

Wednesday, December 13th, 2017

## A cigarette is smoked, a phone is answered: Matt Bollinger at Zürcher

print

by Dennis Kardon

**Matt Bollinger: *Between the Days* at Zürcher Gallery**

October 29 to December 21, 2017

33 Bleecker Street, between Lafayette Street and Bowery

New York City, [galeriezurcher.com](http://galeriezurcher.com)



Matt Bollinger, James' Weight Room, 2017. Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher Gallery, New York

Chardin, Morandi, Hopper. If there's a genre in the history of painting that teases Zen drama from the mundane details of daily existence, Matt Bollinger must be its new master. While his work doesn't fit into conventional categories like animation or conceptual art (though it partakes of both), I consider Bollinger a Proustian painter, constantly in search of the lost fourth dimension, the one to which painting alludes but cannot really express; to answer the question, "Where has time gone?"

*Between the Days* is a stop motion animation that is also the title piece in Bollinger's fifth New York show at Zürcher. Shyly located behind a curtain off to the side of the gallery, the projected video is the conceptual center of this exhibition of 13 dark, moody paintings of suburban middle class life. *Between the Days* is but the latest step in Bollinger's gradually evolving investigation of how painting can bridge the divide between the representation of static moments and the passage of time.



Matt Bollinger, Before Work, 2017. Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 27.5 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher Gallery, New York

Search in vain for bravura passages of gooey oil paint: his flat, dry surfaces are made with acrylic and Flashe. Although there is a great moment when in the animation of a moving assembly line, the paint suddenly grows thick and clotted as the machinery comes to an abrupt halt. Bollinger paints in an economical straightforward manner that he is nevertheless able to leverage poetically to convey changing moments in the animation. For instance, a dancing mandala on the wall, created with successively rendered patterns of the light shifting through a leaded glass door, is used to illustrate the waning of the day. And then when Bollinger makes humans move, their successive silhouettes accordion out as a wormhole to the next pause between movements.

But actually, humans are somewhat interlopers in both the animation and the paintings.

The interiors Bollinger depicts in his paintings are the real stars here. Bollinger uses them to stage eccentrically detailed still lifes and lighting changes. A sports trophy, a bust of Jesus, a photograph of a soldier posed against a flag, an inspirational poster of a buff torso next to cinder blocks and bleach bottles in the weight room, or a cigarette burning in an ashtray, all convey reams of cultural and class information about the intermittent occupants, reinforcing moods of tedium and loneliness.

This focus on interiors and the abstract language that Bollinger has developed in the service of representation inevitably invites ambiguity. Having viewed the video online before the exhibition, I was slightly mortified, upon reading descriptions of it, to realize that I had mistaken the two separate mother and son protagonists for a single person. But upon viewing it several more times to understand how I could have been so embarrassingly unobservant, a few things became obvious.



Installation view, Matt Bollinger: *Between the Days* at Zürcher Gallery, video projection

Though apparently mother and son, the two characters appear serially, never together. The mother's hair is as short as her son's and the clothes she wears on her chunky, middle-aged body are genderless. A person wakes up at 5:45 to a clock radio, and has a cigarette, and we then see a young man cleaning up the empty beer cans and emptying ashtrays from the night before. But is it the same person? He then gets into a car, and is held up by a passing train trundling across his view. But the person getting out of a car at a factory in the very next frame turns out to be Carolyn, the mother. I thought we were still with James. (We only know their names from painting titles and their relationship is never stated). The video follows Carolyn through her workday and into the evening.

James doesn't appear again until late at night after Carolyn has consumed several beers and an episode of *Law and Order*. When it finally becomes obvious that James is the one returning later to pump iron in his weight room, one wonders where James has been all day, anyway? Understanding that there are two separate people *does* clarify the dramatic implication of a son cleaning up for his indifferent mother who is never actually with him. It makes the utter painful loneliness of the video even more poignant. But for esthetic purposes this knowledge doesn't really change the mood of quiet desperation Bollinger portrays.

Though *Between the Days* is centered on the idea of narrative, nothing much ever happens, except to paint the aloneness that fills most of our solitary moments, and is at the center of an artist's creative existence. We see light change from night to morning to dark again, sunbeams project onto walls from windows, shadows lengthen, screens glow, and passing headlights momentarily illuminate interiors. But a story-like plot, in the conventional sense, neither powers the paintings nor the video. A cigarette is smoked, a phone is answered, a post-it note is posted. On *Law and Order*, the TV show that fills the screen as Carolyn watches, people have emotions. Bollinger even shows us an eye welling up and a tear that trickles down a cheek, but Bollinger's protagonists are always impassive. The dramatic climax comes as James's late night weightlifting results in a painful grimace as he struggles to hoist the barbells off his chest, and then, to our relief, is freed by tipping the weights off to the floor.



Matt Bollinger, Living Room, Night, 2017. Flashe and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher Gallery, New York

While Bollinger employs his paintings to animate his video, the paintings are not mere artifacts of the animation process, as he also uses the video to intensify the emotional charge of the paintings, adding a memory of time that has elapsed without producing any real change in the situations that the paintings represent. Each painting, while related to the others, conveys a separate experience.

The mournful solitude of *Living Room, Night*, 2017, with its greenish glowing TV eye (depicting a tearful one) and illuminating a still life of empty beer cans and cigarettes while echoing a little orange rectangle of a neighbor's window, contrasts sharply with the bustle of *Carolyn's Office*, illuminated this time by a computer screen and filled with disembodied hands performing various tasks. These hands were added after the fact,

and were not a part of the video that depicts Carolyn in her office. They are reminiscent of the disembodied hands in Fra Angelico's *Taunting of Christ* in the San Marco monastery, Florence.

Bollinger links these two paintings with a detail that is so subtle it easily escapes notice, and is representative of the complex emotional visual structure he has built. Barely visible in the darkness of a shelf in the left side of *Living Room, Night* is a lightly nuanced praying-hands sculpture. It's a nice little touch, especially as it rhymes with the rounded arm of the couch as it catches the glimmer of the TV. While scanning the clutter of *Carolyn's Office*, however, perhaps drawn there by the diagonal series of rectangles that moves from computer to chair back to the surface of the filing cabinet in the lower left, one might notice there, along with a KU mascot decal and a Garfield postcard, another praying hands, this time as a refrigerator magnet. I like to think it expresses Bollinger's faith that his work will endure.



Detail from Matt Bollinger: *Between the Days*, 2017, stop-motion animation, 17:59 minutes. Photo: Dennis Kardon

print

### ALSO ON ARTCRITICAL

**Passage: Donna Dennis at Lesley Heller - ...**  
5 years ago · 2 comments  
"Ship and Dock/Nights and Days or The Gazer", on view through June 30

**Invader of Space: Leonardo Drew on his ...**  
4 years ago · 1 comment  
Interview follows on from earlier encounter in 2016

**When Women were easier to obtain than ...**  
2 years ago · 1 comment  
His early work, about to open at the Phillips Collection

**The Restlessness of Thought: Adrian Piper ...**  
5 years ago · 2 comments  
A Synthesis of Intuitions is up through July 22

**War of In**  
6 years ago  
Why this c done with Art Fair

### 0 Comments

1 Login ▼



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS



Name

♥ • Share

Best Newest Oldest

Be the first to comment.

Subscribe Privacy Do Not Sell My Data

DISQUS