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Dan Colen: how the bad boy of New York art discovered the good life
He was part of the New York-based Warhol's Children set – but now he's moved to a farm upstate. As a retrospective of his work opens, Dan Colen talks about burying trucks in fields and why he uses bubblegum and bird shit instead of paint

Edward Helmore



Dan Colen's At Least They Died Together (After Dash), on display in Greenwich, Connecticut. Photograph: Farzad Orwang

At 34, Dan Colen has lived a series of art narratives. He's been bad boy of post-pop New York, a central figure in a creative, degenerate set dubbed Warhol's Children. He flamed out, sold out and was critically beaten up. Now he is transformed and re-engaged, living on a farm upstate, according to the rhythms of the seasons and the needs of his livestock. If that was all there was to it, one could expect to find Colen propped up with a shepherd's crook. He's not – or not yet. But his work has evolved in a direction that's at least sympathetic to his new environment.

On Sunday, at collector Peter Brant's polo field gallery in Greenwich, Connecticut, Colen will unveil a new piece: two semi-articulated trucks buried vertically like giant sentinels. Colen surveys his new work, *At Least They Died Together (After Dash)*. Have the trucks dropped from the sky, or grown up out of the earth? "That's the question," says Colen. "I don't know the answer."

The piece, it turns out, is sympathetic with much of Colen's body of work, a selection of which is on show until September in the semi-retrospective *Help!*. It includes graffitied rocks; bird shit paintings; the famous, mirror-image *Holy Shit*; a canary sanctuary made of trash metal; *Love Rose*, a decorative curtain made of Chinese glass crack stems; small studies of extinguished

candles (from Pinocchio); and large abstract canvases depicting confetti or with chewing gum affixed.

Colen's aesthetic choices are consistently his own. "I'm trying to equalise the world to say there is no high and low. People have often thought I was fucking with them when really I was just trying to share that sentiment."

But beauty in trash, of course, depends on the material used. Colen found that he didn't need bird shit to make highly textured bird shit paintings – it could be done with oils. He stoops his 6ft 6in frame to examine a painting. The chewing gum on it is drying out and crystallising. "It's about tapping into a material's power and figuring out what it wants to do," he considers. "The painting has changed over time. The colours have become rotten and pungent, more complex. It's become more interesting."

One of the emerging themes of Colen's show is fragmentary colour. The canaries provide it in one room; chewing gum in another. In a third, there are confetti paintings, for which he found a way to take the decision-making out of abstraction by photographing the confetti and using the image as a map. No decisions – just an artisan making a mark. "A lot of my work is about what's abstract and what's pictorial. Is it bubblegum, or is it an abstract painting using bubblegum? The energy comes from walking that line and watching things dip this way and that."

There is other work on show at the Brant Foundation, including monstrous action paintings using street trash and a new series of crushed flower paintings, as well as small, delicate oils that depict journeys, often pastoral, or season shifts. "A painful thing to do," he says of the brushwork. "Hard work."

Colen often imbues lost objects with symbolism or meaning, like the dimes he collects for his late grandmother and for the artist Dash Snow, Colen's close friend, whose death from an overdose in 2009 made him resolve to curb his own addiction. "I was trying to discover things. I got stuck and used up all the creative energy," he says now. "Now I've found a new approach that gives me new energy and direction."

A cluster of ruined blue bicycles hangs from the ceiling in the last room. The piece, he explains, came from a time when he needed to be out of the city. "I started by collecting newspaper racks, shopping carts, psychic signs. I saw three blue bikes chained together. I was wondering what to do with them. Then I started seeing pathetic blue bikes everywhere. People had forgotten about them. They were abusing them, and I thought of myself as saving them."

For the opening on Sunday, the junkyard saviour will light odourless incense inserted in their frames. It will give the effect of a delicately smouldering, suspended funeral pyre. Or at least, that's the plan. "I never wanted to set myself apart," he says. "I'm trying to relate, and to locate what we have in common."