

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE AESTHETE

### **The Curious Case of Dan Colen** **A Trash-to-Treasure Millennial Artist Realizes an Idea, and then Moves On**

By Phyllis Tuchman



In late spring of 2013, with his works on display all over town, painter Dan Colen became the face of Millennial artists, a generation that hasn't had a discernable identity. At Frieze New York, Gagosian Gallery featured his oval, practically transparent sculpture comprised of glass basketball backboards. In the East Village, at Okó, a hole-in-the-wall satellite of Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery, Colen is exhibiting works inspired by Disney's Fantasia and by the Pre-Raphaelites (through June 15, 2013). And, at auction, the 33-year-old made record prices. Twenty-four hours after a tall, multi-hued floral canvas executed only last year realized \$714,000 at a Christie's benefit organized by actor Leonardo DiCaprio, another large painting, covered with wads of red, blue, and cinnamon chewing gum, fetched \$900,000 at Sotheby's.



*Bottles of various oils, and jars of pigment powder.*

Colen's artworks could not be more different from one another. There's no disconnect between his working with representational or abstract imagery, making sculptures or paintings, using readymades or his own hand. Back in the day, critics would have complained that he was all over the place. But that's part and parcel of the Millennial aesthetic. Instead of developing art in a logical progression, solo careers are beginning to resemble group shows. Colen, for example, is less concerned with matters of style than he is with aspects of process.

On a radiant spring day, Colen, a 6'6", curly haired guy with hazel eyes, said, "I'm on a journey. I'm not interested in singular things." Rather, he believes, "It's important to work with the unknown. I take something to a certain point, and then move on."



*A work in progress.*

First, Colen has an idea; after that he figures out how to realize the concept. Often, he uses odd materials: chewing gum, dirt, grass, flower petals, powdered color, metal studs, motorcycles, whoopee cushions. He's been dismissed as juvenile for this as much as he's been praised—but the Oko show includes two highly reflective abstractions that evoke celestial night skies, which might have been executed by the Color Field master Jules Olitski. Somehow, Colen ends up with works that relate to the same aesthetic issues of color, light, composition, texture, weight and dimensions that always have engaged painters and sculptors.



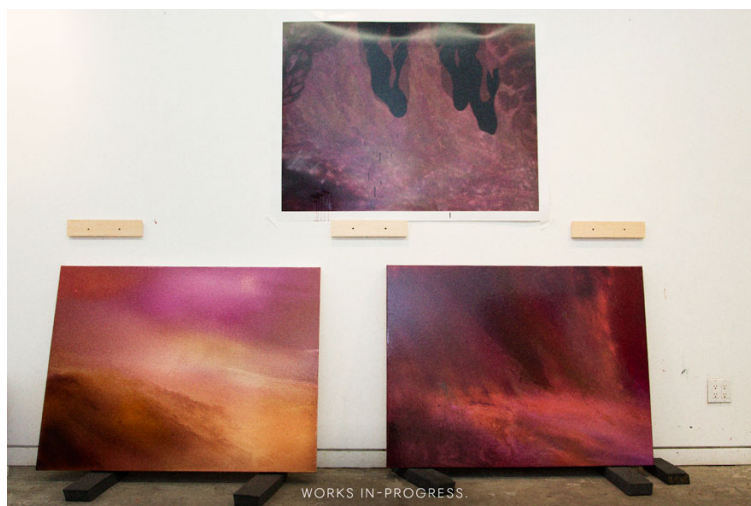
*Dan Colen in his studio.*

The artist's journey has been unusual from the get-go. He's made a name for himself along a route that's been frequented by artists like Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, and, yes, Jeff Koons, rather than the Abstract Expressionists or the Minimalists. Glossies and mainstream media, rather than art magazines, have popularized him and his career. A few years ago, the New York Times described how Colen got his foot in the door at Gagosian: A director at the high-powered gallery hung three paintings in a bathroom and sold them. Quickly. (Since then, the artist has exhibited at the dealer's outposts in Rome, Paris, Athens, London and New York.)



*A longview of Dan Colen's studio.*

In 2006, Colen's works were included in the Whitney Biennial. His big break publicity-wise, however, came in January 2007, when he and his pals, photographer Ryan McGinley and the late artist Dash Snow appeared on the cover of New York Magazine. The three were heralded as Warhol's children and photographed in their briefs, appearing to be asleep like babes in arms. The article inside recounted their drug-induced, hedonistic Candide-like adventures rather than offering detailed analyses of their art.



*Works in-progress.*

When Snow died of an overdose in the summer of 2009, Colen entered rehab and quit drinking. Today, his career is more about his art than his antics, and he waxes poetic on the subject of materials. The other day, just before he left for his latest show in Italy, he discussed the

relationship between his sculpture and readymades. He mentioned how that's because the objects he uses are raw materials, not appropriations, the catchall phrase of recent art history. To fabricate the sculpture at Gagosian, for example, he had to bend stiff, glass backboards six feet long. (We "pretended the basketball backboards were like clay," he says.)

Studio assistants help Colen solve these problems. As a breeze wafts through his light-filled space, he says, "I have an idea that's greater than what I could do on my own. There's an energy where everybody is invested." And, he adds, "I exploit eight human beings creating together. A single person couldn't do it."



*Dan Colen's jacket on a work table with ashtray.*

Sometimes the crew is as in the dark as he is. Colen doesn't hire skilled artisans because he's not looking for the sort of perfection that, say, Jeff Koons is after. "Jeff sought out experts in different fields to locate his specific visions," he says. "I have more faith in process." In the end, his group of workers function like scientists trying to find an answer by trial and error. Tellingly, the genial, soft-spoken artist actually refers to his art objects as "experiments."

"I don't have a clue," he's admitted. "That allows me to turn on a faucet, and pour out art."