

If you're looking at Phillip Adams' work for the first time, you'll probably want to put your nose up close to the surface. Admiring the craftsmanship, you might wonder, "he made this with charcoal?" But marveling at the photorealist dexterity risks missing what you can only see by stepping back. A vast emptiness surrounds many of the figures. Though larger than life they seem small. Though unwavering they appear vulnerable.

In the *Solipsist* drawings, we can see this in the tension between empty space and spaces reflected in sunglasses. The images summon a kind of severe empathy. They ask, who have you become because of where you've been—finding selfhood through compounded spaces.

In *Jamie*, we see 20 and 30-somethings in an inflatable structure, the kind seen at street fairs and children's birthdays. This playful persona embraces absurd spaces, stubbornly, forever young. In *Jeff*, we can see a tranquil lake reflected, where you might go to gnaw on big questions—to look within.

If the reflections in the *Solipsist* drawings invite us to build a story, *Matterhorn* extends that narrative flirtation. Building on the sense of grandiose and absurd, the characters take the stage as they occupy this vast setting. In several pieces we see allusions to the Disneyland attraction modeled after the mountain. Fantastical rollercoaster architecture grafted into the Alpine landscape; what can we make of our impulse to mimic what already exists—superimposing decorative overlay on nature's pokerfaced landscape.

If *Solipsist* characters filtered space through their Aviators, *Matterhorn* figures shield themselves from their craggy surrounds. But rather than a hiding place, their hoods embolden them—leveling their impervious gazes.

Broadly, these drawings belong to a conversation that began in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when, independently, three Englishmen travelled through the Swiss Alps. From their accounts, the philosophical notion of the *sublime* emerged—a grand aesthetic in nature, incommensurate with mere beauty. One of those Englishmen, Joseph Addison, wrote that "The Alps fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror."

A similar sense of horror is palpable in the writing of Edward Whymper, the mountaineer and illustrator who first climbed the Matterhorn's summit. In "Scrambles amongst the Alps in the years 1860-69," he grapples to find language for this new space.

*The sun was setting, and its rosy rays, blending with the snowy blue, had thrown a pale, pure violet far as the eye could see; the valleys were drowned in purple gloom, whilst the summits shone with unnatural brightness: and as I sat at the door of the tent, and watched the twilight change to darkness, the earth seemed to become less earthy and almost sublime; the world seemed dead, and I, its sole inhabitant.*

For Whymper, the "purple gloom" of the iconic and deadly Matterhorn inspires sublime alienation. So what love might we find in Phillip Adams' *Matterhorn*? A love born of the self-knowledge growing behind mirrored glasses? One inspired by an assembly of unvanquished Bohemian clerics? One sheltered from the glare of unnatural brightness? An otherworldly place of sublime absurdity where we are not alone.