

Daniel Gauss, *Matt Bollinger*, Wall Street International, 23 July 2020

Wall Street International

Matt Bollinger

Zürcher Gallery, Manhattan

23 JULY 2020, DANIEL GAUSS



Entertainment Center, Flashe and acrylic on canvas, diptych, 78 x 62”
each; 78 x 124” overall, detail 2020

Matt Bollinger has been painting white, lower-middle class folks who often look so forlorn that one has to wonder what has shattered their contentment. The ambiguity of their desolation seems a key to interpreting his recent paintings and the animated features derived from them. Is he showing his characters in transitory states of despair inherent in their unstable lives? Is this a long-term malaise among this class? Do these folks feel trapped and hopeless? Do they feel under siege due to a changing America and populist calls for action? Some of these folks seem to be what British sociologist Anthony Giddens called the white-collar working class. Factory jobs have gone overseas so one now works at Walmart or does lawn care or works at the liquor store or CVS or some little office doing clerical work behind a computer screen. Factory guys often took pride in their work, and their unions, and this was a validation of their manhood (Lewis Hine, for example, seemed to argue this in his photos of working-class men). What is now left for these guys whose wives may be holding more stable and lucrative jobs?

To me, however, in his paintings, Bollinger presents these folks in what look like moments of epiphany, self-reflection and/or the horror of facing denial, white fragility and whatever else that might constitute limits to their consciousness and development. Like glimpses of an individual who begins to realize something might be wrong, because things just do not feel right... with his life, those around him... what he was taught to like, how he was taught to act and respond to others. Like the way artists in Gandhara once created sculptures of emaciated Buddhas reflecting the exact moment of his enlightenment. If Bollinger is presenting a possible epiphany for this class, there is an epiphany for all classes as every social class has its own forms of denial and dark secrets. The white, upper-middle class guy who competes and pursues his own excellence and affluence to the neglect of the plight of the disadvantaged, but who can quickly use “systemic racism” in a sentence, and give lip service to social justice, is living in a state of denial as well, perhaps even more toxic socially.

The horror might come from the fact that even if you realize what you have become, you have missed the starting point for a new life. There is something better out there, but you are not going to get to it for lack of money, social skills, connections, education and/or a myriad of other factors. In the animated vignettes you often see references to light sources or flashes of light in ordinary daily situations as if these are little moments of transformative light inviting self-realization. The flashes occur but there is no transformation. The flash can come from lighting a weed pipe, using a microwave oven or the sun itself, to no consequence.

Bollinger works on each canvas, making numerous changes to it while using stop-motion techniques to get his animated features. He then completes each canvas independently of the animation. So his narrative is based on the meaningful moments of his characters in the paintings. Each static image possesses such potential energy, however, that it becomes dynamic and morphs into an aspect of an overarching story. But we do not necessarily get answers from the animation. The answers that we get from the paintings may be misleading since it looks as if there is self-reflection and horror in these individual stills, but these folks do not change. In the animation, a disaster or something mournful has seemingly occurred before the story and colors everything that happens or does not happen. The paintings tell of possible epiphanies, the animation shows lassitude.

In his latest work, the *Holmes trilogy*, which Bollinger currently has on his website, a real disaster binds and underlies the stories of the folks of the fictional town of Holmes, Missouri, near the Lake of the Ozarks. There has been a school shooting that morning in the community. A woman drinks a cup of coffee in her kitchen, steam rising from the cup, listening to her classic rock radio station. Soon she is at Walmart stacking goods. The Walmart logo looks like an ideogram for the sun. She watches one of the many TVs in the electronics department without changing the expression on her face of surrender and powerlessness. We see on TV it is 68 degrees in Holmes, the icon of the sun next to the temperature looks like the Walmart logo.

We see Kyle light his bowl, smoke rising, getting high before doing his lawn care job. Heavy metal music blasts through his earphones. The sun glares, he pauses stupefied after ruining somebody's lawn. We see his mother Candy, morbidly obese, wearing a Tasmanian Devil tee shirt, connected to an oxygen tank while scanning through the channels of her TV. In between the documentary on bobcats and a cop show she pauses briefly to take in the news of the shooting. She becomes engrossed in the cop show, lies down and goes to sleep. It has become windy as Eric drops by a Quik Stop to get a soda and microwaveable sandwich before heading to his job at the liquor store. He sees news of the shooting and continually calls his sister, who works part-time at the school, only reaching her voicemail.

Helpless, apathetic, horrified and stoned, these responses bear a direct relationship to the shooting as the implication is that there is a meaningful engagement missing in our communities and society. There is no common value system demanding that each of us continually strive for something better in and for ourselves. The shared values we have had, perhaps, were corrosive influences. The fact that the Coronavirus is running rampant through vast swaths of this country and we watch helplessly on TV, as things get worse each day, bears this out. That we had one of the most overt acts of police violence, after numerous previous overt acts had been protested against, also bears this out. We are not reaching each other, we are not challenging each other, we are not living for each other. What we see in Bollinger's fictional towns is what is literally destroying our country.

I think Bollinger's success is due to how deftly he walks the line between demonizing and romanticizing people who are often perceived (rightly or wrongly) as supporters of divisive right-wing politics and causes. He is looking at the social class from which he came with the perspective of a person who was able to escape it, but who is still haunted by aspects of it. The characters in Bollinger's version of Winesburg, Ohio or Spoon River clearly feel something is missing from their lives, but it is missing from America too.

As a side note: I saw Bollinger's work at the Armory Show in New York City in March and never stopped thinking about it. Both Matt and the Zürcher Gallery were kind enough to share some of Matt's recent work with me for this article. His Holmes paintings and animation will comprise, no doubt, a future gallery show at Zürcher. Bollinger's animated pieces can be found here.

Daniel Gauss