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Matt Bollinger, Painter of the Forgotten

By dealing with class in his art, Bollinger touches on the strain infecting the current “us and them” situation in the United States.



John Yau



Matt Bollinger, “Uncle Dave” (2023), flashe and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 78 inches (courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery, photo Dario Lasagni)

In 2021, when I reviewed the exhibition *Matt Bollinger: Furlough* at Zürcher Gallery, I concluded with this:

Bollinger is a major artist whose chronicling of a substantial sector of American life is more than a commentary on the failures of capitalism. It is a heartfelt and thoughtful response to a demographic trapped in a cycle of comfortless options.

While Bollinger has not extended the geographic parameters of his subject matter, his memories and views of Independence, Kansas, he has strengthened and deepened it in this small, beautiful, melancholic exhibition, *Matt Bollinger: Station* at François Ghebaly (April 22–May 27, 2023). The exhibition includes six recent paintings and “Between the Days,” an 18-minute hand-painted stop-motion animation dated 2017, which is well worth seeing in its entirety — Bollinger’s animations are as strong and compelling as his paintings.

Bollinger works in flashe and acrylic on canvas, giving his paintings a matte surface. Located in the front gallery, they range in size from 20 by 16 to 96 by 78 inches. He seems to be able to work in a range of sizes without diminishing the power of his images. “Uncle Dave” (2023), the show’s largest painting, depicts three sanitation workers on the job. Together, they form a triangle, set against a yellow truck with an open door. The apex of the triangle is occupied by the largest, and oldest, figure, flanked on either side by a younger man smoking a cigarette.

None of the artist’s figures come close to fitting the ideals of physical beauty upheld by Hollywood, fashion designers, or fitness and beauty magazines. In contrast to Claude Monet and other Impressionists, who

focused on leisure time, which was a new phenomenon in mid-19th-century France, Bollinger recognizes how the desire for cheap labor and profit has degraded that possibility. Staring blankly as they perform the necessary duties of an unfulfilling job, the men and women in his paintings are afflicted by an unnamable malaise. They know that what they are doing is fruitless.

In the two largest works — both of which belong in museums — Bollinger uses color to structure the painting and inflect the mood in ways that set him apart from his contemporaries and historical precedents, such as Edward Hopper. As carefully choreographed as “Uncle Dave” is, it never feels still because of the role color plays in unifying and distinguishing the figures. Holding a rake in one hand and an unlit cigarette in the other, the young man on the right stares vacantly at the man opposite him. Dressed in the brightest yellow of this very yellow painting, he is the only figure of the three not looking at the viewer. The older man climbing into the truck is also looking at us. The tonal shifts in the yellow help hold the painting together, and add another emotional dimension.



Installation view of Matt Bollinger: Station at François Ghebaly Gallery, New York. Pictured: “Between the Days” (2017), hand-painted stop motion animation, 18 min. (courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery, photo Charles Benton)

The two men looking at the viewer touch on the strain infecting the current “us and them” situation in the United States. That encounter between the subject and viewer, which is central to modern painting, beginning with Edouard Manet’s “Olympia” (1863) and the prostitute staring haughtily at the viewer, is very different from the voyeuristic viewpoint taken by Hopper and continued by artists such as Eric Fischl. Being a voyeur allows the viewer to feel superior, a position Bollinger constantly pushes against in his work. While the young man with the rake is wearing a bright, clean uniform, the yellow truck behind him is dirty. Can the majority white-collar audience of art galleries, many of whom are also wealthy, see him as separate from his job? Are the only true assessments of an individual those that have to do with appearance, power, and material wealth? Can this audience bring trash collectors into their homes and museums? These are the questions Bollinger asks.

Bollinger touches more directly on the futility of labor in a mechanized world in “Cold Drinks” (2023), which juxtaposes a young man selling soft drinks from a cooler next to a “Pepsi” vending machine. Both the vending machine and young man are bathed in different shades of turquoise and blue, which bonds them. A pair of hands extends in from the painting’s right edge, offering money to the young man for a drink. He does not seem to notice and, on some level, appears stiff and hollow-eyed, like the vending machine.

I found something interesting, engaging, and challenging about every painting in the exhibition. In different ways, they circle topics such as waste, recycling, and labor, but they do more than comment on them. Like Kerry James Marshall, Jordan Casteel, and Aliza Nisenbaum, Bollinger deals with the unseen and overlooked. One difference is that he reveals his subjects’ joylessness — something that you will not find in the work of the other three artists. Bollinger has his finger on the pulse of something that is disquieting: the simmering discontent of a wide swath of the US population. Another difference is that he deals with class, which few in the art world address. His subject is the White working class that our celebrity-obsessed art world has largely forgotten or denigrates. I find it interesting that Bollinger is the only one of the artists I mentioned who has never had a museum show in New York.