

Rostron, Edwin, *Matt Bollinger*, Edge of Frame, 24 February 2022

Edge of Frame

A blog about experimental animation

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Matt Bollinger

By Edwin Rostron

Matt Bollinger is a New York based artist whose practice encompasses painting, animation, sculpture and music. His animated films are predominantly made with acrylic paint, which he utilises with enormous skill and originality. Many of Matt's films depict the everyday life of midwestern America and are full of acutely observed and lovingly rendered details. These quotidian scenes often have an atmosphere of dread or sadness hovering around their edges and the overall effect is hypnotising and immersive, invariably leaving this viewer with a sense of much more having been going on beneath the surface. Matt's paintings occupy the same territories and often portray the same scenes and characters as his animated films, and he often shows them together in his gallery exhibitions. In the words of poet and art critic John Yau *"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."*

Matt Bollinger has had acclaimed solo shows recently at mother's tankstation, London; Zürcher Gallery, New York and M+B Gallery, Los Angeles. He has an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design and is represented by Zürcher Gallery and mother's tankstation limited.



Between the Days (2017) by Matt Bollinger. Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation and Zürcher Gallery.

EoF: Can you give a bit of background to your becoming an artist, and how animation became part of your practice?

MB: I think I became an artist because I was good at drawing when I was a kid. I loved images, comics, movies, and later on, art. I had a high school art teacher who showed me Philip Guston and Francis Bacon (he was into expressionistic work) and my good friend, Daniel Magers and I would go down rabbit holes exploring film via a local Hollywood Video store and music.

I first realized that animation could be a part of the art world when I saw a VHS transfer of a William Kentridge film in undergrad. I made my own version using similar materials of a landscape evolving over time. Later in school I spent months working on frames of an animation that might have had a more individual approach, but I abandoned it. No one really had much to say about the videos I made, so they felt like side projects. 15 years later, I saw an animation by Jake Fried and understood that he was using a similar method to Kentridge but with an individual look. I had been making some artist books and zines at the time. One was a facsimile of a notebook drawn in sharpie and ballpoint pen and I liked the way the ink bled through the page with the markers. I used an approach that combined what I liked in Fried with my book works and animated a notebook with

drawings appearing on their own and the pages turning.

EoF: Your current practice encompasses painting and animation, and you have often featured animation works within gallery exhibitions of paintings. You seem equally engaged in making both animation and painting to a very high level; I don't get the impression one is secondary to the other, and there is obviously a close connection between the two. Can you speak a bit about how these two elements of your practice co-exist, both in the studio and in the context of showing your work, and how this relationship has developed over the years?

MB: Thank you. Both practices come from drawing and narrative. Some stories, characters, settings want to be in motion and unspool over time while others need to be present for the audience to almost physically walk into. In other words, the two forms have inverse relationships with time: one still, the other moving. For awhile these parallel tracks were more tangled because I used the paintings to make the animations. In one project, *Apartment 6F*, when the scene was finished being animated, I stopped working on the painting. This left some interestingly chaotic canvases in some cases. On the other hand, with *Between the Days*, I continued to work on the canvases (some were very large, over seven feet) until I felt they were ready to be exhibited. At the present, the two practices are in tandem tracks, each informing the other without either being subservient.

EoF: Your recent animation works and paintings seem to take place in one over-arching world, perhaps even within the same narrative. Some of the press around your wonderful recent show at Zürcher Gallery referred to its evocation of a Middle American, white, suburban demographic, and what this might mean at this turbulent and divided point in time. Is this socio-economic and geographic focus something you have consciously generated, and can you speak about how your own relationship to that world and its inhabitants connects to these works?

MB: There is definitely a geographic connection between my different bodies of work. As you point out, I generally paint images set in the midwest, ranging from the more urban or suburban (Kansas City) to the rural (central Missouri). These are all places where I've lived and the people I paint are often composited from individual's I've known or encountered, either in my past or now in upstate New York. I'm distinctly aware that I'm painting working class, white people during this politically charged moment. I think it's important to look at this group of people, which includes a lot of my family, in all of their complications. I try to avoid reductions and endure the ambiguity.

EoF: I am particularly interested in the way you portray that world and these people formally, through some really interesting colour palettes and a quite stylised approach to the human form. Your works have a very particular feel and look to them. Can you describe how your style has developed and some of your thinking behind these formal issues in relation to the subject matter?

MB: The form of my work changed quite a lot back around 2009 when I stopped using photography as a direct source for the work. After that I needed to find solutions for spaces, light, and compositional questions and that has led to some of the shapes and color decisions that structure my current work. Prior to 2009 I worked mostly in oil paint. When I abandoned the photo, I left oils behind too. At first, when I re-introduced color into the work, I made painted paper collages. This also changed the way I thought about shape and color. After the collage phased out of my work, I found it exciting to move things around in a painting while I found and tuned a composition. This process leaves interesting textures and artifacts in the work and anticipated the sort of radical changes that animation forces me to make.



Magic Hour (2021) by Matt Bollinger (flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 in.). Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation and Zürcher Gallery.

EoF: You make your own music for your films, and it is at least as much a part of the works' atmosphere as the visual side. What is your musical background and how do you approach scoring your films?



Super Bowl Sunday (2021) by Matt Bollinger (flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.). Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation and Zürcher Gallery.



Furlough IV (2021) by Matt Bollinger (flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 in.). Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation and Zürcher Gallery.



Holmes, MO (I) (2020) by Matt Bollinger. Part 2 here and Part 3 here. Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation and Zürcher Gallery.

MB: I love doing the music and foley for my animations. I might spend months shooting the animation and only two weeks on the sound, but they feel like equally weighted halves of my films. I grew up playing cello in public school orchestras and wound up being fairly good for a high school student, but I had to put it aside when I went to art school, mostly because the cello is so big. I had also taken some guitar and piano lessons. Around 2010 my sibling gave me a guitar and I started teaching myself to play. By the time I started composing music for my animations, I had been practicing nearly daily for five or six years so I felt okay writing simple lines, creating atmospheres and textures I could collage together when editing the videos. When gearing up to score an animation, I often create a playlist of music that is on my mind relative to the project. This can range from contemporary classical or other film scores, to vintage country or Norwegian metal. I'll listen to the playlist and add to it, modify it, etc., for months while animating. When it comes time to create my own score, I'll start improvising in a mode or key that suits the film, often searching out a melody that can be a theme to revisit. Sometimes there will be a motif for a particular character. I play electric guitar with a lot of effect pedals, synthesizers, software instruments, banjo, piano, and anything else at hand. I created the Satanic drumbeat for *Apartment 6F* by dropping a bunch of paint brushes into a plastic bucket and manipulating the sound digitally. Once I have lots of improvised bits, I collage it all together in the video editing software. There's no pre-existing song because I'm cutting the sound to the visuals.

EoF: Can you tell us a bit about the way you work with narrative in your films? Do you write scripts or is your planning out more visual? How much do the films usually change as you make them in terms of the structure and story?

MB: I typically write a short script, more or less a block of prose rather than a screenplay since I use so little dialog. Then I grid off a lot of pages of my sketchbook and storyboard. This is the most important part of the writing because I make lots of changes and also decide how the film will look. I think through movements, timings, and the overall pacing of the animation. Then when animating there's always improvisation to find the right movements and stuff always ends up thrown out. After I do a rough cut of the film, I share it with my partner and usually one close friend. Often they make suggestions that leads me back to the studio to shoot a few more moments to tune things up.

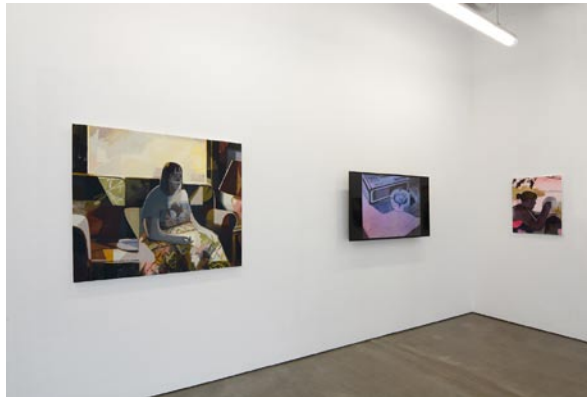
My narratives come from things I see, have experienced, or people have told me about. Oftentimes I'll let a story bounce around in my head for months or even years while I'm working on another project. If they don't remain interesting during all of that time, I know I can let them go.

EoF: Your films make animating with acrylic seem very tempting – they have a great physicality but there is also real precision which I imagine is not that easy with painted animation. Has your painted animation method taken a lot of work to develop? Do you find yourself tempted to try other kinds of animation?

MB: I'm always experimenting, so it's nice to hear that the work appears consistent. I have a trilogy of shorts, all called *Holmes*, that I animated with gouache on a plastic film called Duralar. It's nice because it has some of the precision of my acrylic animations but is much easier to move around and change. At the moment I'm working on a longer-term animation project, also in gouache, and a shorter film I hope to finish this summer that is in acrylic on canvas. The physicality of paint is so central to what I do, that I wouldn't want to give it up. Aside from helping the animations communicate well with my paintings, it creates a viscous reality. Surely there are more sensible and easier ways to animate, but I like that characters and objects are inseparable from their context. There is no passive background before which someone moves. Instead this viscous context fills in all of the gaps and a body has to trudge and sludge through it.

EoF: You teach animation and I wonder if you might tell us a bit about your approach, what your focus is on as an educator and if there are any ways that your teaching has informed or fed into your own artistic / animation practice?

MB: Teaching is a fun output for my experimental impulses. I like to learn and I can share new ideas and approaches with the students. At the same time the students' energy feeds back to my studio.



Installation view of *Collective Conscious*, an exhibition of works by Matt Bollinger at mother's tankstation, London, UK April 15 – June 12, 2021

EoF: What are you working on right now?

MB: I'm creating a few new bodies of paintings: one following a group of teenagers during summer, painted in different blues, and another showing some people who are cleaning up a roadside as a condition of their probation for drug possession. I have two new animation projects in the works that I mentioned earlier. One involves a bit of coding to make a timeline that changes in a real-time gallery experience. It's sort of like a choose-your-own-adventure book but the computer algorithm does the choosing. The second is about a young dad who is a house painter and follows him through one day of work before heading home to take care of his toddler son. As the parent of a young child, I think a lot about work and family. I'm thinking of this particular dad as a hopeful model of masculinity—someone who works hard at his job, but is also equally nurturing when he comes home.