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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

A Wild Trip From Bathroom to Gallery



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Dan Colen working on a “painting” made with chewing gum in preparation for his Gagosian Gallery exhibition.

By CAROL VOGEL

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THE story of how of Dan Colen landed his first major show at the Gagosian Gallery sounds a bit like an art-world version of one of the Disney tales that sometimes show up in his painting.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Dan Colen, far right, and assistants drag a canvas behind an all-terrain vehicle for a work that explores how randomness can transform something, one of Mr. Colen's favorite themes.

One drunken night after an exhibition opening in 2006, Mr. Colen and Sam Orlofsky, a director of the high-powered Gagosian Gallery, found themselves sitting around the artist Cecily Brown's Manhattan studio. The two men started talking.

"I'd seen his work here and there," Mr. Orlofsky recalled. "And I remember friends told me about it, too. The market was on fire back then, with one gallery after another opening in Chelsea every week. Since I knew one day something was going to happen to this guy, I suggested he do a show with us."

Mr. Colen laughed at the idea, Mr. Orlofsky remembers: "He said, "Yeah right, where am I going to show, in the bathrooms?" "

Which is precisely what happened.

Mr. Orlofsky persuaded his boss Larry Gagosian to let him put six of Mr. Colen's paintings — canvases that the artist had found in thrift shops and then embellished to make his own — in the bathrooms of his 24th Street space. Priced from \$10,000 to \$12,000 apiece, they sold immediately.

Since then, Mr. Orlofsky and Stefan Ratibor, a Gagosian director in London, have been following Mr. Colen's work closely, visiting his Manhattan studio regularly and making a point of seeing new pieces wherever they have been shown.

But it is not simply his precipitous rise — from showing in the cramped bathrooms of the 24th Street gallery to filling the entire space in just four years in his show that opens Friday — that gives Mr. Colen's career the quality of a fable.

Mr. Colen came to New York in 2001 after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, and soon became — along with his artist friends and collaborators Nate Lowman, Ryan McGinley and Dash Snow (who died of a drug overdose last year) — a poster child for hard partying and brash stunts in the pre-crash art world.

In Berlin four years ago, Mr. Colen caused an uproar by pasting fliers for an exhibition all over the city that pictured him from the neck down, a Jewish prayer shawl hanging from his erect penis. In 2007, he and Mr. Snow got volunteers to spend days shredding some 2,000 New York City telephone books, then invited 15 artists to roll around together — naked — in the waist-deep results at the Deitch Projects, the gallery on Grand Street.

“Those days were pretty wild,” Mr. Colen, 31, admitted, in an interview in his Manhattan studio. “I was living a severe lifestyle, hooked on everything” — drugs, alcohol, cigarettes.

“It all sort of snowballed out of control when Dash died,” he added.

But shortly thereafter, he said, “I realized I wanted to be there for Dash's daughter,” Secret, now 3 years old. So he went into rehab and stopped it all.

His work since has continued to deal with many of the same themes it did in the old days — “places where subcultures commune; the meeting of high and low; questions of how much intervention a work of art requires to make it transformative,” as Mr. Orlofsky put it. But it is generally less outrageous.

On Monday, Mr. Colen stood in the middle of the Gagolian Gallery. A strapping 6-foot-6, he seemed surprisingly calm with just five days left until the show's opening and almost nothing in place. “We've still got two paintings to finish,” he said.

Mr. Colen uses the word paintings loosely: one of the works in question, a large abstract canvas that at first glance looks like a kind of crude homage to Jackson Pollock, also had the unmistakable whiff — literally — of the chewing gum in which it was covered. Nearby were bags and bags of the stuff: Orbit, Trident, Juicy Fruit, Big Red. Mr. Colen, whose work is often illusionistic in one way or another, said he first started using the material in 2005 and 2006, in trompe l’oeil sculptures of boulders with bird droppings and wads of gum painted on them. He used real gum as a reference, he said, and “the problem was it looked so much better than the paint.” So he began to explore the artistic possibilities of the stuff.

First he and his studio assistants just started chewing — “everybody would have to do it all day long, it was so crazy,” he recalled — but too little usable material resulted: he produced only three paintings in a year. So he started experimenting, heating the gum up until it got to just the right consistency and then throwing it across a canvas, which created a kind of three-dimensionality not unlike the impasto of thick paint. “I couldn’t invent that combination of colors,” he said of the rainbow palette of his gum “paintings.” And gum dries like acrylic paint.

Confetti is another favorite material in the new work; Mr. Colen uses it in pieces that explore the role of chance in making art. By throwing it onto canvases and seeing where it lands, Mr. Colen said, he “eliminates having to make decisions.” And though he also uses paint to make canvases that only look like they’ve been strewn with confetti, he bases those on photographs that he takes of the real thing, “recording a frozen moment that avoids invention,” he said.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Grass stains made on canvas from dragging.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Mr. Colen throwing confetti — also a favorite material — to create another work exploring the role of chance in the making of art.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Mr. Colen also works with chewing gum; right, an assistant preparing some for the canvas.

That idea of the accidental — how one seemingly random gesture can utterly transform something — comes up frequently. There are paintings created by dragging canvases through wet grass or made by leaving a canvas on a muddy city pavement in the rain.

The first thing visitors to the show will see is a worn brick wall. Weighing some 50,000 pounds and made in Bethel, Conn., it is based on a photograph of Michael Jordan

playing with children against a brick wall decorated with spray painting. “At first I thought I would spray paint it, but when I got it here I liked the way it looked.”

And because it was made in two sections there is a ridge, running horizontally, another matter of happenstance. “It makes it a work of art, not just a brick wall,” he said of the ridge.

An earlier piece, from 2004, replicated a wall in Mr. Snow’s apartment that was covered in sloppily taped-up snapshots, notes, fliers, newspaper clippings, cartoons and photographs — but in this case each element was a meticulously painted reproduction of the original. (It now belongs to Charles Saatchi, the British advertising magnate and gallery owner, and has been shown many times, including at the Royal Academy of Art in London and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.)

He often uses film stills from Disney movies for inspiration. One painting, which shows bottles on a table, has been exactly copied from a still of the Disney cartoon version of “The Three Musketeers.” Two years in the making, he happened on the image while working on a series of paintings of a candle, also lifted from a Disney still.

But he hasn’t let that image of the bottles hang by itself. In front of it is a row of 13 gleaming Harley-Davidson motorcycles parked a foot apart.

“At first I wanted to stay away from motorcycles because of my bad-boy reputation,” he said. “But then I thought I could have fun with them, with the images of subcultures and gangs.”

So for months Mr. Colen rode his bicycle past a Hells Angels clubhouse in Manhattan, each time stopping to photograph the motorcycles. From his pictures, he determined the model and year of several of them, obtained those models and obsessively reproduced the customizations, down to the bolts and decorative flourishes, including a cowhide strip running down a gas tank of one.

Right before the show opens, Mr. Colen is planning one more tweak. He is going to kick them over so they fall like dominos. “The guy who knocks them over is the artist,” he said. “Because he’s the creator of the situation.”

DAN COLEN: POETRY

WHERE AND WHEN Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1111; gagosian.com. Through Oct. 16.