

Hettie Judah, *Matt Bollinger: Collective Conscious*, Art Monthly no.447, June 2021



Matt Bollinger, *Candy at Home*, 2019

## Matt Bollinger: Collective Conscious

Mother's Tankstation, London, 15 April to 12 June

Newport cigarettes, oxygen cylinders, petrol pumps, particulate-pinkened sunsets, the cool electric light of TVs: these things furnish the hum, the scent, the texture of Matt Bollinger's paintings. There is always the hint of a bigger story playing out in the background – be it industrial pollution, mass unemployment or an epidemic of loneliness – but Bollinger's characters keep travelling through their day-to-day lives, looking only as far out in front of them as is necessary to keep functioning.

The backdrop to the grand diptych *Entertainment Center*, 2020, is a school shooting, reported on a bank of blue-screened TVs in the 'Entertainment' section of an electronics shop. No one is gathering around the monitors watching horrified for updates: neither shop staff in their blue tabards nor customers in baggy sportswear appear to react at all. They are sharing space (with one another, with the TV news broadcast), yet browsers and cashiers alike are isolated in their own thoughts. A school shooting – another one – is just the backdrop these individual histories are playing out against.

Perhaps this disregard is a reciprocal gesture in a world in which they feel overlooked and unseen. The shallow space in Bollinger's paintings presses us towards one another. We can sense the abraded surfaces, the scuffs, stains and sticker-residue on the materials around them. *Candy at Home*, 2019, positions us knee to knee with an older woman as she sits on her sofa in the reflected light of her TV. A cannula runs beneath her nose (in another painting we see the oxygen cylinder it attaches to) and she holds her empty right hand on her knee with the poise of a habitual smoker, though her smoking days are over now. The Tasmanian Devil's cartoon grin, just visible on the T-shirt stretched over Candy's slumped chest, feels like a cruel counterpoint to her own face, sad and gravity-drawn, painted in grey, the patchy tones of drying cement.

It has a name, this fictional place that appears in Bollinger's paintings. He calls it Holmes, Missouri and it's based in part on the neighbourhoods of his childhood near the Lake of the Ozarks. 'Collective Conscious' is one suite of works from a much larger project

# ART

Monthly

No.447. June 2021

featuring recurring characters and interiors. Where 'Collective Conscious' offers glimpses into the world of the female characters Candy and Honeysuckle, a coincidental exhibition – 'Furlough' at Zürcher Gallery in New York – looks to unemployed and underemployed men, hanging out in pickup trucks, urinating behind trees and gathering to watch the Super Bowl.

For the white working-class portrayed here, Holmes is a place where time is measured out in cigarettes, cans of beer, tanks of petrol and commercial breaks. Bollinger plots time, too, in the textural details of his painted world, full of the marks of care and long use: weathered skin, wrinkled cloth, faded paint. This is not a world mapped in fresh, bright expanses of untroubled colour. Even the sky looks stained, blotchy: unwhole-some in its salmon-pinkness.

In the animation *Between the Days*, 2017, Bollinger captures the passage of light as it filters through the stained-glass panel of a door, before the floor and wall, in dancing lines and lobes, first colour, later white and grey. At 5.45, dawn illuminates the side of a clock radio and last night's Newport, run to ash. One of a series of hand-painted animations, in which action is tracked in smeared erasures and echo marks, the film is a loving portrait of between times, days waited out, lives barely crossing. Beneath framed portraits in service uniform and graduation robes, a young man lies on a weightlifter's bench and loads weight plates onto his barbell until he can no longer push it off his chest. A lone hopeful gesture towards a future, his workout ends up crushing him.

Bollinger's figures are filled out, their limbs almost cylindrical. Like Fernand Léger's 'tubist' forms, such smoothness connects them to a heritage of industry and agriculture, echoing pipes and tankers of machine-assisted labour, new and bright a century ago, but fast-disappearing in the early 21st century Midwest. Now that padding looks more like self-protection, comfort, or perhaps reflects selves full to bursting with worries and anxieties. In *Under the Oak*, 2019, Honeysuckle smokes beside the ever-rosy sky and reflecting lake, a jaunty pink bikini top knotted at the back of her neck. It's sunset and she is sitting by water in a swimsuit staring forward, the white dots of rising tears sparkling on the surface of her eyes.

Hettie Judah is a writer based in London.