

only the lonely

Everyone remembers certain times that have provided lasting visual insights, acting to alter one's course. I first became aware of T.L. Solien's work, his vision, in the mid 1980's and, in a large sense, I was blind-sided by what I perceived. Here was work that was so idiomatically strange that it seemed to exist without precedent. In the famous documentary accompanying his San Francisco retrospective, Philip Guston reminds us, "we don't come from nowhere," and, always keeping this in mind, time has helped to clarify for me some of the sources and cultural premonitions of Solien's work as well as its impact on contemporary painting.

The 1980's collective art consciousness experienced a dramatic return to painting; it seemed as if more artists were painting, seizing on both the materiality and the descriptive potential of painting. The conceptually minimalist strategies of the late 1960's and '70's seemed so over (all that corporate-style modernism that certain museums still collect) and new possibilities were seen in a return to, or a reawakening of, a more personal kind of picture -- those earnest viewings we are often provided in the quieter galleries of many museums. The German neo-expressionists were very visible and, in their intensely gestural, figural realization of paint, they became one big hallmark of western culture's new look at painting. It was into this climate that Solien's work arrived, embedded in a personal, painterly fabric we could recognize, but offering something very different from the essentially redux presentations of the western canon we were then seeing in Euro-NY shows.

What Solien showed us was a more honest look at the autobiographical than modernism had allowed. As he has recently stated, "For the majority of the last 25 years, I have considered the function of painting as an autobiographical construct." And, "During this 25-year time frame I have attempted to invent a personal and idiosyncratic visual language in which consideration of both the history of Abstraction, and the traditions of Figural Painting are of equal and essential concern." When it first arrived, his work confirmed what I think many of us knew -- that an idiosyncratic vision does indeed have a subject life all to itself. It has an instinctual profile in its imagery more individually personal than either the contemporary art conversation or history. Solien's work demonstrated how emotionally charged the ineffable realizations of style, idiom, and idiosyncrasy itself could be. In an academic sense, we know that the language of form can be learned, and that content is as probable as thought itself, but the particular qualities of what poets call voice and the individual presence of any organism's character -- this, too, is at the center of what we

call “art.” It is “ineffable” because what we call “soul” (think: the blues) cannot be described.

Solien’s premises arise, broadly, from a dovetail of the modernist aesthetic and the idiosyncratic. It is one thing to experience the realization of a personal “voice” in the traditional theater of the western canon and another to realize that voice outside of the canon. Isn’t this really what we mean by the “idiosyncratic” -- that the form has become so personally contrived that the existing communal, visual language does not support it? His landmark paintings and prints described a new, more personal way for autobiographical sources like memory, heritage, and family to contribute to the originality of a vision.

As we now also know, his work was at the forefront of the avalanche of pop-cultural influences affecting artists that lay towards the “outside”: all of the self-taught and naïve visions that we now take for granted as legitimate sources and which, dare we say, have more importance to many artists working currently than the comparatively simple, modernist identity search in faux-existential laboratories. (Case in point, the inspiration and theme for this year’s international Venice Biennale is a work from the American Folk Art Museum’s collection – “The Encyclopedic Palace of the World,” by the self-taught artist Marino Auriti.) Most importantly, Solien’s work did not claim the same vantage point as the 1960’s pop artists who canonized and sold everything as they went along; his newer kind of pop-influenced image was local and ephemeral, in source and intent, without the corporate presence of the 1960’s and ‘70’s.

Where others had been harbingers of the outsiders – Vincent van Gogh, Henri Rousseau, Joan Miro, Evelyn Stattheimer, Jean DuBuffet, Jim Nutt, and Philip Guston – Solien was a precursor to others who were also ready to move ahead and regain some of the soul that had been lost to corporate modernism. His timing was perfect; the culture was ready to look beyond the existing canon.

No matter how self-determined they may be, most researchers find that fate often helps to complete their discoveries. Investigators roam around, often repeating themselves, until that one variable episode – the so-called “ah-hah” moment – occurs. Conversations with Solien have shown that he wasn’t really consciously thinking of pop culture sources as his iconography initially developed. He did not make the references at first; that is, there was no “strategy” on his part. It was only later that it became obvious to him that his sources were found somewhere beyond the learned image. His own training in canonical modernism was ambushed by a passionate body of autobiographic self-reference and idiosyncrasy.

Works in the present show, “the loneliest gods,” combine the virtuoso washes that have always been the “ground” in his work with isolated, repetitive cutouts. Since 2004, Solien’s work has included stencil-like, cutout and collaged icons that have permitted another layer to the strange surfaces he has always conjured. This feature of cut-paper first arose in his prints –the monotypes—in response, technically, to the problem of holding color clarity over already developed areas of the surface and, theoretically, asking the viewer to accept what he has called, “a clumsier theatricality in order to believe in the work’s subjective premise.” To paraphrase, an important side effect of the collaged areas appearing as stenciled territories of color clarity is that they achieved the same feeling of direct paint passages, while bringing the sense of an entirely different vocabulary to the image surface. The quirks of his brushwork were amplified when made with the scissors and an unusual crispness came to exist in his images, neither completely graphic nor completely painterly – that is, the “clumsy theatricality” he describes.

As if his image surfaces weren’t complex enough, this recent use of the cutout has amplified the sense of layered narratives that can seem both post-modern in their accumulation and totally seamless in the way that we expect The American Landscape to be. In a large, important, body of work from 2005-2008, based on Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick,” the cut-outs, still in service to the autobiographical constructs of Solien’s life, were hung on the broader narrative of the novel. The Moby Dick series took the epic, fictional descriptions and added a subtext of players more precisely generated as, he has said, “surrogates for the contemporary Self; the interrelated nature of ‘dream life’ and a fictional ‘condition’ based upon the confluence of multiple modes of representation.”

His current use of fictionally based narratives is more completely in place of the autobiographical earlier work and has brought a suggestive distance to the expectations of the told story. Solien’s examinations of his own life’s story have been expanded to include signature fictions that broaden the scope of the self-based narrative and suggest a historicity to both the story and the form. In works recently staged against the theme of “Westward Expansion,” there is a wrap-around effect wherein the ephemeral sources and products of the making are proposed as simulacra of the historical continuum. One thinks of a Mobius strip or a continuous, time-based video loop, in which premises become contradicted through the passage of the loop and the result is a (literally) twisted paradox, in his case, of both the pop ephemeral and the traditionally historic.

In his present show, Solien has extended his focus beyond the epic profiles of both autobiography and mythic narrative and the players are given much more specific identities as characters in themselves, beyond the metaphorical

references to the self. Images like "L'Etranger" and the wonderful series of jersey images, including "Horseman's Jersey," "Mechanic's Jersey," and "Stableman's Jersey," reflect a resolution in which found images create new characters for the play - instead of the story acting to realize the characters. "Widow's Lamb" is a slightly different, but important, inclusion in that it references the Picasso-like, self-portrait series Solien painted in the mid-1990's. This was prior to the cut outs/collages and "Widow's Lamb" suggestively pairs as subject some of the brushed surface from the earlier period with a technically more current use of cut outs.

The figurines in "the loneliest gods" are, perhaps, more indicative of his present, professed content and establish identities of characters which exist in sculptured "real time," susceptible to the wiles of the world - showing the apparent randomness of bruises and chips from the careless, and bird shit from feathered drones (see "Masked Love Bird"). For Solien, these figures exist in a "state of suspended animation" and they certainly look and feel like survivors from lost weekends, a tribe of zombies. He imagines these as having passed through the portal from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional - a one-way journey from the freer world he calls the "ambiguity of two dimensions."

Especially poignant and going beyond what his two-dimensional images conjure, are the strange, remote presences of "L'Etranger," "Reaper," "Widow," and (my favorite) "Tornado Girl." These are in collaboration with their own, thrift store beginnings, a land of lost resources that have provided such a strong well for Solien's extraction of the ephemeral.

Solien's interest in the importance of ambiguity, as described in the visually two-dimensional, is interesting in light of the larger existential questions his work addresses. The ambiguous nature of the pictorially illusionistic can be an artistic parallel to the anxiety many of us experience in a world culture that is increasingly binary, and where we sense that all things, meaningful and quotidian, are becoming digitalized. The accompanying loss of the freedom to say, "maybe," or "let me think on that and I'll get back to you," is illustrated by the "yes" and "no" formats we experience every day. Solien's figurines especially, as survivors from their two-dimensional, ambiguous world, portray an isolation and loss of community; this is an estrangement acted out, in their "state of suspended animation," on his "austere landscape." These are zombie-wanderers in ambiguity, lost in an Orwellian world.

T. L. Solien's themes may always include the big, "humanly eternal" problems of isolation, deserted landscapes and death. But one wonders, why is everyone so vulnerable? Are the "invisible agents" that he so often references, actually guardian angels? And, most important, how can it be that no one has

an interior, non-“interactive,” life anymore?

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