

Dueling exhibits dive into darkness

Solien, Nordqvist works on display at Folliard Gallery

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The ruins of time and domesticated dreams currently greet visitors to the Tory Folliard Gallery. T.L. Solien and Erika Nordqvist straddle autobiographical narrative and novelistic fantasy in their concurrent solo exhibits.

Like Bob Dylan's grimy epic "Desolation Row," or the gothic stories of Flannery O'Connor, Solien's paintings carry a humorous, tragic mystery. Nordqvist, in turn, creates airy, anxious drawings of cloudy non-events, figures betraying sidelong glances and a thoughtful inwardness.

"The Foreseeable Past" examines Solien's themes of doomed pilgrimages and dark deeds with considerable power. His protagonists are worn and weary toys, ornaments and cartoon characters. Their bleak and ruined bodies gesture and flail for meaning and enlightenment that evades them. The artist poses them in compositions derived from the Old Masters and invents new narratives. His title suggests a world view we can see mirrored within the paintings.

The annunciation of the Virgin Mary is a biblical theme painted by Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli and many others. Its composition has been codified and repeated. It shows the angel Gabriel gesturing toward Mary, the young woman bowing in supplication or swooning in fear. The balletic rendition ascribed to the workshop of Paolo Veronese appears to be referenced within Solien's inverted interpretation entitled "The Renunciation II."

In it we see not a heavenly messenger, but a dirty clown/angel doing somersaults in a moronic courtship. Tiny black wings flap impotently as the clown, clad in a tunic of Mondrianic abstraction, rolls and tumbles about the seated figure of Mary. She, in turn, does not look well. Slumped over with stitches and Xs for eyes, Mary appears to be asleep, dead or just too stoned to care. Her blue lips, hoisted guitar and red dress point to a wayfarer's life on the road, of one too many mornings. At her side, a peppy dog benignly smiles away, and perfectly echoes the small Spaniel that appears in Veronese's version.

The character of Casanova appears prominently in Solien's work as a dreary doppelgänger doll with a bilious red face and pith helmet. In a tightly packed vignette, the doll bleats "Casanova?," in a word bubble toward a shapely, anthropomorphic flower vase. The vase in turn addresses a jutting and phallic red skyscraper with the declaration



T.L. SOLIEN

T.L. Solien's painting "The Renunciation II" is on display at Tory Folliard Gallery. It touches on the annunciation of the Virgin Mary.

"Casanova." The scene is worthy of a bathroom scrawl, but retains sophisticated formal command and vision. I was entranced with this seeming paradox again and again. As the character of the courting figure is repeated, it begins to describe an allegory of the artist and art itself.

The power of T.L. Solien's work stems from his ability to meld narrative, surface and mood. Solien scratches, layers and spray paints on his work. This accumulation gives the paintings a cruddy, antiqued quality, as if they were found in an old barn. They feel like the antique toys and baubles that he employs as subjects. His additional layering of art historical reference and storytelling make the paintings cohere into lyrical gestalt. Philip Guston and Dana Schutz on a good day are among Solien's milieu.

In an adjoining gallery, whimsical and poignant drawings by Erika Nordqvist utilize the human figure in magical realist vignettes in her exhibit "Bye Bye Dirt, Bye Bye Worry."

Domesticity, folk art and fable combine in these drawings to create psychologically charged near-dramas. I say that because Nordqvist's scenes seem to take place between events, seemingly just before or after something will happen. A young woman seems about to cut a lock of her own hair while another girl, in glasses and wolf sweatshirt, quietly watches and unbuttons

her pants. A large TV dominates the composition but is turned off. A drawer full of folded clothes sits on the floor, along with a sculpture of a girl riding a horse. The scene remains inscrutable, as are the stoic attitudes of the two women. The narrative seems mundane and charged all at once.

Animals move in and out of Nordqvist's work. They appear as pets, toys, on clothing and in the imagined world. Five adolescents ride sawhorses rigged up with English saddles. They appear to be bored with this play-acting, leaning on elbows or gazing distractedly out at the viewer. Portraits of people with tiger heads are displayed on the wall.

The drawings are timorous and questing. They seem indeterminate and scratchy, echoing the averted glances and unsettled actions of the figures themselves. In elemental graphite and watercolor, they are humble and very beautiful. Nordqvist's work is established within a contemporary canon of Swedish artists including Mamma Andersson and Jockum Nordström.

"T.L. Solien: The Foreseeable Past" and "Erika Nordqvist: Bye Bye Dirt, Bye Bye Worry" are on view through May 27 at Tory Folliard Gallery, 233 N. Milwaukee St. For information visit toryfolliard.com.

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ERIKA NORDQVIST

Erika Nordqvist's mixed-media work "Speed Danger Death I" is on display at an adjoining gallery at the Tory Folliard Gallery.