

John Yau, *Matt Bollinger's Working-Class Elegy*, Hyperallergic, 9 April 2021

HYPERALLERGIC

Matt Bollinger's Working-Class Elegy

Bollinger is a major artist chronicling a substantial sector of American life.

by John Yau
April 9, 2021



Matt Bollinger, "Countdown" (2021), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 inches (all images courtesy Zürcher Gallery, New York / Paris)

I did not grow up a sensitive white male in America, but many of my friends did. It is from them and their art and writing that I have a sense of what that unsettling and even harrowing experience was like. It is also why I first reviewed Matt Bollinger's revelatory exhibition, *End of the Road: Matt Bollinger*, at Zürcher Gallery, in 2016, and why I have followed his work as closely as I could ever since.

This is what I wrote in my review of his exhibition *Matt Bollinger: Between the Days* at Zürcher Gallery (October 29–December 21, 2017):

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.

Along with not growing up anywhere near Kansas City, I can't say that I hung out in a room in suburbia with the people in Bollinger's paintings, at least not comfortably so.

I was reminded of that invisible social barrier and the attendant feelings of wariness that it raises when I went to see *Matt Bollinger: Furlough* at Zürcher Gallery (March 13–April 29, 2021), which features 19 paintings of varying sizes completed since the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020.

The artist explains in the gallery press release that the exhibition's title comes from "[focusing] on single men or groups of men 'blowing off steam' after being furloughed" because of COVID-19 job cuts.

Almost all the men and women that Bollinger depicts are physically unfit, many of them bordering on obese. And yet, the artist seems to be sympathetic to their plight, and is in no way satirizing his subjects, even as he enhances their physical dimensions.

In contrast to his earlier work, which centered on “a world devoid of primary colors” — rooms bathed in muted and bright, sickly greens or dusty pink light — his current use of midnight blues, lemon yellows, hot pinks, and smoldering oranges are more intense and moody.

One of Bollinger’s growing strengths is his ability to use color to impart an overall atmosphere to the painting, and to the solemn, unsmiling figures within.

His subjects are, for the most part, middle-aged people trapped in the sunset hours of their lives and lifestyles, unable to comprehend all the different ways the world is changing, as well as passing them by.

In the painting “Magic Hour” (2021), an overweight Walmart cashier wearing a blue face mask and a sleeveless blue uniform bears an oversized name tag that reads “Janet.” Standing behind the protective Plexiglas barrier, she is staring blankly, either at the cash register’s computer screen or past us, as if we are not there. The absence of human communication is true of the three other women behind Janet, two of whom are cashiers. No one is talking.

A row of oval, orange-brown balloons recedes from the upper left-hand corner into the distance. Are they meant to cheer up the customers or do they signal a holiday celebration? The painting never discloses their intended purpose.

Finally, the salmon-pink sunlight that reflects on the side of Janet’s arm and the backs of the other two cashiers, along with the store’s gray-yellow overhead lighting, adds a bleak emotional tone to the painting. This is a vision of a forlorn world, where hope is not part of the vocabulary.

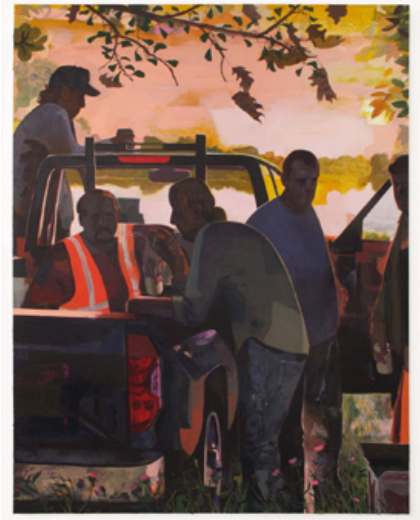
In “Furlough 1” (2021), five men are gathered around the back of a pickup truck, which seems to be facing a lake. The pink and yellow light suggests that it is late afternoon. The man sitting in the bed of the truck wears an orange safety vest. He is drinking a beer and staring back at us, with an expression that could be frustrated, despondent, or exhausted. A man just to his right rests one arm on the truck bed, while smoking a cigarette.

Seen in silhouette, the sharp curve of his back tells us a lot about the internal weight pulling him down. None of the five men are talking. Their anger and frustration is palpable. They cannot think of anything to do, either as a group or as individuals, except smoke, drink beer, and stand around. The trees, flowers, and lake — signs of nature — seem meaningless to them in relation to the stress of being on furlough.

In “One Gallon” (2021), a large, thick-limbed man in dirty pants and a sleeveless shirt is bent over, pumping gasoline into a one-gallon red can. To the left of him, cropped by the painting’s edge, is part of a pickup truck’s tailgate.

The man’s shoulders, back, neck, head, and brimmed cap run nearly parallel with the painting’s top edge, separated by a narrow band of greenish sky. By consciously cramming the huge mass of the sharply bent body into a small space, Bollinger underscores that the man will never stand up, and that he will always be trapped in this extreme, awkward pose.

In his attention to postures, facial expressions, and body shapes, Bollinger masterfully captures his subjects. I cannot think of another American artist of his generation so in tune with the depression, emptiness, and frustration



Matt Bollinger, “Furlough I” (2021), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 78 x 60 inches



Matt Bollinger, “Magic Hour” (2021), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 inches



Matt Bollinger, “One Gallon” (2021), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 inches

a wide swath of working-class Americans feel. The scenarios are easy to parody or look down on; to elicit our sympathy is far more challenging.

Look at the men gathered on or around a couch in "Super Bowl Sunday" (2021). Four open beer cans are on the coffee table. The pot-bellied man sitting in the middle of the couch wears a short-sleeved red sports jersey bearing the number 15 in yellow on its front; a man sitting on his left wears a plain red t-shirt.

With visual clues such as these, Bollinger evokes the rituals of men, some middle-aged, who have gathered together to watch a sporting event. However, they are not talking or cheering, nor do they seem excited. The emptiness and anxiety that accompanies being furloughed and has extended to every part of their lives.

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, "Super Bowl Sunday" (2021), Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Matt Bollinger: Furlough continues at Zürcher Gallery (33 Bleecker Street, Manhattan) through April 29.