

Varia Serova, *In Conversation with Matt Bollinger*, Zephyr and Maize, 22 June 2021

Zephyr and Maize

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In Conversation with MATT BOLLINGER

Curated and written by Varia Serova

Matt Bollinger (born Kansas City, 1980, lives and works in New York) was awarded a BFA from Kansas City Art Institute (2003) and an MFA from Rhode Island School of Art and Design (2007). Bollinger's drawings, paintings and stop motion animations consciously grapple with the 'veritas', or otherwise of the American dream, and capture the zeitgeist of its dystopian dark side. Bollinger has shown his work at the South Bend Museum of Art, Indiana (2020); Phillips Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania (2018); Nerman Museum, Overland Park, Kansas (2016); Musee d'art moderne et contemporain, Saint-Etienne (2016). His other solo exhibitions were held at Zürcher Gallery, New York and Paris, M+B, Los Angeles (2020), and mother's tankstation, London (2021).



Matt Bollinger in his studio © Courtesy of Matt Bollinger

Varia Serova: How did your artistic formation begin?

Matt Bollinger: I remember extending four lines from a circle to make an amebic person. Then later drawing ocean waves on long, inter-connected pages of perforated computer paper—a huge, Crayola marker-blue sea with surfers atop each crest. Next methodically copying Marvel comics and cartoon characters. Drawing whole taxonomies of werewolves and then a sharpie pentagram on my palm, convinced that would help me transform under the full moon (a detail learned courtesy the 1987 TV series *Werewolf*). This was followed by a call home from my 5th grade teacher.

VS: What was growing up as an artist like, and how did you begin developing an interest in your main subjects –American working class and the course of everyday life?

MB: My family was fairly supportive of my interest in drawing as a child. They could tell I did it well and later, as long as I told them I would teach to make money, they were happy enough with my career path. When I was younger, in middle school and high school, I drew subjects that all had to do with escape and personal transformation. At first I drew from comics and horror movies, but later I wanted to escape the Midwest and the sort of hourly toil that seemed to trap everyone around me. Literary novels, poetry, post-punk music like *The Birthday Party*, painters like Guston and Bacon, and the sort of movies that were coming to the video store via *The Criterion Collection* all gave me a new idea of how to transcend my surroundings, at least as I saw it at the time.

When I was in art school, I started making very intricate, thickly textured paintings of corners of rooms with stuff piled up: a stack of tree branches, shoes or laundry, furniture. The work was fairly large and I realize in retrospect that I was reenacting some of the labor that my parents engaged in. It was more than a decade later

when the working-class imagery started to appear in the work. I interviewed my father, in part as a way to help us communicate beyond simple pleasantries or complaints about work or other daily annoyances. This brought a lot of the subjects from my life in Missouri into my work.

VS: Your work assumes a form of the social chronicle of the new age. What is your relationship with your subjects, do you feel sympathetic, do they appear heroic, comic or distraught to you? What is the sentiment?

MB: My subjects are composites of people I've known, seen around, and heard about in conversations with others from similar backgrounds. Although it cleaves close to the real world, I think of my work as fictional. I also prefer to think of it as narrative rather than realist work. Because the people I paint are researched, often in all three of the methods above, they are very believable to me. This also makes them empathetic. I'm not interested in making art that makes a statement in any reductive sense. There's no political agenda that I'm trying to get across. I want the scenarios and figures to be complex and ambiguous. Since each seems like an individual to me, I approach each character uniquely. My painting called *Magic Hour* shows a woman who works at a Walmart. I felt a lot of affection for her, for the work she was doing to support her family. The figure in *Insomnia*, gave me a much greater feeling of ambiguity. I was thinking of my father and his friends, all white men in their late 60s or early 70s, who voted for Trump and I disagree with on essentially every issue. At the same time, he could be my father or uncle—someone I care for deeply. The two things exist in the same body.

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Matt Bollinger, *Countdown*, 2021, Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 in. © Courtesy of Matt Bollinger and Zürcher Gallery, New York / Paris

VS: Although your narrative often calls out hardship and turmoil, the space within it remains inviting, even to the point of literally bringing people “in” your work (with *Three Rooms*, 2018); filled with light and harmonious color, it does not appear to depict rejection nor escapism. Am I reading the work correctly, is there a general sentiment of acceptance that prevails, or does emotion vary from painting to painting?

MB: I would like the work to pull the viewer into the experience of the work, but also to suggest something that creates a fracture in the everyday. I try to do this with the shapes and light. *Three Rooms* was a way of thinking about how my habits return years later. I had read Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects*, so I was thinking of the things, like global warming, that exist massively distributed in space and time, and how I fit into these things. The sci-fi aspect of that animation was a way of projecting a habitual cycle into the distant future (I just doubled the date from 2018 to 4036)—how choices I make now might continue to have an effect 2000 years from now.

VS: Do you see your work having any connection to the social-realism art movement, does it have in its core an urge to critique the existing power structures, or do you prefer to take on a more observational stance?

MB: There are moments in my work that resemble social-realism, moments of regionalism, or the work of Edward Hopper, but I don't have any particular agenda in the work. I'm not trying to glorify the worker for instance. At the same time, I want the viewer emotionally involved, pulled into the scenes, as you mentioned. I don't think this is contradictory. Meaning comes from the audience interpreting their experiences of the work rather than me leaving

something succinct for them to pick up.

VS: Labor Day is one of your most acclaimed series of paintings. How did the idea behind it appear and develop, and what was the experience of working on this series?

MB: Thank you! I had been making paintings and drawings that I imagined took place in a small town in Missouri that was a composite of where I live in upstate NY and the lake of the Ozarks where I spent summers as a kid. It excited me to have narrative linked to a place that I could revisit in my mind, but not one unified storyline. The summer of 2020 was a tough time for me (and most people). I made most of the work in that show during that time and I think I channeled some of that intense energy into the paintings. I was thinking about people out of work, as I would go around Ithaca, where I live, and see empty store fronts. The façade I used for the painting called *Labor Day* is just a few blocks from me. I would walk and drive by it and imagine I could see more dust accumulating on the counter each time. It became a kind of stage set. I pictured a father and son who ran an auto repair shop and thought about the way a business like that is linked to a lineage and also to inherited ideologies.

VS: In this series, you effectively unite your portrait works with what appears to be scenes, or “snapshots”, of the everyday life, to create and capture an atmosphere. Why did you decide to include these particular scenes, and what do they represent to you?

MB: Oddly enough, I never wanted to paint portraits and wound up doing it without making the decision to shift into that genre. The works were all scenes to me, but some I build using a central body, while others focused on a space. I included each scene for a different reason. The painting called *Sharing Smoke*, for instance, came from thinking about the distance that I'd been feeling from friends this year. Meeting up with someone to socialize was taboo—even worse to not wear a mask—plus they are smokers! The smoke was a way to visually show breath, which has been particularly frightening during the pandemic. Last summer I was biking outside of the city on a country road and someone drove by. I could smell their cigarette and I found it incredibly disturbing. At the same time, I wanted to convey the intimacy of two friends, probably after work, trying to connect during a tough time.

VS: Let's talk about your studio life. How does your process unravel? Do you paint or sketch from life or from imagination, how long can it take before a painting is completed?

MB: Everything I do starts with observations stuck together with some sort of idea (this is probably my narrative impulse) and then I make drawings. The drawings further synthesize my interests while helping me find a form or structure for the image. Once I know roughly what the composition will be, I'll generally do research for the details that I might not be able to remember or make up. I collect photos, draw and paint from life, and tune in during my non-studio time to keep an eye out for the sort of things I'm trying to paint. For instance, prior to the pandemic, I was starting a big painting set in a Walmart, so I went to an actual Walmart and just walked around to get a feel for the space.

When I start a canvas, I dump a lot of paint on the surface and move it around with large palette knives, house painting brushes, and a 12" wallpaper brush. The work looks abstract for the first session or two while I let the image get situated. I'll use chaotic colors sometimes, while others I'll use colors that might be in the scene I'm planning. After this, the process feels like revision even though I am just getting started building the figures and settings. It is such a pleasure to put paint over paint, to carve back into a form with another color. The painting can hang around for weeks, generally if my teaching or parenting schedules are too all-consuming, but, when I have the time, I can finish a painting much faster than that.

VS: How is the process staged?

MB: I stage the figures and settings in that initial sketching phase. I'll draw the same idea again and again in a sketchbook or sometimes larger in more finished drawings, until I feel satisfied with the form. I might only have a 5" sketch, but when it clicks, I feel like I'm halfway through the painting already.

VS: I have noticed you sketching ancient heroes, as well as the new age ones. Is there an interrelation? How do you view now versus then, both in art and in life?

MB: I found a book on Pompeii on a \$1 shelf outside of a used bookstore. The pictures, old black and white prints and saturated color images were so interesting that I decided to make some gouaches of them. I have made dozens now. I gravitated to sketching the statues and that started to influence the way I painted my figures, making them more sculptural as opposed to photographic. Thinking of the bodies I paint in the round really helped the work, I think, and it fit with my narrative urges. A feeling that the person exists in the round also suggests more interiority to me—visual volume evoking an inner, subjective space.

VS: Being an art critic, I cannot avoid asking about particular figures or movements that inspire you in the course of art history. I have already noted to myself the works of Durer and ancient sculpture as appealing to you, as well as some of the visual and philosophical qualities from the Japanese ukiyo-e, American and, perhaps, Russian social realism...

MB: I love lots of art, including things that don't look at all like what I do (Mark Bradford's work, for instance). I am really influenced by Kerry James Marshall's works from the 90s and early 00s. I love the specificity in Catherine Murphy and the paintings and drawings of David Byrd. I wrote about his work, Murphy's, and the writings of Lucia Berlin a few years ago for *Painters on Painting*, linking threads of labor and the suggestiveness of images. Specificity to me is key to catalyzing an experience in a viewer's mind.

VS: Apart from more traditional painting, you have been exploring other art forms, like sculpture and installation/art objects (*Three Rooms*, 2018). What does the extra dimension bring in, and how do you use it to express your ideas?

MB: Sculpture has been a big influence on my work so it has seemed natural to make three dimensional pieces from time to time. I made some sculptures that were in response to characters, trying to boil them down to a gesture. I was also thinking of Durer's images of hands when I made them. The objects I made in my show *Three Rooms* were used to create the appearance of depth in that animation. My aim was to make a painting that could be pierced in some way, creating an inside, so I made a series of standees with windows and doorways. The sculptures were small and the paintings were large so when I shot footage with the sculpture near the camera, I could look through at the big painting behind. The spatial illusion was pretty convincing. After finishing the animation, these objects seemed like more than props. I included images of a dollhouse in the video and these looked like doll-sized fragments. There are scales of time in the project. These suggested a link by dealing with scales of space (sculpture to painting to video).

VS: Video art is another new interesting direction your work takes, could you tell me more about it?

MB: I am often working on painted animation projects concurrently with my other work. Paintings and animations both deal with time and narrative in very different ways. This is why I do both. While the paintings calcify into a kind of sculptural stillness, a tableau vivant, the animations exist in a viscous reality—a paint world. The themes are generally consistent and at times, the characters exist across approaches. One does not create the other, but both emerge from the overarching drawing space. I might start with written notes or a short script, but then I make dozens or even hundreds of small drawings. For the animations these will be storyboards, but all the threads of my work hang from this initial drawing/writing process.

VS: What are you working on now?

MB: I have started a bunch of new canvases, with subjects ranging from kids at a public pool to people cleaning the side of the highway as a condition of their probation. The settings of the new work feel like the same world I have been working in, but I am opening up some of the scenarios to include a broader look at the families of the people I have been painting, their kids in particular. I started the large painting of the kids at the pool around the same time I started reading Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School*. It got me thinking about the inheritance of behaviors—privileged, gendered, or violent. I am also in the middle of a few animation projects: one, a long-term work I started a few years ago and might finish in 2022, and a second that is new and I should complete this summer. The new one is about a father, working through his day as a house painter, then coming home to take care of his toddler son while his partner goes to work. As a working parent, this balance has been particularly challenging during the pandemic but at the same time, I have spent more time with my daughter than I would have otherwise had because lapses in childcare. Recently I have made some paintings about problematic fathers, so I wanted to make a hopeful space in the work for a better model of fatherhood.