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DAVID CAINES MATT BOLLINGER

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DAVID CAINES INTER- VIEWS MATT BOLLINGER

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David Caines: Where do you start with a painting, Matt? What's the first step?

Matt Bollinger: Drawing is always the first step. I have a small sketchbook and I do thumbnails, working out compositions and things with graphite. Recently I've started doing slightly bigger drawings. They are totally free, they don't have any particular goals, so they're different to the thumbnails where I might be thinking of an eight-foot painting. I'm still figuring out what role these bigger drawings play in my work, but having something that doesn't have any pressure on it is really liberating for me.

DC: Is there a moment when you feel *"That could be a painting, there's something coming through there"*?

MB: Yes, sometimes they surprise me. I'll photograph them and print them out, and have the prints just bumping around the studio, and you get used to them. And then you think *"Oh, I could do something with that."* It's lived a little bit and now it's ready.

DC: When you start a painting, I know there is a phase where you are putting quite a lot of paint on and just moving it around the canvas.

MB: I have a very clear drawing of where I want to go, and so I don't feel obligated to go straight there. If it goes to the picture too fast it feels like it hasn't lived at all. I have a quasi-anthropomorphic thing with painting [laughs] where it's just in a room breathing with you. So, it feels right to take a more circuitous route to get where I am going.

I have a paint that was formulated for muralists. It's the most bare-bones acrylic. It's fairly fluid and it covers really well. I'll just start putting it out on the surface to fill that white canvas. It's such a pleasure for me to put colour over another colour. I think other people use lines a lot more than I do, but I tend to build the figures out of silhouettes and shapes. It's a bit like a Rorschach test. I think I know where I'm going, but I make a shape and the thing evolves. It's a way to get the canvas to talk back to me when I'm trying to develop what this will be.

DC: Could you tell me more about the actual paints you use?

MB: I use some vinyl paints like Flashe. They're super matte and have an organic feel under the brush. They want to separate and they have to be stirred so they feel quirky and kind of special. The bulk of what I use is mural paint called Nova Color. It ranges from satiny matte to very shiny, and it's fairly fluid. I also have tubes of the heavy body paint and that tends to be pretty shiny. In the end the surface feels organic because there are some parts that are a little more matte, and I'll also glaze things with different kinds of mediums. So, there's a lot of history under the surface. When you walk around the painting it announces it's this handmade thing, which for me is why I make paintings. There's this human presence in every square inch.

DC: You've created a whole world in your paintings and films. There's such

Opposite:

Countdown

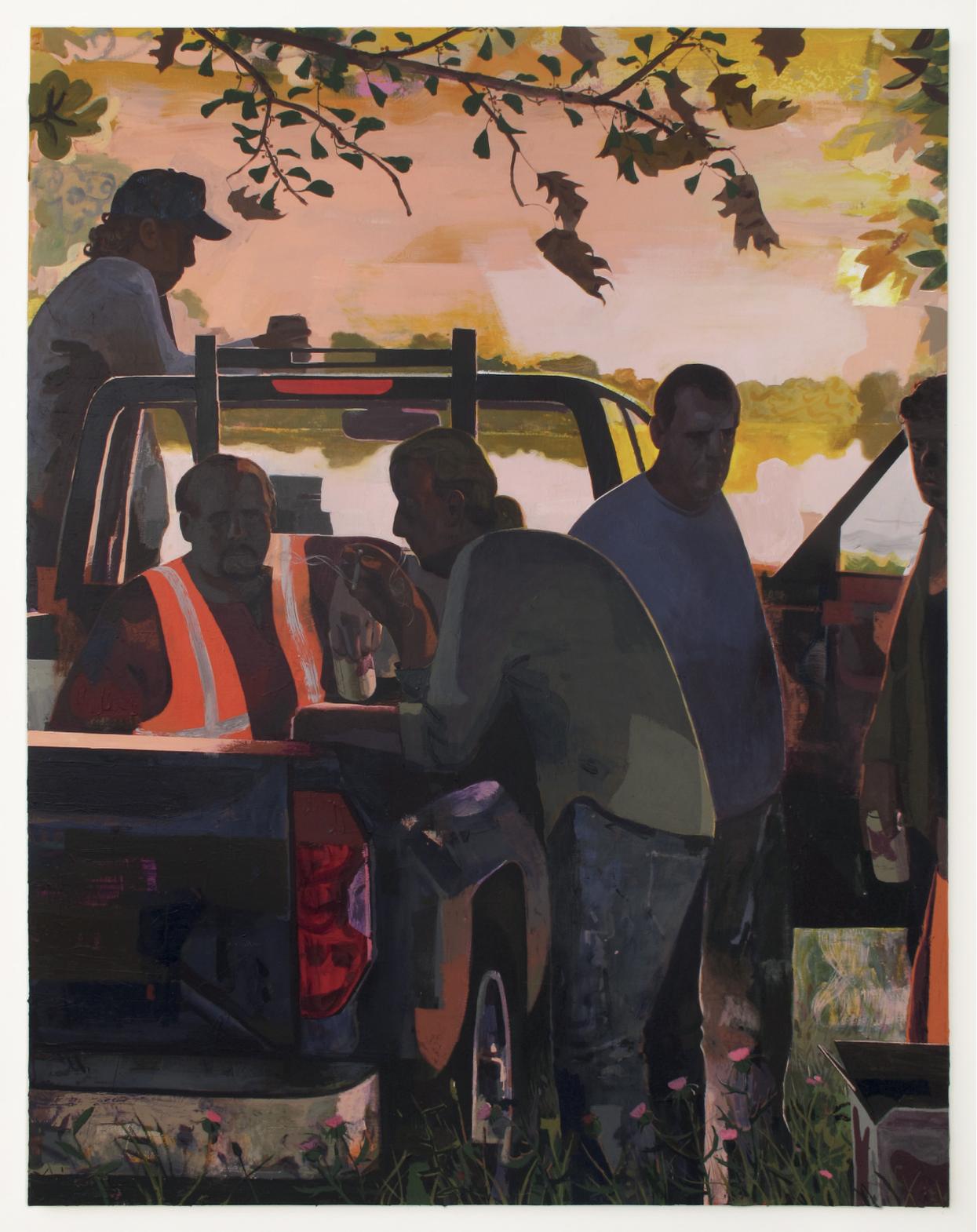
2021
Flashe and acrylic on canvas
122 x 91 cm

Overleaf:

Entertainment Center

2020
Flashe and acrylic on canvas (diptych)
198 x 157.5 cm each panel
198 x 315 cm overall

Courtesy of the artist,
mother's tankstation gallery, Dublin/London,
and François Ghebaly gallery, Los Angeles/New York



a strong sense of place, you feel like you could almost go and live there. Characters reoccur in different paintings creating a suggestion of narrative. Who are they? What's your relationship to them?

MB: They are recurring characters. I guess they are a fiction that is closely drawn from my experience. There are parts of people I know, or have known, in them, which makes them relatable to me. I care about them. I often know a lot about them. The woman in *Countdown* (2021), filling her car with gas, I know a little bit about her married life, and she's a nurse. Some of these things. She might end up in a film later but some of them don't, and some of them I learn about from painting them. Characters like that woman; she got more real the more times I painted her. The paintings talk back to me. It's very important that it feels like there's something behind the surface of the painting to me. I like the idea that Roland Barthes has in relation to photography. He refers to the '*blind field*' meaning that you can imagine those people living outside the shot. I enjoy the feeling that the characters might walk out of the frame; that I could put my face in the painting and look beyond the boundary.

I guess that's part of what I'm looking for as I'm building the painting. I don't want them to feel like a picture of a certain type, '*working man number one*', for example. Specificity is so essential to me. I like that word because it doesn't necessarily mean that every little detail is there; it's more like the set of relationships is particular enough to be evocative of the broader range of their experience.

DC: And where do they live?

MB: I've invented this small town in the Ozarks in Missouri called '*Holmes*'. It's a composite of where I live now in NY State and where I grew up and spent summers. I can create an endless cast of characters and it's a place where only I

can go, and everything I need is there to make my work. Most of the paintings feel like that's where they are, in a circuit between Kansas City and central Missouri. Sometimes things get a little suburban, but for the most part it's in the suburban to rural continuum.

DC: There's a lot of detail in the locations that you create, like *Entertainment Centre* (2020), for example.

MB: I was hanging out at Walmart a lot to create that painting, just trying to observe and trying to be present. Those places can be kind of overwhelming. So, I look a lot and I also have to not look, so I can just see the painting and figure out how to put the pieces together. It really has to get built on the surface itself for me. Because the solutions for what you can't do end up being the abstract ligaments that hold the painting together.

DC: Where do the smaller paintings of weeds fit in?

MB: I was doing a large painting called *Furlough I* (2021). There are a group of men standing around the bed of a pickup truck, drinking beer at the lake. There's a strip at the bottom where the grass is coming up. It felt silly to make up fake plants, so I just started looking up some weeds that might be there. I started thinking how interesting the plants that get called weeds are. They thrive but they are out of place, kind of like the characters in the paintings. I decided I would try some portraits of weeds on their own. In actual figurative portraits, the information we tend to privilege is in a ball in the centre of the canvas and the plants are not like that; they are lattice-like structures. So, all those negative spaces become exciting too. The deeper influence is, when I was growing up, I always walked everywhere. Where I lived, you'd go to where the sidewalk ends and then you'd walk in a ditch along a small highway. I got really interested in what was happening among the foot treads as you're pacing along, what grows there, and what's thrown there. Evidence

Opposite:

Furlough I
2021
Flashe and acrylic on canvas
198 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist,
mother's tankstation gallery, Dublin/London,
and François Ghebaly gallery, Los Angeles/New York

of people passing by. So sometimes that kind of stuff comes in.

DC: The overarching mood of the paintings is quite melancholy. That can be a powerful emotion in art, and in music as well.

MB: Well, I don't wake up and think "*Let's make another sad picture*", so I do think some of it is internalised with regards to what I'm drawn to and what experiences I've had. On the positive side, melancholy is a contemplative mode and I think it's natural for paintings to have an atmosphere of contemplation because they don't move. I'm drawn to understatement as far as plot goes. I'm so disappointed with the majority of movies and TV because there's just too much going on. I'm happy to just sit for a while. Maybe I'm unusual in that way, compared to the average viewer. So, I think all of those things affect the work. I think a lot about class and the frustrations that a lot of white working-class people experience in this country. I'm very interested in how complicated that is. I'm aware that I'm painting people in a political moment that is incredibly fraught. Melancholy is maybe a way of giving space for those experiences without appearing to either mock or celebrate. I think I'm trying to tread this ambiguous ground in between those things.

DC: The lighting in your paintings is distinctive. It's a hard light like the sort that comes through a car windshield or a shop window. It falls upon the human figure in geometric patterns in quite a specific way.

MB: The light and the colour to me are really linked, and they are often tied to a particular time, or weather, or technology. For example, someone will be green because they are in the glow of the television, or something like that. A lot of the mood, the setting, and the staging comes from a colour environment. The shapes that happen are often just me trying to find some

solution to entangle the figure in the context they are inhabiting. So often those geometries of light you're talking about come about far along in the process as I try to arrive at some kind of solution. I might need a disruption, so a contrasting colour or shape comes in. Maybe the face arrives too quickly or maybe it feels too descriptive, so it needs something that makes it relate to other things in the painting. Those stark geometries for me are a kind of quilting of the reality that the characters inhabit. Where there are sympathies between a shape of light and the side of someone's face and maybe overhanging foliage, you know, the different elements. There are these rhymes and recurrences that allow a painting to move and exist as a whole. I think, if I was working from a photograph, I wouldn't be able to see those things. They come from just a lot of time looking at the painting. Sometimes the paintings will be in the studio for a year or more. Not necessarily with me applying paint but just with me living with them. I usually try to get them to a point where I can stand living with them, and then they might sit for months and months, before I take another run at them. And sometimes what they need then is some kind of disruption to re-catalyse everything into life, having been inert for nine months or something like that.

DC: The effect of the lighting is very dramatic, almost cinematic.

MB: I like that, thank you. That quilted quality, for me, is like a composite of moments. It is cinematic but it is also compressed. This is something I think about a lot, like, "*What work becomes a painting and what work becomes a film?*" And the works that tend toward compression, condensation, and contemplation – things being pressurised into that frame – want to be paintings. They hold your breath for you. And things that need to unspool tend to become films. The films are intended for galleries so they

are always loops, so to me there is still a boundary that the characters don't leave. We stay contained within the arena of the loop.

DC: Your films resemble the paintings come to life. What's the relation between the two? Because they are very closely linked, aren't they? Some of the paintings look like they could be stills extracted from the films.

MB: You're right, they are very closely linked. Sometimes the ideas come to me more as a scenario, like a sequence, more than they do as a kind of frame. It's as simple as that. I just want a different kind of duration. Paintings are forever *there* in whatever that moment is. Maybe my interest in animation is sometimes about extending that present a little bit further?

DC: Can you explain how you make the films? I'm saying *'films'*, but they are very painterly, stop frame animations.

MB: They're definitely painted. Essentially, it's a stop motion process. What looks like a camera angle is a painting, and each time it changes to what appears to be a different camera angle, it's just a different painting. And to make something move I adjust whatever's going to move by a small degree, photograph it, and then I just repeat that a hundred or a thousand times, and you see the movement.

DC: So, you literally erase something and paint it back in a slightly different place.

MB: That's right, over and over again. You know, people respond with a certain amount of dread to painting things out but it's just totally natural to me. The thought of making things move around, it's exciting. I don't feel any anxiety about it. In a way, it's a relief to paint things out.

DC: The traces of the erasure are very beautiful, they make the films so alive.

MB: I saw William Kentridge's hand drawn animations in the late '90s, and suddenly I could imagine all kinds of films, because the process was so simple, but the results were really rich. I started making animations more than twenty years ago,

but it took me a long time to figure out how to make them so they didn't look like Kentridge, because everyone identifies that stop motion approach with him. Eventually I figured out that if I just used paint, it wouldn't look like his stuff. That made all the difference, and it felt like mine.

DC: What are you currently working on?

MB: What I really like is that I can keep going to the town in my imagination, and I can just turn a little bit. My new animation takes place in the auto repair shop in the main street, and I turn away from that a little bit and there's football practice, and I turn away from that and there's some women after work meeting up at a picnic table in a park, and they're just trying to get a little breather for themselves. That's one of the paintings that's happening in the studio right now.



David Caines
focus group
2023
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm

Courtesy of the artist