

## Mathew Reichertz: *The Fight*

The seven canvases that make up Mathew Reichertz's multi-panel painting *The Fight* are at once tough to look at and extremely visually compelling. What at first appears to be a melee, on inspection, is revealed as repeated images of the same pair of figures locked in battle, each pair progressing forward in the picture plane, successively increasing in scale from the top to the bottom of the canvas. Suggesting the sequential nature of narrative and the physical reality of film (episode following episode; frame following frame), this work depicts a battle that ranges across recognizable landmarks of a particular city – this one – Halifax. (Locals will recognize Seaview Park, Point Pleasant Park, the downtown core, the waterfront, etc.).

But just what, really, is going on?

A closer look reveals that the two figures, while always the same, break the narrative convention within each canvas, and across the whole work. “A” does not follow “B” here. A shirt that is torn and bloody in one “scene,” is whole again in another. A blue jacket is torn off only to be back on the back of its wearer in the next part of the composition. The figures writhe and grapple, but sometimes seem to be laughing – or are those grimaces of pain?

There are no answers, of course, just more questions.

Violence, as an immediate threat, is not as prevalent today, for us here in the urban West, as it was even thirty years ago. Most of us will never experience the kind of brutal, random violence that we read about so often in our media. However, we still fear it – and too often we also seem to revel in it. (How many murders, beatings, rapes and other acts of brutality did you watch on television last night?)

Look at the construction of these paintings. The paired figures scale up as they come closer to the viewer in the picture plane – they proceed through the space as a series of stills, jumping though time and space as if animated, not sequentially exactly, but not randomly either. Reichertz's evokes the conventions of Renaissance space, the use of painterly tropes of perspective and composition that are so familiar to us that we don't even notice them anymore – these paintings look like paintings should, despite their provocative subject matter.

Whatever the real genesis of these images, that is, no matter whether they are sourced in invention, representation or convention, these paintings, as with any paintings, are staged. This seven-part series is a constructed image, as fake as any WWE wrestling extravaganza, as serious as any brawl in the middle of a hockey game. Reichertz is presenting violence to us in a way that demands our attention, and that resists the desensitization of the television drama, the distance of the television news. These works with their multiple views, non-linear narrative and disjointed sense of time destabilize us even as they, through their classic and ordered structure, reassure us. The “push and pull” of formalist painting is here in both the composition and the subject matter.

What is going on? Whatever the imagery, perhaps what is really going on is a clinic on how a painting works – how paint on canvas becomes an image and an idea, how a mute piece of cloth smeared with coloured pigment can communicate. *The Fight* is a battle to be articulate in a medium whose dumbness is a given. That is the constantly remarkable thing about good painting: a surprising, and when you really think about it, completely unexpected, eloquence.

– Ray Cronin  
Director and CEO  
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