T.L Solien’s exhibition, *Cemetery Stack*, continues the artist’s ongoing practice of trying to make sense of his life through painting. This exploration revolves around (but is certainly not limited to) autobiographical issues: probing familial relations, understanding social experiences, and examining his place in the world. These decadent paintings present themselves to the viewer with peculiar and sometimes vicious concoctions of images executed in a variety of styles. The strangely personal images make the viewer privy to a highly individualized struggle fought on several fronts: the artist wrestles with the physical considerations involved in constructing a painting, while grappling with the way in which the images interact with one another inside this brutal landscape. Each piece is built with a fresh, youthful sense of experimentation and improvisation tempered by the quiet ruminations of a skilled painter.

Solien’s paintings show the countless hours of starting and restarting, covering and revealing, hesitancy and assuredness. Employing a vast assortment of visual sources, the artist establishes a sense of non-linear time by simultaneously referencing dozens of different eras of image origins and paint handling styles. One sees awkward, urgent juxtapositions depicted with an almost encyclopedic understanding of the way in which paint works. The variety of parts harvested from the artist’s personal collection of images can be staggering and keeps the viewer on his toes. A graphic, flatly presented baby carriage sun shade carries with it a very different read than a dissolving, washy pile of books, as does a Disney inspired constellation of Bambi eyes or the gooey, shiny stack of pancakes. The way the images come into and out of focus, gelling and solidifying, gives the viewer the sense that not only has something happened, but something *is* happening now and will continue to transform.

The layers of the painting’s surface show the lengthy process (months or years) that went into carefully stacking and restacking the bundles of images. These layers are separated, bound, and draped in thick washes of resin and pigment that create a seductive / repulsive atmosphere that recalls old master varnishing techniques by bathing
the painting in what could be mistaken for a grotesque roux of butter and bile. The richness in Solien’s painting surface hooks the viewer and holds him in place long enough for the iconography to begin to unravel and unfold.

The place where the parts arrive in the artist’s landscape is as particular to the objects as their physical and visual condition. Solien doesn’t approach his paintings with a preset plan, or any real understanding of what the story is or how he wants it to unfold. Rather, for both the artist and the viewer the journey becomes about the struggle that arises from that lack of understanding. It is the leap between this thing and that thing, the gaps between his impossible narrative’s disparate parts, that give these paintings their juice. Solien has thoughtfully developed a kinetic structure that exists long after the pieces have left the studio. The visual icons and cues lead the viewer on a different route through his psychological thicket with each painting. One bounces around in the compositions, led this way and that by the artist’s “subtle geography of images.”1 In Night Rider the scene is laid out as if on a stage. We slide from the bald, bucktoothed bunny via the stylized suggestion of a tree, wriggle through the stack of drippy books, are patted clean by the cheap hotel towel, hop back around the frame again by means of a series of simplified window forms to an illustration of a baby carriage (under which sits a set of bared cartoon teeth), bounce off the googly eyes like a pinball through the murky center, and finally rest on the thickly painted, red and white ball of yarn near the middle of the painting. While making our way through that wonderful, terrible storm we are not simply bearing witness to, but are generously given the room to add our own voices to the awesome transformation.

Hamlett Dobbins, Director

1 from a conversation with the artist.
Wafarers, 32” x 40”, mixed media on paper, image courtesy Luise Ross Gallery, New York

Cover: Night Rider, 60” x 72”, oil on canvas, image courtesy the artist, Luise Ross Gallery, New York and Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee

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