



Federico Solmi
The Bacchanalian Ones

ON THE COVER

The Bathhouse, 2020 (detail)

Acrylic paint, mixed media, gold and silver leaf on Plexiglass,
LED screens, video loop min (9:46 sec), 72 x 240 x 5 inches.

Original music by KwangHoon Han

ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY

Introduction

Using game engines, digital animation, motion capture, virtual and augmented reality combined with his drawings and paintings, Solmi creates satirical and clownish portrayals of political leaders, colonial rulers and explorers absorbed in extravagant and deranged parties; pompous, imperious parades; and theatrical and contrived events.

Visually stunning, the theatricality of the work is enhanced by Solmi's dynamic style of animation and video production. This is expressed in the inclusion of 3-D digitally printed, artist painted masks designed for the Oculus Go VR headset. Working collaboratively with George Lecakes, Director of the Rowan VR Center and with the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, the masks are sculptural representations of Solmi's animated characters of George Washington and Empress Hagios Theodora. The performative element to the exhibition is complete as viewers of the VR experience creak and sway mimicking how the very same characters move in the video installations.

Inspired by ancient mythology, modern myth, and contemporary celebrity culture, Solmi has blended together historical characters, and depicts them as ghoulish, self-indulgent, degenerate devotees of the cults of Bacchus and Dionysus concerned only with their own power and influence. Through the absurd behavior of the characters in his animations and virtual experiences, Solmi asks us to question their relevance and the distorted historical narrative that has led to an era of misinformation, corruption, and hypocrisy.

Mary Salvante

Curator, Rowan University Art Gallery Director

Federico Solmi

The Bacchanalian Ones

Presented by Rowan University Art Gallery

November 2, 2020 – January 16, 2021

Federico Solmi's March of Folly

Eleanor Heartney

"The trappings and impact of power deceive us, endowing the possessors with a quality larger than life. Shorn of his tremendous curled peruke, high heels and ermine, the Sun King was a man subject to misjudgment, error and impulse – like you and me."

– Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

Today questions about the nature of history are threatening to tear the polity apart. Angry dissenters unceremoniously topple statues of once revered figures, from Robert E. Lee and Christopher Columbus to Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Once settled "truths" are thrown into question. One side sees the Founding Fathers as the brilliant architects of a brilliant Constitution while another regards them as hypocritical slaveholders whose allegiance to the notion that "all men are created equal" did not extend to their own property. Debate rages over whether the second Monday in October should be celebrated as Columbus Day or Indigenous People's Day. Historians argue about whether the country was born in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration of Independence or in 1619 when the first African slaves were brought to our shores.

Is history a record of the triumphs of the winners? Is it a mirror of contemporary passions gussied up with period costumes? Is it an instrument of

societal self-flattery? Is it a weapon to be hurled against one's adversaries? Or is it, in Barbara Tuchman's memorable phrase, just an unending "March of Folly" perpetrated by individuals and groups who ought to have known better but didn't?

Our difficulties in resolving these questions stem from the slippery nature of history itself. History, at least as it is invoked in our political discourse, often appears as little more than a collection of myths about who we want to think we are. History, in the more factual sense, reveals less edifying aspects of the story invoked in Fourth of July celebrations. Often it is difficult to reconcile the two. George Washington, the Father of our Country, was known among Native Americans as The Town Destroyer. Forty-one of the original fifty-six signatories of the Declaration of Independence owned slaves. American Exceptionalism is an ideology that has blinded us to the consequences of expansionism, economic exploitation, and destruction of the environment.

These contradictions could form the basis of a dark account of betrayed ideals and lost illusions. Or they could inspire satire and comedy. Federico Solmi has chosen the second path, using humor and absurdity to illuminate the human frailties that have produced this March of Folly. Inspired by his status as an Italian immigrant to the United States, he has taken a deep dive into the

checkered histories of his adopted country and of the larger world. This has yielded a series of still and kinetic works that combine drawing and painting with the visual techniques of video games, 3D animation and virtual reality to bridge the gap between the history we think we know and a fantasy world where humankind's worst impulses are on full display.

Solmi's works focus on characters consumed by lust, power and greed. His scenarios are full of excess and take place in such spectacular settings as tickertape parades, military drills, red carpet galas, Papal ceremonies and carnivals. In some works he presents figures several removes from reality. His characters include, for instance, an enthusiastically deceitful Bernie Madoff-type banker named Dick Richman, a future Pope whose sexual obsessions land him in hell, and a 21st century Chinese dictator who takes over the world and brings on Armageddon. Other works offer lurching, maniacally grinning cartoon versions of actual historical figures. These run the gamut from Pharaoh Ramesses II to Donald Trump. Some recent works present assemblies of iconic individuals who have crossed time and space to preen, party and wallow in fame together.

Solmi's recurring themes are the corrupting effects of the quest for power and the disastrous consequences of the mass media's ability to

manipulate popular sentiment through appeals to our worst instincts. His works spare no one. Infamous historical tyrants and despots like Genghis Khan and Benito Mussolini, more ambiguous figures like Napoleon Bonaparte and Montezuma and generally lauded heroes like George Washington and Socrates join in raucous spectacles of debauchery, greed, and megalomania. Nor does he absolve us, his audience. The sound of roaring crowds accompanying his videos also indict a populace immersed in celebrity worship and consumed with politics as entertainment.

This show presents a selection of recent works. Shown here for the first time is *The Bathhouse*, a five channel video installation that offers an immersive introduction to Solmi's dystopian universe. The setting, an elegant villa connected to a Roman Bathhouse, conjures the decadent lifestyles of the aristocracy in the late Roman Empire. The opening scene is inspired by the operatic performances of Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini. An orchestra, its musicians outfitted in Roman togas, produces swelling music for an audience of history's most famous and infamous characters. Empress Hagios Theodora, Hernan Cortes, Benjamin Franklin and others march down a red carpet wearing sunglasses like modern day film stars. Classically clad servers ply them with drink and food. As they become increasingly inebriated, some

guests slosh about in the crystal blue waters of the bath. Conquistadors, Revolutionary War heroes, Renaissance cardinals and Native American chieftains splash about. Other guests dance orgiastically around a platter bearing a giant boar stuffed with apples. The great heroes of history gorge themselves, collapse in drunken stupors and otherwise abandon all inhibitions as scantily clad rope dancers in butterfly costumes float above the scene.

With its fantastically opulent setting and unrestrained hedonism, *The Bathhouse* emphasizes leaders' insularity, self-indulgence and insouciance in a world otherwise dominated by yawning inequality. In a similar vein, *The Indulgent Fathers* is a video painting that shows the Founding Fathers abandoning the straight-laced deportment familiar from high school history books. Instead they careen like drunken sailors in pleasure boats outfitted with bands and lavish banquets. While this work points to the dangers of an uncritical Patriotism, *The Great Debauchery* evokes the unholy alliance of militarism and jingoism. This monumental painting sets George Washington, Christopher Columbus, Benito Mussolini, Napoleon, and Hernan Cortez prancing on horseback at the head of a military parade before a backdrop of rippling American flags. Several paintings present famous historical figures as celebrities preening for Fox News. *The Mastermind* is quasi-history textbook in which the conventional story of

America's discovery and settlement becomes an account of the ruthless theft of the land from its original inhabitants. The exhibition also creates a Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality experience, that combines old and new technology. When viewers look through what appears to be a 19th century camera, they are immersed in sounds and colors as the characters in *The Great Debauchery* come to life.

Solmi's themes are well suited to the conventions of his pop culture sources. We, as omniscient viewers, seem to weave in and out of grandiose settings as if careening through virtual space via a joystick. The flashy graphics, cartoonish avatars and deliberately awkward gestures produce characters who are puppet-like mannequins enslaved to their basest desires. Meanwhile the videos are presented as repetitive loops that evoke their protagonists' unbreakable patterns of bad behavior.

But Solmi also draws on the much older tradition of history painting – that now largely discarded genre that dominated the Parisian Salons of the 18th and 19th century. History paintings presented dramatic tableaux depicting stories from classical history, mythology or the Bible and were often meant to be read as allegories for contemporary concerns. In some cases they took up contemporary events directly, romanticizing military adventures or heroicizing political figures

and events. Often they constituted a form of political propaganda.

Solmi updates this concept using 21st century technology to transform sermonizing history lessons into farce. *The Bathhouse*, for instance carries a whiff of the wanton dissolution portrayed in *The Romans in their Decadence*, Thomas Couture's 1847 allegorical indictment of France's post-revolutionary July Monarchy. *The Indulgent Fathers* grafts Théodore Gericault's 1818 *The Raft of the Medusa* onto Emanuel Leutze's 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, creating a comic spectacle in which melodrama and hero-worship devolve into an ignominious charade. In playing fast and loose with the history painting tradition, Solmi joins a handful of other contemporary artists, among them Peter Saul, Robert Colescott and Kent Monkman, who also employ satire and outrageous stereotypes to present counter versions of beloved historical myths.

The melee of our recent Presidential campaign suggests that reality has caught up with Solmi. In the light of the swirling morass of "fake news", social media disinformation and embrace of the cult of personality, his satirical scenarios seem less and less outrageous. Fact and fiction have never seemed so indistinguishable. But if these works reflect our moment, they also raise an important question. What does it mean to be an

American? Solmi's work suggests a nuanced answer. His unheroic heroes have feet of clay. They are indeed like us in all their failings. He refuses to deny the follies of our precursors and to whitewash the darker aspects of our history. Such, one senses, would be a disservice to the nation's aspirational ideals. Instead, Solmi suggests that we can't move forward toward genuine liberty, equality, and democracy until we acknowledge how much these lofty ideas have been sabotaged by greed, fear and desire. In the end, to be American, in Solmi's universe, is to strive to do better.



World leaders have gathered in the luxury of a Roman-villa themed mansion for an extravagant gala to celebrate their enduring glory. Pompously dressed in silks and armors, the royal guests are welcomed with bottles of champagne and martinis cocktails as they file into a space adorned with antique sculptures and mosaics

as well as the finest examples of the contemporary art world. They swagger through the villa, as glamorous as the greatest pop-icons, decked out in riches toasting to the night, wetting the marble floors with spilled champagne. As the night progresses, every minute of spectacle is accurately planned

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We greatly appreciate the assistance and contributions to this project by Dr. Shreekanth Mandayam, Professor, Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering, and George Lecakes, Director of the Rowan VR Center for his consult on the VR, the loan of Oculus headsets, and design refinement and digital printing of the 3-D VR headset masks.

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This project is a Rowan University Art Gallery production, curated by Mary Salvante, Gallery Director.



and has been recorded by ever-present cameras for more momentous archives of history. Once the orchestra starts to play, filling the bathhouse with music, the guests dance together, immersed in an ambiance of Bacchanalian pleasure. Leaders become children at play; they are now enjoying splashing water at each other and

engaging in simulated war games. The night event is an escalation of celebratory spectacle. From a live orchestra, to circus performances, the high profile guests are immersed in a lavish party customized for their everlasting pleasure.

— Federico Solmi

The Bathhouse, 2020

Acrylic paint, mixed media, gold and silver leaf on Plexiglass,
LED screens, video loop min (9:46 sec), 72 x 240 x 5 inches.
Original music by KwangHoon Han

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles









The Bathhouse, 2020 (details)

Acrylic paint, mixed media, gold and silver leaf on Plexiglass,
LED screens, video loop min (9:46 sec), 72 x 240 x 5 inches.

Original music by KwangHoon Han

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles



The Great Debauchery, 2019

Acrylic paint, gold and silver leaf, pen and ink,
mixed media on 3 wood panels with shaped wood relief.
72 x 240 x 3 inches

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles



In the scale and splendor of American and European history painting, *The Great Debauchery* both pays homage and satirically pokes fun at what now has become a stoic display of famous and infamous historical figures on horseback, while American flags completely engulf the space around them. The rush of

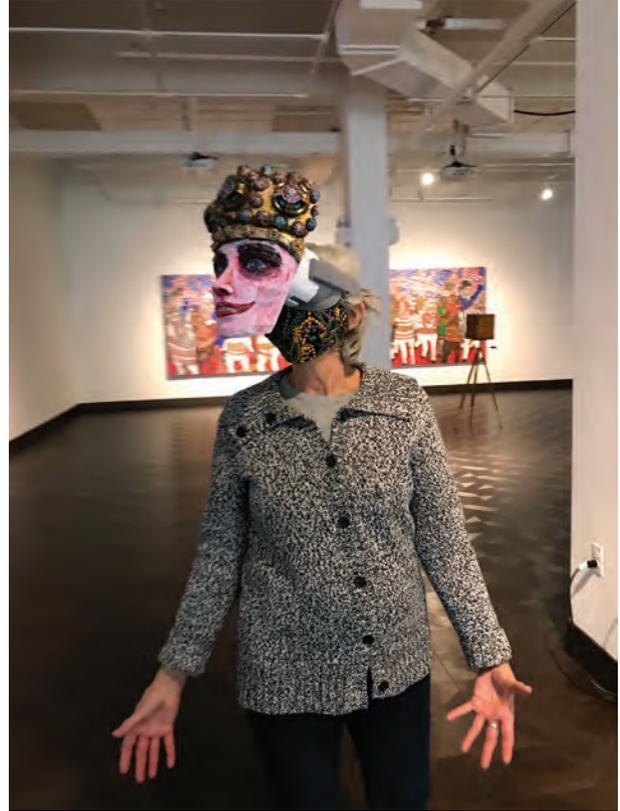
figures and horses with their facial grimaces and wily, sharpened teeth are aggressively compressed onto the foreground of the picture plane. With this frightening and terrifying, quasi-comical cavalcade, we are reminded that history is not always glorious, dignified, nor chivalrous as one might think.



The Jubilant Tricksters, 2020

AR Experience, XIX Century camera replica, I PAD

This replica of a 19th century camera houses the Augmented Reality viewing experience of *The Great Debauchery*. Triggered by the painting, the AR imagery emerges as active 3D interpretations of the figurative subjects depicted in the painting.



The Dreadful Ones, 2017

VR Experience, Hand Painted 3D Printed Masks
VR set Oculus Go

Beloved and despised leaders throughout history accompany President Donald Trump on an exorbitantly patriotic and carnival-esque limousine parade to his inaugural ball at the White House. General Robert E. Lee and Benito Mussolini sit on either side of President Trump, gently waving to the adoring masses and smoking cigars. The President leads his conspirators through a waiting pool of paparazzi and into the White House, where an enormous presidential portrait greets them. The leaders then follow Trump into a ballroom, where they take turns dancing with each leader on top of the presidential seal.



Hand Painted 3D Printed Masks, 2020

Empress Hagios Theodora (left)

George Washington (right)

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles





The Indulgent Fathers, 2019

Acrylic paint, mixed media on Plexiglass, LED screen, video loop (min 3:51, sec), 48 x 72 x 5 inches.

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

Lost on the open seas, a band of characters reminiscent of pilgrims and founding fathers, have descended into a bizarre display of bacchanalian behavior, entertained by eccentric musicians and dancers. These iconic figures blatantly contradict their own statuses as the incorruptible nation-builders known to us in the textbooks.



The Mastermind, 2018

Inside spread

One of a kind book, made and bound by hand.
Acrylic paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, mixed media on
tarlatan, paper and foam core.

24 x 18 x 2 inches (closed); 24 x 36 inches, (open
painting spread)

6 bound paintings

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

A quasi-history textbook in which the
conventional story of America's discovery and
settlement becomes an account of the ruthless
theft of the land from its original inhabitants.





The Kindhearted Demagogues, 2020 (top left)

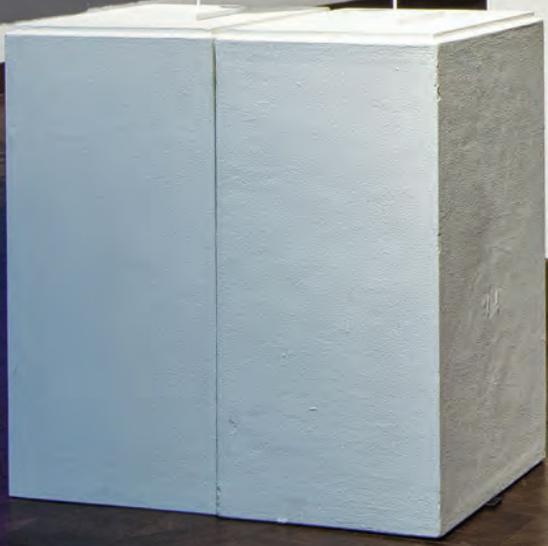
The Amiable Deceivers, 2020 (bottom left)

The Affectionate Charlatans, 2020 (top)

Acrylic paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, pen and ink, and mixed media on wood panel with shaped wood relief.

Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

Assembled together for a press conference in a lush, tropical setting, the world's most infamous idols, politicians, and conquistadors have taken the stage to announce their own historical legacies. Triumphant, they stand before us, presented more like A-list celebrities than the honorable leaders they are otherwise believed to be.





Artist Statement

Federico Solmi

Solmi says of his work, "I always believed that art can be used as an effective tool for social change. Art for me it's a vehicle to fight injustices, a tool to spread awareness and independent thinking. With my artworks, I hope to inspire people to discover facts, to try to decode reality from fiction, historical truth from propaganda. One of the greatest difficulties I encountered when I moved to the United States in 1999, was to decipher American history, its contradictions, and inaccuracies that I often encountered in my research and reflections. I had a lot of trouble distinguishing the reality of historical facts, unequivocal, from the government propaganda told in the books. I strongly believed that only if I had been able to understand the origins of this nation, in its roots, would I one day understand the society in which I had chosen to live, and only thus one day, would I have been able to have my say."



Artist Biography

Federico Solmi

Federico Solmi (Italy, 1973) currently lives and works in New York.

Solmi's work utilizes bright colors and a satirical aesthetic to portray a dystopian vision of our present-day society. His exhibitions often feature articulate installations composed of a variety of media including video, painting, drawing, and sculpture. Solmi uses his art as a vehicle to stimulate a visceral conversation with his audience, highlighting the contradictions and fallibility that characterize our time. Through his work, Solmi examines unconscious human impulses and desires in order to critique Western society's obsession with individual success and display contemporary relationships between nationalism, colonialism, religion, consumerism. By re-configuring historical narratives across eras, he creates social and political commentary works which disrupt the mythologies that define American society. Scanning his paintings into a game engine, Solmi's videos confront the audience with his own absurd rewriting of past and present, merging dark humor and sense of the grotesque with new technologies. He creates a carnivalesque virtual reality where our leaders become puppets, animated by computer script and motion capture performance rather than string.

In 2009, Solmi was awarded by the Guggenheim Foundation of New York with the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in the category of Video & Audio. His work has been included in several international Biennials, including: Open Spaces: A Kansas City Arts Experience (2018), the Beijing Media Art Biennale (2016), Frankfurt B3 Biennial of the Moving image (2017-2015), the First Shenzhen Animation Biennial in China (2013), the 54th Venice Biennial (2011), and the SITE Santa Fe Biennial in New Mexico (2010).

Solmi has several forthcoming museum solo exhibitions, including; The Block Museum of Northwestern University (2021), Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson Arizona (2021), and group exhibition at Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC. Most recently, Solmi's work was featured in Times Square New York for the Midnight moment and in a solo exhibition in the Ronald Feldman Gallery booth at the 2019 Armory Show (NY).

About the Author

Eleanor Heartney



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Eleanor Heartney is a Contributing Editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and author of numerous books and articles on contemporary art including "Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads", 1997, "Postmodernism" 2001 "Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art" 2004, "Art and Today", 2008 and *Doomsday Dreams: the Apocalyptic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, 2019. She is a co-author of "After the Revolution: Women who Transformed Contemporary Art", 2007 and "The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium", 2013. She received the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism in 1992 and was honored by the French government as a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2008. Heartney is a past President of AICA-USA, the American section of the International Art Critics Association.



Exhibition Checklist

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6 bound paintings

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72 x 240 x 3 inches (6 x 20 feet)

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VR Experience, Hand Painted 3D printed masks, VR set Oculus Go

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Acrylic paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, pen and ink, and mixed media on wood panel with shaped wood relief,
36 x 60 x 3 inches

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Acrylic paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, pen and ink, and mixed media on wood panel with shaped wood relief
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Rowan University Art Gallery

Where the University Meets the Community

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a premier cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and the surrounding region. We provide a platform for discourse on best practices in contemporary art by professional artists, curators, and scholars through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, panel discussions, guest curatorial projects, and other public programming. We are committed to cultivating an inclusive environment that encourages a dialogue between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, the general public, and other cultural institutions. Our goal is to offer visitors an enriching cultural experience and function as a resource for contemporary art throughout the region.

Acknowledgments

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Shen Staley Shellenberger
Tyler Kline
and Rowan Students



ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY

