

## Victor Boulet: WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINTING.

By Alfred Mac Adam



Installation view: *Victor Boulet: WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINTING.*, Lubov, New York, 2023.

### On View

#### Lubov

January 13–February 26, 2023

New York

Reilly Davidson has packed thirty-six Victor Boulet (b. 1969, Norway) paintings into the Lubov gallery: their psychological impact on the unprepared visitor almost warrants a warning label because their static, mundane violence leaves us bewildered. All painted between 2019 and 2021, these works of varying size do not constitute the uniform, coherent body of work one might expect from an artist showing in this gallery for the first time. This is because they all relate to Boulet himself, autobiographical in that what they depict is Boulet in various moods, reacting to a particular context or psychological state and transforming it, not into a concrete

image of a place or thing but into a figural image of himself metamorphosed into the object of his scrutiny.

Boulet is the latest incarnation of Baudelaire's "painter of modern life," a flâneur with the jaundiced eye of someone wandering around while recovering from a physical or mental trauma. As Baudelaire writes, "The convalescent, like the child, enjoys, in the highest degree, the ability to interest himself keenly in things, even those which appear the most trivial." This fascination with banality we see in a series of four 10 by 8 inch oils on linen, all titled *I Want Coffee*. In all four there is a coffee pot with a fork leaning against it, but what we are seeing is not the object per se, but rather Boulet's varying frames of mind as he perceives the coffee pot, sometimes with a red base and a green cup, sometimes with an orange cup, the fork sometimes resting on its tines, sometimes resting on its handle. The object is the same and yet never the same because the artist changes with each new viewing. Even these supremely banal objects become fraught with significance, transformed into fetishes, or inhabited by ghosts when Boulet does the seeing.

Three large (63 by 51 inch) paintings hang next to one another. Not a triptych, but all with the same title: *Binman*. A binman is a garbageman, though Boulet's is not emptying garbage cans but sitting in an interior. He's a mess. In the first (left to right), he's got a wailing baby on his lap, presumably held in place by his gaze since his hands are elsewhere. One foot is bare, the other covered with a huge, dark green boot that complements the light green of his sweater. He's going nowhere because there is nothing to do with a screaming infant except stare at it in parental hell. In the second image, the binman has been duplicated and dismembered. One of his heads is at one end of a sort of bed, the other head at the other end, while his limbs are stuffed below. The green of his sweater is replicated in a pitcher filled with nothing, not half empty, not half full, because optimism, pessimism, and salvation are all out of the question here. In the third, a disconsolate binman stretches out a huge, deformed hand as he pleads for something, perhaps for someone to help the other person in the picture, who seems to be deceased.



Installation view: *Victor Boulet: WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINTING.*, Lubov, New York, 2023.

What this non-triptych populated by fragmented figures represents is bereavement. It's what we feel when we lose a loved one: an emptiness, as if a piece of us has been stolen. Bereavement is what Holden Caulfield experiences in *Catcher in the Rye* and what Victor Boulet brilliantly expresses in these heartrending images of human bodies that have lost coherence: a dismemberment of the self, reflecting what has been torn away from us.



Victor Boulet, *Sadman Boulet*, 2020. Oil on linen, 18 x 15.75 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lubov, New York.

The hapless binman reappears in *Binman (Heritage Problem)* (2020-21) in a family portrait. He's lost his green sweater, having replaced it with a monstrous green glove covering his right arm. He's still one shoe off, one shoe on, but perhaps his wife can help him since a huge green boot is growing on her own right arm. Either the squalling brat has disappeared, or it's grown up to be the little girl perched on mommy's lap. This is no commemorative portrait, not a fond memory, but the family as a nightmare

prison. Binman's final appearance, *Binman (Hope Street)* (2020–21) has the poor man dismembered and impaled, his green sweater shot full of holes. There is clearly no hope on Hope Street, which becomes a theater for Boulet's ironic inversions of portraiture and still life—the literal meaning of *nature morte* is entirely relevant here.

Where it all ends is a small 18-by-15-inch self-portrait, *Sadman Boulet* (2020). Now the artist too is burdened with the binman's green glove, which instead of protection is a kind of leprosy or some kind of grotesque camouflage to conceal an absence. All Boulet's antecedents—Ensor, Nolde, the Expressionists—come home to roost in this stunning depiction of melancholy, the capstone of a superb inaugural show.

## Contributor

### [Alfred Mac Adam](#)

**Alfred Mac Adam** is Professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He is a translator, most recently of Juan Villoro's *Horizontal Vertigo* (2021), about Mexico City.