

RELIQS FROM ANOTHER WORLD

A conversation between artists

ESSAY BY Matthew Ballou

ART BY Joey Borovicka





Joey Borovicka's modest studio in Springfield, Missouri, is every bit as tightly bound and curious as his paintings. Located on a quiet street and situated in a converted single-stall garage, the interior is warm and smells of wood, oil paint and coffee. Inspired by Borovicka's evocative paintings, I wanted to visit with him to find out just how closely they are related to the Midwest. Borovicka grew up and was largely educated here. He spent time across the region, from "Kansas to Oklahoma and then Missouri, moving from farming to small town suburbia." He attended Missouri State and Indiana universities.

"I'm no doubt a product of the Midwest," he says, "but an art that represents or is quintessentially Midwestern is not the motivation that drives me. All spaces interest me, suburban spaces, retail spaces, outdoor spaces, dream spaces. These cabin-like places keep appearing partly because I'm fascinated with things in between. They're on the outskirts of town, out on the edge in the border between the known and the unknown."

Of course, Midwest is not just an appellation for a region. It is also indicative of time and experience. It encompasses the chaotic continuum between the Louisiana Purchase and the Missouri bellwether, between the Oklahoma City bombing and the riots of Ferguson. Precious Moments figurines coexist with the meth racket, and Walmarts mesh seamlessly with grand art museums. Miniature pump-jacks coax a meager flow of oil from fields overseen by distant wind farms.

Collections and



Don't Mistake Solitude for Peace
previous spread: *I Am My Own Hiding Place*

contradictions make sense to Borovicka. "I love sifting through things. I think of my grandma's garage sales. I think of basements and attics where we store things from our past and forget about them. I have dreams about exploring spaces, forgotten rooms in my own house, forgotten areas of my town, underground places, retail spaces. I don't know why, but I love those dreams, and that's the feeling I'm chasing in my work."

Grandma's lace on the end tables and Dad's wooden childhood toys punctuate the family order and sense of time. That's the thing about small Midwestern towns, homes, objects and people: They grip continuity. When I ask about this notion, Borovicka clarifies: "Objects are more my forte than people. My grandmother has a letter opener that has long fascinated me. I painted it in grad school after coming

home and looking at it closely for the first time. It has a pearl handle, and on it is stamped the name of a bank where she got it as a promotional gift back in the 60s. It still looks brand new, and looking at this object, I'm struck with the fact that a giveaway letter opener in the 60s was made well enough to endure for a half-century with no signs of aging, and just as fascinated with the fact that my grandmother could hold on to this object for so many years so effortlessly. In an age of waste, this is a relic of another kind of world."

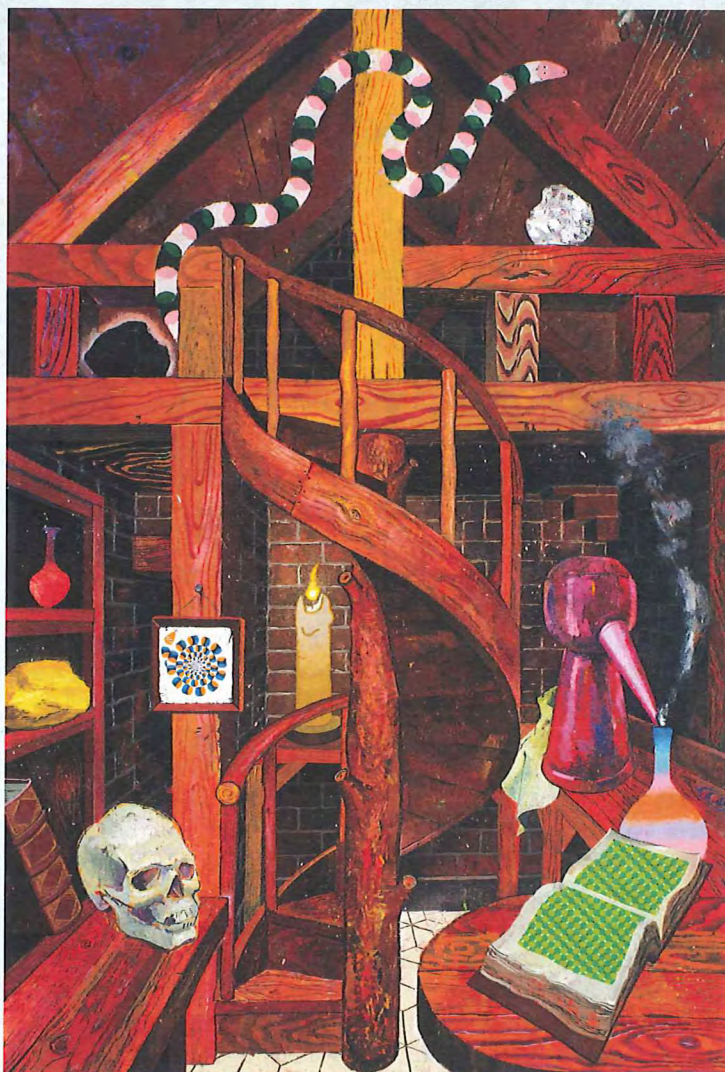
Gathering relics from another world is at the heart of Borovicka's approach, which somehow feels unmistakably Midwestern. His artworks reference everything from old school radio dramas to Saturday morning cartoon aesthetics of the 1980s. Vincent Price and Andy Griffith make appearances alongside

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Grandpa’s Zippo lighter and pocket knife. The paintings are as rigorous in construction and as fine-tuned as the workings of a watch. Their compositions interlock like a woodworker’s dovetail joint. Yet they also convey a quiet strangeness that undercuts their forthright qualities; there is more going on here than meets the eye.

Borovicka’s works exist between the soulfulness of *Stand By Me* (the novel and the song) and the existential dread of *Twin Peaks*. This is to say absence is the key to presence in these artworks. Gazing upon Borovicka’s depictions of interiority, we navigate a lived-in zone that holds the evidence of human activity. The missing people “collect things, build things, futz around,” according to the artist, and we follow the evidence. These painted spaces resist true decrepitude. They are not abandoned, but weirdly, uncannily, no one is there. Are the inhabitants just out of sight around the corner? Are they merely beyond the door or



The Alchemist



The Watcher

windowpane? Perhaps, too caught up in our own assumptions, we are unable to perceive those who do exist here. Or might we the viewers be the inhabitants?

The secret life of the interior amounts to a sincere reflection of the self. Although not necessarily true or entirely honest, an enclosed, private dwelling is always an *authentic* image. It is a situation in which what we believe about ourselves is made real and is palpably experienced. Thus any interior we enter is, in some sense, all of the interiors we have entered. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard

says as much when he comments, “[T]hrough dreams, the various dwelling-places of our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days” (5). So Borovicka’s childhood spaces, rooms where he experienced *Scooby Doo* and *The Smurfs* and where he played in miniature arenas of stylized action and adventure, carry on their influence in the interior of his studio. He muses, “If we’re being honest with ourselves, don’t we all have an instinct to hide away? Isn’t it easier to stay home than to go out?” The values of the adult painter and the child at play “co-penetrate” the tableau of

his painted rooms.

In Borovicka’s paintings we see his intense scrutiny of weird objects and affectation of mysterious moods while also noting his intentional omissions and stylizations. The greatest interior-focused artworks are very frequently about this kind of curated attention. The question of what is missing or lacking invites a sense of oddity and unease. Borovicka also attempts to shift the visual logic from straightforward representation toward a kind of astonishment (Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 78). In this state, the mood of experience

and feeling of beingness are elevated through materiality, color, form, scale and symbolic association into an expression of encapsulated intimacy.

That quality of enclosed intimacy is telling. Rather than asphyxiating or imprisoning us, it offers a kind of expansiveness. “These interiors originally came from a sense of claustrophobia I had in my life. I felt a great deal of anxiety and a desire to be elsewhere, though ‘elsewhere’ was an illusion. The interiors are claustrophobic but somehow a relief.” There is security in being inside, as Bachelard notes when he writes, “Too much space smother us much more than if there were not enough” (*Poetics of Space*, 221). Exteriority — the “big sky” and endless plains of the Midwest — may elicit the *horror vacui* of the infinity of outer space or the terror of falling. Certainly skies are a part of these painted scenes but only briefly, fleetingly. We never see the earth through the roughed out windows of a backyard shack. The spreading gradient of post-sunset gloaming — full of puce and cobalt and fuchsia — can be glimpsed from our enclosure, but no wide angle is allowed. Maybe it is as Wendell Berry observed: The landscapes of the Heartland “are now virtually deserted,” and true connection, “such as it is, between land and people is now brief and infrequent” (Berry, *Our Only World*, 117). The whole world, it seems, is inside.

Thinking specifically about his painted fragments of exterior space, Borovicka notes, “I think the swaths of color outside the windows of my interiors function like that... I think we automatically



Under the Radar

perceive a world beyond the wall without consciously thinking about it, and it's interesting what you find out about the inner-workings of your mind when you examine why you automatically arrived at whatever conclusion you did.” The painted interior becomes a dream of an exterior.

Borovicka's exclusion of the exterior protects those who dwell within his rooms. If we don't look outside, we can continue as we always have done. In small towns all over the Midwest, a similar logic can be found. The sight of the horizon is dangerous because we reflexively wonder what is beyond that edge. The eye then is a threshold between the observed finite and the imagined infinite, between the rooms we carry within (Kafka, *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 1) and the rooms before our eyes. Perhaps this is why Borovicka's windows hide the horizon from us, so we can stay within

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without distraction. They are taken away from the world. This dislocation is key to the visual silence Borovicka creates.

The obsessive paintings of Joey Borovicka, made to contain a sense of psychological interiority by depicting stylized interior spaces, are meant to be contemplated. They engender a slow reading and obtain greater effect over time. Like the Midwestern world they inhabit, the paintings reveal themselves at a reserved pace and reward ongoing observation. While the symbols and references they depict indicate the existence of a wider reality, the artworks are practically self-contained worlds. Crafted with internal consistency and a well-honed vernacular of form and structure, the paintings perform a tight philosophical maneuver justifying their meaning by *virtue* of their enclosed quality. Borovicka’s unique vision has

provided ideal cells to house Middle American hermits, “loners whose misguided obsessions are enabled by their confinement.” ▲

Bibliography

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Berry, Wendell. *Our Only World: Ten Essays*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2016.

Kafka, Franz. *Blue Octavo Notebooks*. Exact Change, 2011.

Quotes by Joey Borovicka are from two interviews, April 14, 2018 and December 30, 2018, as well as a couple found here:

Borovicka, Joey. “Statement.” Joey Borovicka. Accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www.joeyborovicka.com/statement/>.