

John Yau, *Matt Bollinger's America*, Hyperallergic, 3 December 2017

HYPERALLERGIC

Matt Bollinger's America

This is the American Dream gone wrong.

by John Yau

December 3, 2017



Matt Bollinger, "Before Work" (2017), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 27.5 x 36 inches (images courtesy Zürcher Gallery)

We are unseen visitors in a world largely devoid of primary colors. When we do see these colors, it is because it is on the label on a bottle of bleach or laundry detergent. The setting is an indistinct neighborhood that can be found almost anywhere in America — a cookie cutter ranch house in the suburbs, a weight room in the basement for pumping iron, a couch parked in front of a television, a window overlooking the house across the street — all of it bathed in dusty pinks, acid greens, violets, grays and browns. This is the American dream gone wrong — a life of emptiness and routine. I don't think I am the first to be reminded of Henry David Thoreau's telling words:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. [...] A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.

In his current exhibition, *Matt Bollinger: Between the Days* at Zürcher Gallery (October 29 – December 21, 2017), the artist returns to a subject he has explored before and knows well: the American heartland, specifically a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri, where the artist was born in 1980 — the beginning of the Reagan era. The exhibition includes 13 paintings and two sculptures, all of which have starring roles in Bollinger's 18 minute animation, "Between the Days" (2017), a tour de force.

Bollinger uses the most basic filmmaking process, stop-motion animation, a technique pioneered in the 19th-century by George Méliès, a failed magician but a great filmmaker — to depict time passing in this hushed, uneventful world in which we see two characters, a mother and son. She sits on a couch, chain-smoking and drinking beer, while watching television. He comes home late at night, goes down to the basement and pumps iron and nearly hurts himself. A cigarette glows in the dark, burns down in an ashtray. The sun rises. We see it passing through the leaded glass of the front door, reflecting on the wall. She smokes a cigarette first thing in the morning. She gets out of bed, smokes another cigarette, and drives to work. She sits at a desk, answering the phone and entering numbers on the computer. Nothing much else happens. The colors are muted, and the inhabitants seem to be living in a world presided over by a dying star.



Matt Bollinger, "Living Room Day" (2017), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 inches

Bollinger's attention to quotidian details and Middle American atmospherics is extraordinary. He is interested in the different kinds of light that fill this world – the pale green light of a computer's screensaver, the subdued, dusty pink light of morning, the gray light cast by a television watched by someone alone in the dark. On the screen, we see pale green tears falling. Emotions are what other people have. Bollinger combines dispassionate observation and extreme tenderness towards his subjects, an unlikely combination that gives his works an emotional depth few of his figurative contemporaries are able to attain.

While his characters are going through their everyday lives, one feels the despair – which Bollinger always understates – coursing through their bodies. They seem stunned, like deer caught in the headlights. They have reached a certain level of material comfort, but they don't take much comfort in it.

Bollinger's palette brought to mind an unlikely association with the great painter, Edwin Dickinson, particularly his painting "Francis Foley" (1927), with its sickly greens and pale violets. In addition to using similar colors, Bollinger adds the dusty pinks and neon pinks of Post-it notes to his tonalist pallet. In "Carolyn's Office" (2017), done in Flashe and acrylic, Bollinger depicts Post-it notes in pink, yellow, blue, and white throughout the gray, green, and brown painting, animating the drab colors. There are four disembodied hands on the desk. One is holding a phone, one is jotting something on a Post-it, one is holding what looks like a receipt, while the fourth holds another pink Post-it. A spreadsheet glows on the computer screen. Whatever the job, it requires multiple hands and the worker's compliance.

Evidently, after Bollinger finished working on the animation, he went back over the paintings, deciding what fragments would remain. "Carolyn's Office" is the most extreme. While the image is inexplicable and illogical, it feels absolutely right.



Matt Bollinger, "Carolyn's Office" (2017), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Along with Dickinson, I was reminded of Edward Hopper and his vision of urban isolation and loneliness. I know this is blasphemous to say, but I prefer Bollinger as a painter: he has a softer and gentler touch that adds something to the emotional tenor of his subject matter. The other thing I want to add is that Bollinger's views are less overtly dramatic. He often places the figure in the center of the painting. In this exhibition they are always seen

alone. And yet, he is restrained in his approach, in the softening of facial features and obscuring them further in shadows and poorly lit rooms. It is as if we cannot ever really understand their despair and sense of isolation.

I think this is the key to the difference between Hopper and Bollinger. Hopper gives us characters in a drama. We are meant to understand their isolation, but they live a different world than we do, and we can take solace in that. We are not the people sitting in a coffee shop late at night, but the ones looking at them from across the street. We might not have grown up in a suburb of Kansas City – I certainly didn't – but the loneliness and isolation we encounter in Bollinger's paintings is something whose silence we can hear.

In Bollinger's paintings we are always in the same room as his character. There is no barrier separating us from this person. What is Carolyn thinking as she finishes one can of beer after another while watching television at night in a darkened room? At one point in the animation, she crushes a can and puts it on the coffee table, and opens another beer. As Joseph Conrad wrote: "[...] the most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion."

Matt Bollinger: *Between the Days* continues at *Zürcher Gallery* (33 Bleecker Street, Bowery, Manhattan) through December 21.