

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



On View: Dan Colen, Art World Bomb Thrower, Gets Respectable. Sort Of.

Julie Baumgardner



“At Least They Died Together (After Dash)” is the centerpiece of the artist Dan Colen’s retrospective at the Brant Foundation in Greenwich, Conn., which opens this Monday.

Thirty four is hardly old, but Dan Colen has done a lot of growing up since bursting on the art scene a decade ago, after earning a degree in painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. Colen came to prominence as a member of the Irak crew, a posse of graffiti writers, artists, pranksters and drug users that also included Ryan McGinley and the late Dash Snow. Those formative years are central to “Help,” Colen’s new retrospective at the Brant Foundation in Greenwich, Conn., which opens this Monday. “There’s been an arc in my work and an arc in my life,” says Colen, who still maintains a punkish air, but is now a monied property owner (of a fully operational farm in Pine Plains, N.Y.) with close relationships to art-world power players like Peter Brant, Charles Saatchi, Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian. The exhibition, he says, is an opportunity “to look at the old work and the new work, and really for the first time to consider what ties it all together.”

Its centerpiece, “At Least They Died Together (After Dash),” consists of a pair of box trucks turned on their ends and buried in the Brant Foundation’s manicured polo field. Colen says he took the title from a collage Snow, who died of a heroin overdose in 2009, gave him. “At its original point of conception, I don’t think he was at the forefront of my mind,” he says. “Losing him really gave me an intimacy with death that I hadn’t had before, like literally in my own life, I came really close to the precipice myself. The sculpture, for me at least, provokes this thought, ‘is it a burial or is it like a planting?’ ‘Is life going to grow out of them, or more of a monument?’ ”

Much of the work in the show reflects on those wild early days, including a video of “Nest,” the legendary 2007 installation-slash-happening he created with Snow at Deitch Projects, in which the duo presented their interpretation of a hamster’s habitat with torn phone books, pillow feathers and copious narcotics. A more recent work, the sculpture “Love Roses,” a beaded curtain of crack pipes he created in 2011 with Nate Lowman, turns drug paraphernalia into a kind of mosaic. “A lot of my work is about equalizing things and kind of destroying any barrier between what’s high and low, or what’s deep or what’s shallow, complex or simple,” he adds. “I hope I’m ever-changing.”

“Help” opens to the public May 12 and runs through late September at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center, 941 North Street, Greenwich, Conn., Monday-Friday 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., by appointment only, 203-869-0611, brantfoundation.org.