

MATT BOLLINGER

Collective Conscious

15 April – 12 June 2021

Having summarily executed my previous opening, somewhat in the manner of Manet's painting; *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, and like the left-hand fragment of the National Gallery London's version, I have cut it adrift. It now ineluctably languishes in the footnotes¹ as little prologue, something between a remote pandemic *round robin* and a love letter to an unknown 'a chara'. Do with what you will – read/ignore.

Back to the *viande et patates*... Manet's powerful masterpiece of a group of white males shooting three unarmed men of colour, was politically sensitive even at the time of painting in 1868-9, due to its *republican* sentiment set against the backdrop of Napoleon III's reign, (by *republican*... I mean in the true sense of a system of constitutional, democratic government, as a replacing ideal for an abolished monarchy, predicated on privilege and an essential collection of inequities). Being democratically elected(ish) in 1848, Charles Louis Napoléon Bonaparte political tenure encompassed all manner of political 'approaches': Having run out of constitutional road by 1851 when he could no longer be re-elected, he forcibly seized power, and forgetting all that *so-last-century* malarkey with the barricades, guillotine and cake, effectively installed himself as the last monarch to lord it over France, reigning until 1870. Ring any role-model-aspirational-bells?

During the coincidental interim between the originally intended opening date of Matt Bollinger's first solo London exhibition, *Collective Conscious*, with mother's tankstation, and its COVID-rescheduled commencement, the world watched in shock and horror as a former POTUS, somewhat akin to Napoleon III, refused to acknowledge his constitutionally-determined end. But rather chose the path of sowing mistrust and division, cynically lying and manipulating a willing and malleable audience with the express purpose of revving-up and unleashing a neo-Nazi MAGA mob to storm the (politely left open doors of the) spiritual home of American democracy. A profound complexity lurks in the components and causes of such a revolt, wherein 'MAGA' is a symptom not the cause; yes stirred and permitted, unforgivable, angry, fueled by racism and misguided ideas of a diminishment of expected rights to superior privilege – fooled by history into a complex confusion of freedom with self interest and a dangerous relationship with guns. But also a product of disillusionment, failure, abandonment, irrelevance, unwantedness, by-passed by time, circumstance, economics, geography, industry, technology, everything. The 'westward' imperative just kept moving, leaving all in its wake behind, laying bare a powder keg that has been two hundred years in the making.²

In many respects Matt Bollinger's work is arguably a powerful and brave latter-day inheritor of Manet's emotional purpose in the *Execution of Maximilian*³; politically, in the isolation of the three right hand figures, whose complete *aloneness*, in the face of an inevitability of fate is palpable – the callous 'removal' of the unwanted, undesirable. Secondly in both scale and style, wherein one of Manet's major contributions to the history of painting is the significance he placed upon the importance of the brushwork, being equal to that which it depicts. The most explicit expression of this in Bollinger's work is found in his stop motion animations, wherein the brushwork figuratively drives the narrative. Finally, the locked-in, disconnected concentration of the right hand soldier, who appears beyond caring, as to what he does, what his actions might potentially mean, over and above the simple focus upon the moment (perpetuated) of cocking the rifle. An emotional isolation and empathetic failure born of a blunted collective consciousness. Injury to a nation becomes personally distanced, semi-to-subconscious-hurt.

As an American artist of evident social conscience Matt Bollinger's paintings, drawings and stop motion animations confront the emotional tangle of failed promises and dreams with remarkable sensitivity. The illusive zeitgeist of 'America' water-trickles through his hands into

the Missouri. Growing up in the outskirts of Kansas City and the Ozarks seems to have sketched the outlines and inevitable content of Bollinger's powerful, energetic art. His beautifully observed and confidently rendered paintings in *Flashe* and acrylic on canvas have a complex set of lineages, beyond their geo-political inheritance and core subject matter. Not only does the stylisation of his figures, as simplified, physical forms, tubular, smoothed and rounded by poor diets and near-obesity, appear to have a formal and aesthetic connection to both classical Roman sarcophagus portraiture and Mexican magical realism, but more evidently he acknowledges the works' greater cultural grounding within American modernism tradition; from Diebenkorn to Hopper. There are also clear but tangential correlations to the depression-era Federal Art Project (FAP)⁴ – as well as other international artistic movements orbiting around conscience-driven figuration and social realism. Bollinger's particular genius, however, is the thoughtfully tender depiction of the everyday social derelictions, the small socio-economic diminishments, but human gains and bonds, generated by ravages of the post-analogue, Anthropocene epoch: Boredom, social and financial impoverishment, purposelessness, meaninglessness, lostness. This is not unique to America, the mid-west or anything so specific, but indeed a shared experience of innumerable locations re-iterated across the contemporary world – a collection of lost Applesseed utopias.

Having studied and actively pursued writing as a discipline alongside painting, Bollinger's work blurs lines between fact and fiction. Drawing from memories of his upbringing in the Midwest and buoyed by documentary and social research and interviews, Bollinger has created a cast of characters that frequent both his paintings and his fictitious townstead of Holmes, MO, a composite of his current home upstate NY and the Missouri Ozarks of his childhood. Paintings and animations episodically share apparently trivial incidents and inconsequential moments in their very real-feeling lives. Collectively, inevitably, the pent-up emotions build, saturate, leak.

In *Pump*, a young woman we come to know as *Honeysuckle*, perhaps on her way to or from a work shift, partially gasses-up her car, filling it with as much as she can afford. In *Under the Oak*, the same woman under a tree holds an almost unnoticed cigarette, her resigned body language suggests that 'the smoke', and perhaps many other things aside, are more matters of habit than pleasure. Smoke from the cigarette curls laconically across a pollution-rich pink and yellow background. *Candy*, an older woman who works at the local Walmart struggles quietly with the illness that keeps her home. Watching TV passes time. A DVD of *Lethal Weapon 2*, plays half-attended and un-central to the composition, on a palely glowing screen. Two washed out figures depicted cropped head-to-waist vie for the viewers' attention amongst shelving units housing framed photos, knick-knacks, Garfield tchotchkes, a small ceramic frog... The foreground is dominated by a coffee table, a half-finished TV dinner, a soda, and to its left, a close-up of Candy's oxygen tank. Her stoner son runs the local lawn care business.

Entertainment Center, a dominating 198 x 314 cm diptych, depicts two figures within a iridescent store interior going about their business, while ignoring nineteen screens behind them that run 'breaking news' of yet another mass shooting. Only last week in 'real' reality, Boulder, Colorado – half-mast flags at the White house, but troubled teenagers, unchallenged, purchase semi-automatic assault rifles. Bollinger considers this as "an inverse of collective unconscious"⁵, wherein repetition and routine blunt a capacity to notice, caring and hurt do not go away, but like Manet's gun-cocking soldier, shift internally. The painting's right hand corner hosts racks of PlayStation wargames.

The *Manetesque* scale of *Entertainment Center*, is off-set by a series smaller sensitive, affectionate paintings, predominantly of women, "*Honeysuckle* and her seven sisters" as Bollinger lovingly referred to them in an IG posting, as they departed his Ithaca studio⁶. They are a testament to his artistic intent, which while of course critical, analytic, of systems over people, also deeply comprehends and is judgement free. Matt Bollinger's extraordinary *tour de force* stop motion animation, *Between the Days*, completes the *collective conscious* of the show, with an audio track that spills laconically across paintings and connects disparate, lonely lives.

In a new article, the American poet and critic John Yau, writes movingly of Bollinger's work; "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. 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 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."⁷

Matt Bollinger (born Kansas, 1980, lives and works N.Y. State) graduated from Kansas City Art Institute (2003) with a BFA and an MFA from Rhode Island School of Art and Design (2007). His work has featured in recent museum exhibitions; South Bend Museum of Art, Indiana (2020); Phillips Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania (2018); Nerman Museum, Overland Park, Kansas (2016); Musee d'art moderne et contemporain, Saint-Etienne (2016). *Collective Conscious*, is Matt Bollinger's first London solo exhibition with mother's tankstation.

Your own free apple tree topia: Go to your local store, purchase your favourite variety of Apple – shopping local is good. Eat it, keeping the core. Extract the pips, rinse in water and wrap in a moistened paper towel folded carefully into a sealed zip lock bag. Place on a sunny window ledge and leave for about 10-14 days. Open bag, unfold paper towel, remove and careful plant out the germinating seeds (little pale green tails coming out) into small pots with potting compost. Nurture, water, etc. When large and sturdy enough plant out; garden, common land, neighbours yard, etc.. Ten years later...

¹ It's hard to know where or how to start. I do believe I'm a bit out of practice; Shock/Horror! The last exhibition text that 'skipped' off this keyboard – pandemic slowed – was all of seven months ago! It *doesn't* seem like yesterday *either*. Since then, beyond-brain-fog and like much of the world, we have been mustering and improving our culinary, baking, gardening skills, and have become somewhat obsessed with making Bircher muesli (recipe on request) and germinating seeds courtesy of various DIY YouTube videos– there's a link there, although not perhaps immediately obvious. A lemon pip from lockdown one (L1), is now, as of writing this, a statuesque 67 cm high, and four seeds gleaned from Bircher-grated Pink Lady apples (see), from L3, a mere three weeks, are a tender, under-plastic-dome-nurtured, 6-7cm. Time becomes space – ten years times, apparently they should supply bountiful Bircher muesli fruit.

I'm digressing from my digression. A sage person once advised as how to march beyond mental writing barriers the dreaded block; just sit at your working spot (wherever most comfortable) and in longhand or type, scrawl whatsoever comes to mind, but importantly, without interruption and for a solid forty-five minutes. Then stop. Go away (not you). Don't read or think about it until returning the next hour / day / whenever. But after a complete break cleanly analyse what you have done – look for the unexpected. The likelihood is that it will be *godawful* nonsense, but equally, the technique *is* capable of throwing out inner surprises, things you didn't exactly know you were going to say or even thought. Hence, thinking about apple seeds has taken me to view Disney's 1948, seventeen minute socio-moral 'educational' animation of the Johnny Appleseed legend on YouTube (don't - the saccharine sentimentality of "pioneer spirit" married to religious rigorousness [pink clouds are apple blossom in Heaven] would stunt any growth), but it made me think of how the westward imperative of America, *Appleseedtopia* has devolved to state of departure and sadly vacated much of America. The upwards spirit of endless hopes and dreams have (debatably) dwindled to endless dreams of hopelessness over the lifetime of a good tree, a mere two hundred years. Space becomes airless time... The folklore of *Johnny Appleseed*, hero and pioneer apple farmer in the 1800's, remains one of America's fondest. There really was a *Johnny Appleseed*, John Chapman born in Leominster, Massachusetts in 1774. His utopian dream was to produce so many apples that no one would ever go hungry. Although legend paints a picture of Johnny as a dreamy wanderer, planting apple seeds wherever he went, throughout the countryside, reality reveals him to be a careful, astute and well-organized businessman, who over a period of nearly fifty years, bought and sold tracts of land and developed thousands of productive apple trees.

² Then we all waited ... for an inevitable show trial (*Impeachment 2*)... that only served to expose the entirely reconstructed definition of *republicanism* (or fallacy) within its general usage in American politics. It no longer has it anything to do with the said *ideals* of republics or a republican systems of government as noted above, but rather, 'Republicans' (GOP), are simply the TV channel denotation of those opposed to 'Democrats', which is rather like what it sounds: in that, (a) authoritarianism = the greatest good of the richest and most powerful few (also largely whitest and/or malest), being antithetical to, (b) democracy = the greatest good of the greatest number. Arguably more concerning than the riot, only seven GOP Senators broke ranks to find the ex-president 'guilty' of a self-apparent crime of inciting violence and insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, placing all the others in the historically invidious camp of those *that passively look on at nascent fascism*.

³ Ostensibly, in that we are looking at two major, large-format artworks, painted approximately one hundred and fifty years apart, that deal with 'public' and politically loaded shootings – one directly; Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*, the second obliquely, Matt Bollinger's *Entertainment Center*. Given that, *Entertainment Center*, should be considered a 'History Painting'.

⁴ The FAP, Federal Art Project was the visual arts arm of the Great Depression-era WPA, a Federal One programme, it operated from August 29, 1935, until June 30, 1943. It was created as a relief measure to employ artists and artisans to create murals, easel paintings, sculpture, graphic art, posters, photographs, Index of American Design documentation, museum and theatre scenic design, and arts and crafts. The Federal Art Project also operated community art centres throughout the country where craft workers and artists worked, exhibited, and educated others. The project created more than 200,000 discrete art works, some of them remaining among the most significant pieces of public art in the U.S.A.

⁵ Matt Bollinger's email expands: "The works in the show all deal with repetition and routine as well as the small and large disruptions to those cycles (the school shooting, the young man almost getting choked under the dumbbell, not having enough money for a tank of gas, being unable to leave home because of illness). The body of work also looks at a precarious slice of the white, working class. I've been pondering increasingly the culture of whiteness as I paint and many of the attendant problems (racism, sexism, xenophobia, and so on)." January, 2021.

⁶ I toss this in casually as I love its referential pull to Ulysses' return to the rock, following his journey, trials and travails... climate emergencies, pandemics, insurrections, new beginnings...

⁷ John Yau; <https://hyperallergic.com/633850/matt-bollinger-working-class-elegy/>

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