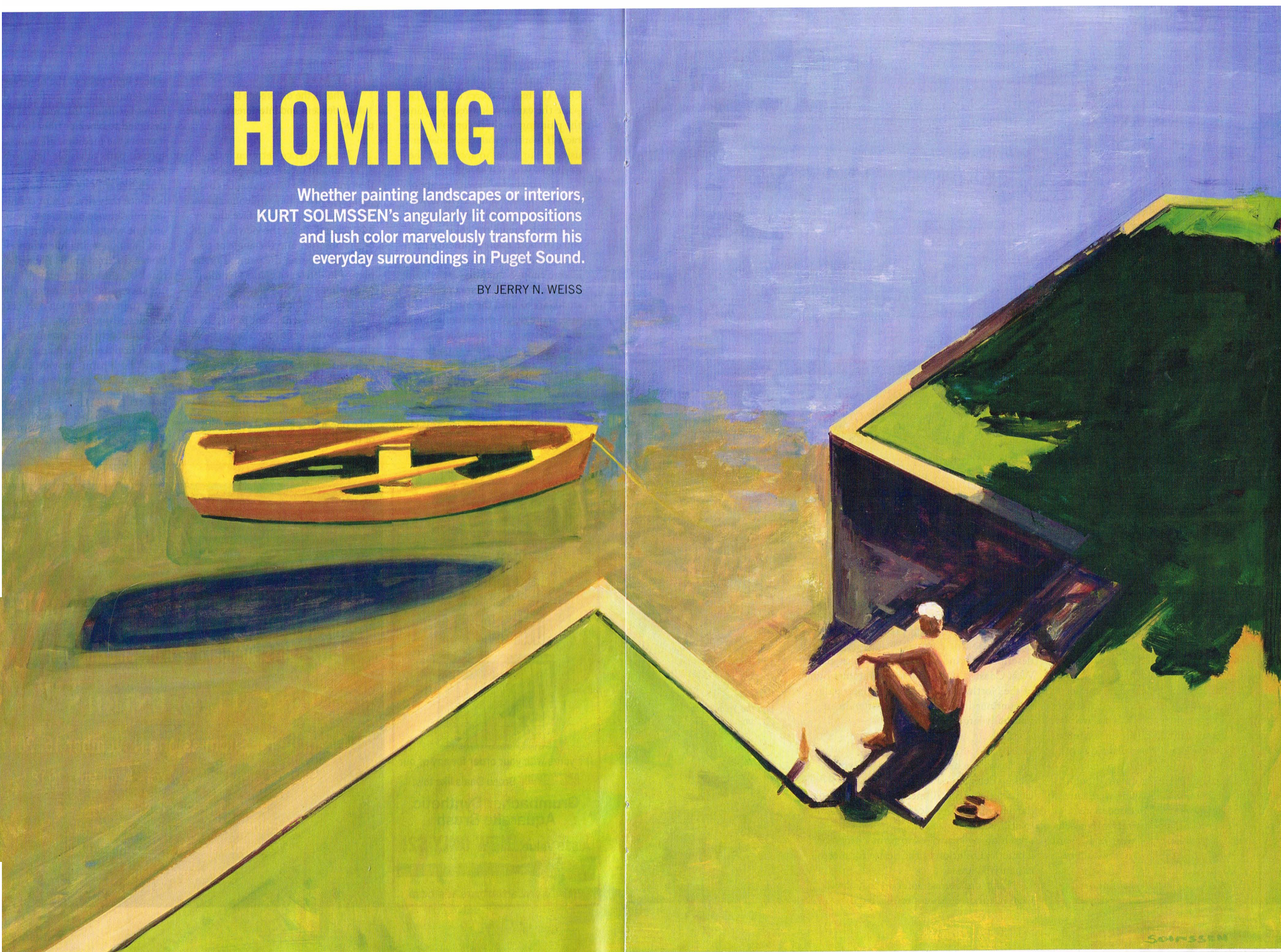
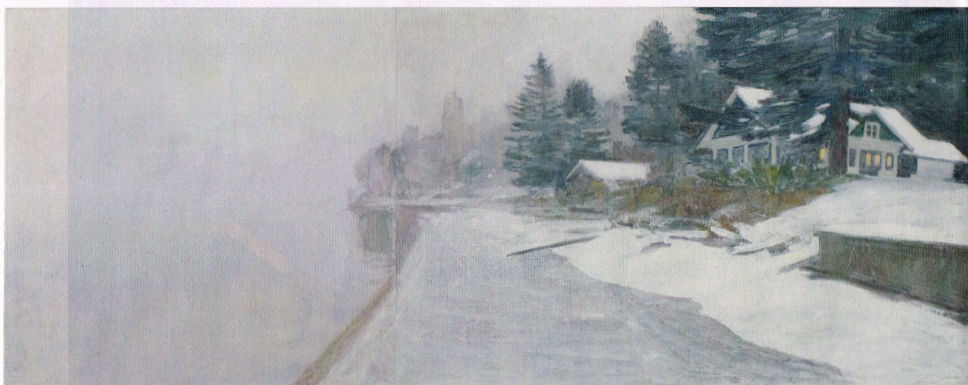


HOMING IN

Whether painting landscapes or interiors, KURT SOLMSSEN's angularly lit compositions and lush color marvelously transform his everyday surroundings in Puget Sound.

BY JERRY N. WEISS





Kurt Solmssen's work came to my attention only three years ago when I saw one of his landscape paintings hanging in a Connecticut gallery. The painting was of a yellow rowboat, a subject, at first blush, of seemingly disproportionate prominence. Bought by Solmssen's grandfather in 1938, the boat has been featured on many canvases, seen from different angles, often beached but sometimes afloat just offshore, casting a blue shadow through shallow water on the sand beneath. As a subject, it speaks to the presence of family in Solmssen's art—he has frequently drafted his wife and daughters to pose—while acting as a vehicle for his technical mastery.

Finding His Space

Solmssen, a Philadelphia native, attended the city's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, whose figure-based instructors included Ben Kamihira and Sidney Goodman. Landscape painting offered an alternative to the school's crowded studios, and Solmssen soon accompanied instructor Louis B. Sloan outdoors. Sloan's palette proved to be influential, as was the example of the Pennsylvania impressionist Edward Willis Redfield, who painted en plein air in all seasons and in large format. Though traditional cast and life drawing were taught at the academy, Solmssen became more interested in modern and painterly representational art, particularly the work of Richard Diebenkorn and Fairfield Porter, whom he calls "a big influence."

After earning a bachelor of fine arts degree at the University of Pennsylvania,

Solmssen built a studio on Puget Sound, in Washington state, and moved into the house once owned by his grandparents (he regularly returns East, and is, by his own description, "kind of a mixture of East and West Coast."). Attracted to the summer light of the Northwest, as well as its winter pallor, he continued working outside, often in an unusually large scale.

Working Large

For years, the bed of Solmssen's Toyota pickup determined the dimensions of his canvases, and 50x70 inches became a standard format. More recently he has worked in still wider dimensions, sometimes attaching two canvases to form a diptych, a practical solution to the desire for more expansive views.

Early on, Solmssen found that easels were insufficient to support his large

canvases outside. He devised a unique solution, attaching a hinge and a 1x2 board to a crossbar on the back of his painting. The result is an improvised tripod upon which the canvas can lean. For a palette he uses a plywood sheet the size of a small tabletop, and it, too, rests on the ground. A large painting may take Solmssen weeks or months to complete, and there may be much revising, overpainting and even drawing into the painting with a pencil.

Working the Seasons

"I like to paint close to home," says Solmssen. "There's a lot to paint on Puget Sound." As a result, many subjects recur, and the yellow boat and a number of architectural landmarks

are familiar motifs. There's also a preference for certain color schemes, especially chromatic contrasts of yellow and orange alongside blue and violet. When architecture—in the form of buildings, steps or a straight-edged waterline—doesn't supply the requisite hard angles, cast shadows are called upon to form dynamic patterns that carve razor-sharp niches into light-filled surfaces. Sometimes Solmssen puts down, paints over and then removes strips of painter's tape to create the necessary crisp lines. These rectilinear shapes and calculated juxtapositions of values are jagged anchors to otherwise idyllic scenes.

If the summer and fall paintings are declarative in spirit, the winter works are evocative. In the winter paintings, he

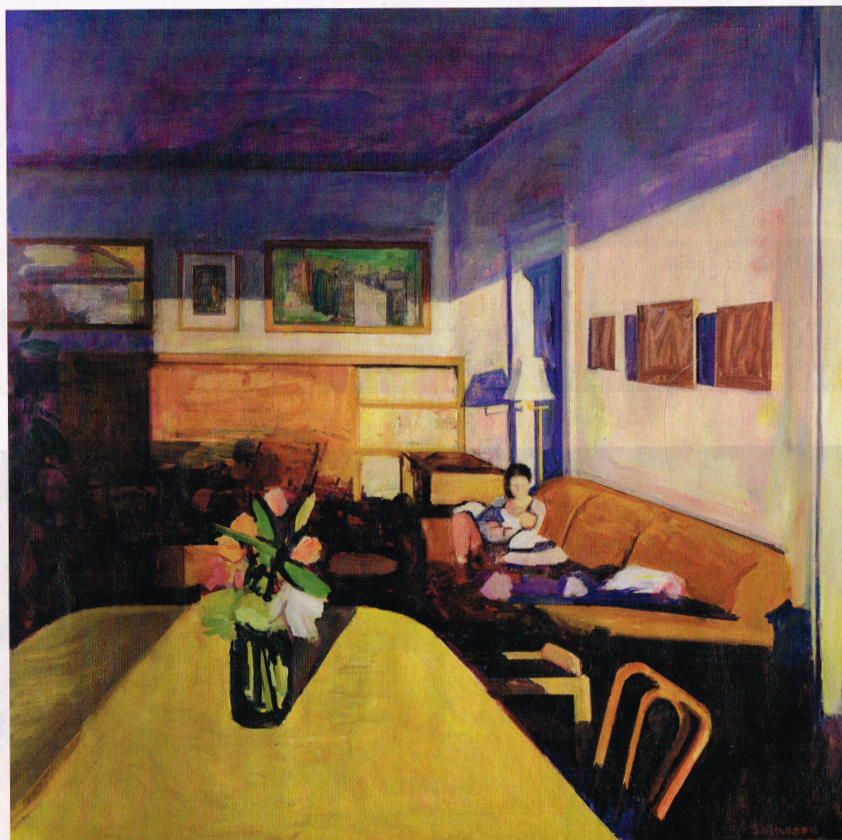
Solmssen estimates that 90 percent of his landscape painting is done in front of the subject.

ABOVE: *The Davis House in Snow* (diptych; oil on canvas, 46x120)

RIGHT: *Lauren Sleeping in Winter Sunlight* (oil on canvas, 36x48)

OPENING SPREAD: *RG and the Yellow Boat* (oil on canvas, 50x68)





MATERIALS

SURFACE: Claessens No. 15 oil-primed linen

OILS: mostly Rembrandt and Winsor & Newton, plus Old Holland ultramarine blue deep

MEDIUM: 1 part refined linseed oil + ½ part Damar varnish + about 4 parts gum turpentine

BRUSHES: Robert Simmons Signet 40F bristle flats in all sizes, 1-inch gesso brushes

replaces saturated color and aggressive contrasts with variations in silver. "You can," make millions of grays out of prismatic colors," says Solmssen—and he does so, using the same palette. The complex light and shadow patterns of summertime are stripped down to a geometric bareness, the land swathed in snow and fog. *The Davis House in Snow* (page 36), a 10-foot wide diptych, is a good example; the house and shore are gently fogbound, and the distant landscape of the left-hand panel is completely shrouded.

Solmssen estimates that 90 percent of his landscape painting is done in front of the subject. He paints standing in the rain

and snow, and has found that precipitation creates interesting and unexpected effects when mixed with oil paint. Solmssen's gift for improvisation is exemplified by his solutions to prosaic challenges: Inspired by a painting by Balthus, he once had his sister-in-law pose for hours on a ladder, picking cherries from a tree. When she'd exhausted the crop within reach, he duct-taped more cherries to the branches near her.

Composition, Light and Color

Preparatory drawings and small oil studies often precede the large canvases. Solmssen makes a lot of drawings when planning



ABOVE: *Sunset Interior* (oil on canvas, 68x68)

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OPPOSITE: *Sunrise Interior* (oil on canvas, 68x68)

a composition, always with a No. 2 pencil. He then starts a painting by drawing with a brush, proceeding at a brisk pace. "The faster I work, the bigger the brushes, the more fun it is," he says. That vigor informs his painting, where the aforementioned straight-edged passages are often complemented by broad forms that have been gesturally brushed in. He leavens geometric construction by scraping, repainting and scumbling. In Solmssen's work, there's nearly always an exciting

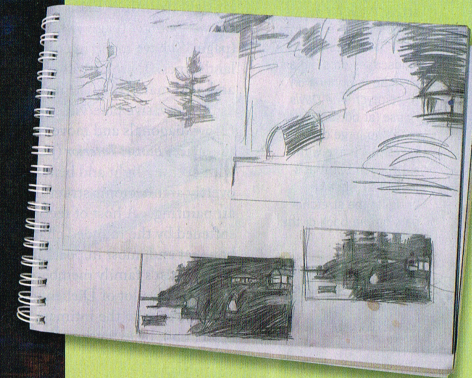
tension between the illusion of atmosphere and structured flat shapes.

When working in sunlight, Solmssen considers the maximum window of time to be three hours. His love of direct light carries to interior compositions, where Solmssen prefers to paint the effects of sunshine illuminating a room rather than the steady indirect north light favored by many studio artists. This interest in light, color

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PAINTING LIGHT IN THE DARK

By Kurt Solmssen



For the most part, I painted *Bonfire* (left) en plein air. Pencil sketches (above) helped me figure out the composition, including whether or not to include the tops of the fir trees. Then, every night as the sun was going down, I set up on the bulkhead and made a fire, keeping it going as I painted.

As light dims, we see in a more tonal way, so at a certain point of each evening, the only way I could determine the colors I was using was by their position on my palette. Later, when I viewed the painting under electric light or in daylight, I could see how the contrast between light and dark made the colors pop.

Bonfire has three light sources—the fire, the sunset and the porch light. One challenge was deciding which source would dominate. I eventually toned down the sunset to an afterglow, making the fire the focus and brightest light.

Walking home on the beach one night, I saw my daughters and their cousins and friends enjoying their own bonfire. I took photographs with a small digital camera and used those pictures to work figures into the painting.

LEFT: *Bonfire* (oil on canvas, 50x70)

BOTTOM: *The Davis House* (diptych; oil on canvas, 50x118)

BELOW: *Plein Air at Large*: Solmssen paints even the largest of his landscapes en plein air. Here he is working on the diptych *The Davis House* (at bottom). He props up large canvases like these with a 1x2-inch bar that's hinged to a board bridging the stretcher bars on the back of the painting.

OPPOSITE: *Yellow Boat, Evening* (oil on canvas, 24x28)

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and contrast suffuses his work in all genres. In their coloration, construction and angular light, paintings like *Lauren Sleeping in Winter Sunlight* (page 37) and *Sunrise Interior* (page 38) have much in common with the landscapes. There's an abundance of yellow and gold material in the interiors, as well as the pervasive blue/violet shadows that throw diagonals and move the eye around the space. *Sunset Interior* (page 39) is ablaze with evening light and benefits from a more overtly architectonic structure than the plein air paintings. A host of rectilinear shapes are softened by the rounded chair backs, floral bouquet and, most importantly, the presence of the artist's family members in the doorway. There's a lot of Diebenkorn here, as well as a reference to the intimate domesticity of Porter and, by extension, Pierre Bonnard.

Solmssen is one of the best plein air painters working today, but his work is not primarily concerned with transcribing the passing conditions that many landscape painters favor. The vibrant colors he uses to denote water or foliage have a formal purpose. *The Davis House* (at bottom), for example, is a sophisticated synthesis of a landscape with which Solmssen is familiar. A representational view of the coastline, it's an essay in color brinkmanship—the same blue-violet that appears in the distant strip of land crosses the composition when it recurs in the house at right, and a few shots of warm brown in the foreground shadows are essential to the entire painting's illusion of depth.

A Marvelous Transformation

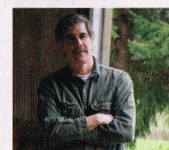
One of the characteristics of traditional plein air painting is that it's a peripatetic calling. Landscape painters rarely seem to stay in one place for long, and their portable equipment makes travel easy. Solmssen, however, has found his place on the coast of Washington, where the themes of home and family inform subjects to which he returns again and again.

Among great painters, that sort of thematic constancy is not unusual. What is striking is the unabated sense of excitement Solmssen brings to his work. One can survey the back catalogue of his paintings and find that they're consistently intelligent in design, resolute in draftsmanship and lush in color. His power of expression only sharpens with time.



Yellow Boat, Evening (above) is reminiscent of the first painting I saw by Solmssen. It is a recent canvas, a riff on a subject he has painted before. It represents the thing seen in slanting sunlight—a small boat resting on the sand—painted with terse means. The sharpened edges of boat and oars, the green trim, its blazing yellow and reflection of orange provide a bare minimum, yet just the right amount, of information. This, like so much of Solmssen's art, is a marvelous transformation of visual fact to graphic statement, fueled by intense personal connection. ■

JERRY N. WEISS is a frequent contributor to *The Artist's Magazine*. He teaches at the Art Students League of New York.



KURT SOLMSEN completed a four-year certificate program at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Philadelphia) in 1982. The following year, the Academy awarded him a William Emlen Cresson Memorial Traveling Scholarship.

He received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) in 1986. He exhibits his work extensively across the United States, and his paintings are part of many private, corporate and museum collections, including those of ExxonMobil Corporation, Bakersfield Museum of Art (Calif.) and the Tacoma Art Museum (Wash.)

Visit his website at kurtsolmssen.net.

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