

## Being Together in Time

by Sky Goodden

Final: Oct. 27, 2021

*We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.*

- Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Before I sat down to look at Andrew Morrow's paintings and write this text, I couldn't tell you what I was doing. I was conscious, but in the way we all are, at home, moving in a sort of half-waking flow. I believe my cat swished around my ankles as I stood in the kitchen, waiting for toast (a lucky guess.) I might have moved to the piano in an act of procrastination that is typically un-volunteered? The days pass like this, without much sense of conscious punctuation.

We have spent the past twenty months shorn of the casual witness: the anonymously-known but intimately-felt presence of the peripheral observer. Your fish monger can serve as this; your local variety-store owner; the Italian neighbour whose name you still don't know, but you trade in tomatoes and plums. We have read about how much these relationships affect us, and how much their absence can be measured in our own diminished sense of ourselves. And conscious or not, we have likely noticed it.

Andrew Morrow – who would really rather this text not be about Covid, and I get that completely – has done something remarkable in the time of Covid. (Sorry, Andrew. I'll keep this tight.) The casual witness he has brought to his 'sitters', who are largely unknown to him, manifests a shared relationality – that quiet, observational exchange – that so many of us have been missing.

It reminds me of the French writer, poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who famously put his attention to the "common-place," or what he termed "source reality," as a font for the imaginary. Morrow made similar grist of a fallow mill. Beginning with a call-out on Instagram, he brought strangers together for "studio sessions" where they were invited to live their lives near their screens – eating dinner, watching a movie, playing guitar, reading, petting the dog (there is much loving attention paid to our loving animals). Morrow painted them in real time across this intimately-shared space. Having only worked occasionally from live models before, these new challenges also introduced new invitations. Within a sitting there is the requirement to get the image down more quickly, Morrow told me, moving through the value and tones of his drawings faster, and then deepening and arranging the various sitter "satellites" back in his studio. And you can see it: the paintings vibrate with their own gestural making, a loose but alert confidence in hand; art possessing the same life it discerns.

Glissant's ideal poet is a real-time "builder" of a grammar and syntax, and while this attention to construction can produce an ultimate *langue*, it's the act of building that received the crucial status. He emphasized the "poet writing" over the "poet thinking." Morrow has moved his hand through a time of stillness and forged passive connection with strangers in a period of isolation. (He's ambivalent about whether the paintings are the trace to the event, or the event themselves.) A redistribution of significance, either way, is always interesting. And the paintings remain an essentializing principle – without them, these are just people hanging out on Zoom, after all, one party observing another that pretends not to notice. But the process of their coming into being, bringing people together for passive friendship, for peripheral attention, for quiet connection ... the work contains the social *doing* that holds their pulse.

Inviting variety and chance encounter into the space of painting (an activity typically single-authored and often isolated), Morrow also sourced the "commonplace" at home. Putting to work leftover latex paint from his children's bedrooms, he patches over pewter-grey tracks that signal joint, gesture, and foundation, and shifts in daisy yellow, streaks of Carolina blue, shimmers of blush and coral pink, all interchangeable and overlapping. The palette suggests an interior universe whose whorls of energy, like dust motes souging in the kitchen light, cohere us around even our dullest, most puttering activities. They swirl out of open windows and across alleyways, a ripple of buttery yellow ribboning around a woman's arms as she pulls up her hair; surfacing across another's couch, as she regards her cat. Legs go tucked beneath a writer at her kitchen table, a blue waving calmly by to help sustain a day's diminishing light. From pink-faced dawn to sun-drawn afternoon to the inevitable, inner-lit and navy night, Morrow's Brueghel-like *mélange* of joyful, contemplative, searching scenes – altogether distinct to this time of isolation (sorry, again, Andrew) but also eternal – continue to reflect back on their making. "All these people supporting my practice; it's not me," Morrow says; "it's not the painter alone in his studio making their work. There's this network sustaining it, which feels very, very different." He takes a moment more, to reflect. "My job is to find the painting."