

september 15, 2020

dear M,

this pandemic, i planted a tree, fixed a bookcase, began to roast my own coffee beans, and ticked off a thousand and one additional tasks from my to-do lists. i reached out to folks near and far, wondering and hoping that i might find some way to reconcile this novel coronavirus with our world. i am comforted to be included in your compact bubble of pandemic contacts. i was unprepared for you to get sick, and i was paralyzed when you were sickest. your request, that i should always be close to X if you did not survive covid-19, still grabs me.

you have always been candid with your thoughts, even if they are not pleasant.

i do not know if i was more angry or more confused when a decade ago you pronounced, "i am not your audience". i left that conversation with an outward chuckle but much anger and sadness.

time passes, and i receive a note about a particular painting or a phone call that begins "i was looking at your website . . .". it is curious that you discovered i had been to montello residency. i was alone in the nevada wilderness for two weeks and communicated with no one for twelve days. i made drawings and paintings for no one to see, and i wonder now, if this is how it has always been—that the work is really just for my own eyes, and if this is the case, is this what you meant?

*for me*, the work recalls an idyllic world, imagined creatures, and a child's freedom from responsibilities. as you will know, and perhaps to your dismay, i have also strived to make the paintings beautiful. now, however, the transcendent possibilities of order and beauty seem no more than blinders. my insistent and forward gaze towards modernism's unfulfilled promise yields to the present.

*this is not the world i dream of.*

i recall many years ago when you phoned and exclaimed, "i realized that i'm not white." you must have been in new york, or dallas. i was in the sunroom of my apartment in chicago. i remember *quizzing* you to make sure you were speaking of 'white' and 'whiteness' in terms we had discussed even longer before. i wonder why i had any questions at all—you never questioned the construction of race or white privilege's invisible hand.

what took so long?

i wanted to call you my american friend.  
you wanted to be my non-white friend.

i have drawn and painted text over much of the work from montello.  
the october exhibition will be called *ABOLISH WHITENESS NOW*.

lots of love to you, R, X, and C, too.

james

p.s. posters coming your way soon.