

Williams, Gilda, *Matt Bollinger*, *Collective Conscious* review, *Artforum*, Vol. 60, No. 1, September 2021

REVIEWS

ARTFORUM

September 2021.

Matt Bollinger

MOTHER'S TANKSTATION

The blistering Kansas City sun was a central protagonist in Matt Bollinger's exhibition "Collective Conscious," joining a cast of characters that also included Candy, a middle-aged woman alone in her shadow-filled living room in the painting *Daytime Soaps*, 2020, and Carolyn and James, a mother and son observed in the stop-motion animation *Between the Days*, 2017, as they go about their soul-numbing daily routines. Toward the beginning of that eighteen-minute-long work, the pearly glare of Midwestern morning sun gently spreads over a car window before James arrives and drives to work, as he does every day. Sunlight later streams through the decorative glass insert of their front door (the nicest model available at Home Depot, the artist has said, pointing toward the family's middle-class aspirations), casting elaborate, dancing patterns on the empty hallway wall. Artificial sources of light include the countless screens lining the back wall of a Walmart in the diptych *Entertainment Center*, 2020, where customers and an employee grimly rifle through merchandise. Back in *Between the Days*, an illegible Excel spreadsheet, complete with painted flashing cursor, illuminates Carolyn's computer. Fluorescent panels glow in her office and in James's basement gym, where he nearly injures himself when overstacked barbells almost fall on his chest—as if to literalize the crushing loneliness.



Often the viewer's vantage point in *Between the Days* seems that of a ghost, haunting the empty house while Carolyn and James are out, or seated in the vacant driver's seat as James approaches his car, leaving semierased silhouettes behind him. Later, again looking over an unmanned steering wheel, the viewer sees a freight train roll by, pulling a line of low rectangular carriages—like a fleet of coffins. Mother and son chain-smoke, presumably to hasten death and bring an end to the cycle: sleep, work, home, beer, repeat. Nobody smiles save for the cartoon cat beaming from a cereal box.

Attentive Foley—synced sounds of unhurried footsteps, the spraying of cleaning fluid, buzzing summer insects—and atmospheric guitar music (composed and performed by the artist) contribute to this twenty-first-century update on the alienated American everyman/everywoman, from Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) to Lester Burnham in *American Beauty* (1999). Bollinger's people are blessed with "everything"—jobs, a car, a decent home, table lamps, magazine subscriptions—while consumed by emptiness. That familiar existential

tale of comfortable quiet crisis turns mesmerizing in Bollinger's labor-intensive painted animation. Each figure's multiple on-canvas outlines reinforce the sense of gestures repeated daily, of routines practiced so habitually their imprints linger in the room.

The frame-by-frame depiction of every small act—answering a phone, examining stacks of bills, lighting another cigarette—laboriously painted on the thickening canvas and photographed, again and again, materializes the characters' struggle through another tiresome day. Carolyn's tiny friendly wave to a colleague—a timidly raised hand, repainted in countless micro-movements—visualizes the struggle behind even the slightest social connection.

A close-up of James's multiple moving feet walking down to his home gym recalls Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (No. 2), 1912, while a scene of colleagues arriving at Carolyn's workplace echoes the Lumière brothers' seminal *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895). But those artists' modernist enthusiasm for the marvels of art and progress is absent here. Edward Hopper's all-American ennui—baking in the summer sun or killing time in a late-night interior—comes to mind instead. Bollinger's paintings combine the stark simplicity of figures in a graphic novel with dramatic chiaroscuro lighting in storyboard-style compositions. *Between the Days*' semi-outmoded technology hints that the work is set a few decades ago, possibly loosely recalling Bollinger's own Kansas City-area upbringing. Or perhaps nobody in this stagnant world ever bothered to update their TV, desk phone, or swirling screensaver—amazingly rendered here in moving paint. Mostly, the imprecision of the *Between the Days* era denotes a mental amalgam of multiple unchanging decades. The repeated loop of Carolyn and James's eventless day suggests they're trapped in a viscous, unbearable present.

—Gilda Williams

Matt Bollinger,
Between the Days,
2017, painted
stop-motion animated
video, color, sound,
18 minutes.