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Dan Colen, one of the city's pioneering downtown artists of this century, moves into a sprawling Brooklyn studio and is the focus of a new solo show at The Brant Foundation.

BY RACHEL WOLFF PORTRAIT BY BIBI BORTHWICK



Dan Colen's *Murda Murda*, 2010



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BRANT FOUNDATION (PORTRAIT); ROBERT MCKEEVER

In 2004, Dan Colen debuted what perhaps remains, a full decade later, his best-known work: *Secrets and Cymbals, Smoke and Scissors (My Friend Dash's Wall in the Future)*. The piece is a kind of painted sculpture—a wood-and-Styrofoam armature upon which Colen meticulously hand-rendered and carefully placed the alarmist *New York Post* covers, R-rated personal snapshots, exhibition flyers, missing cat notices, sketches, ticket stubs, trading cards, magazine clippings, comic strips and other miscellaneous ephemera that his late friend and collaborator Dash Snow would collect and pin to the living room wall of his Lower East Side apartment.

The *trompe-l'oeil* technique Colen used to create this facsimile is staggering, as is the effect. It is a specter of a very different time and place—one in which Bush was in office, Saddam Hussein was a hunted man and downtown Manhattan still housed, spurred and enabled the kind of high-octane creative energy that is found primarily in the outer boroughs today. Colen was thinking somewhat spiritually at the time, he says, about “places where people congregated and shared ideas and belief systems and sites like the Western Wall or Mecca that held that energy for these communities.”

But he was also thinking about his peers “and a certain wall in Dash’s apartment behind the couch where we would all sit around—and this [wall] being that kind of vessel for *our* ideas and beliefs,” he adds. “I had a fantasy of the building crumbling around it and just this wall being left and it being discovered by another generation”—a self-fulfilling prophecy, if there ever was one. That time of shared ideas and frequent collaboration, Colen adds, afforded him some of his “biggest spurts of learning, even about my own stuff by getting access to the intimate parts of somebody else’s creative process, to see what it’s like to be there with somebody when they’re going through the doubt and the questioning and the believing...and seeing what it means to father the faith and go and create something.”

The wall—which, since Snow’s fatal overdose in 2009, has come to serve as something of a shrine to its onetime owner as well—was acquired by the paper magnate and omnivorous contemporary art collector Peter Brant and will play prominently in a new solo show of Colen’s work opening at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Greenwich, Connecticut on May 11. But here, it will serve as both a monument and a starting point. The exhibition, Colen explains, is seeking a continuum between the very different bodies of work within his oeuvre, demonstrating both the breadth of his output and the subtle connectivity between his determinedly varied methods and aesthetics. They range from abstract tableaux made from chewing gum to *trompe-l'oeil* paintings of free-falling confetti to frenetic wire-and-wood installations inhabited by live canaries, as will be in evidence at Brant.

Born in New Jersey, trained at RISD and once synonymous with what is now a somewhat dissipated downtown New York scene (that also included Snow, photographer Ryan McGinley and frequent collaborator Nate Lowman), Colen has entered a very different phase in his career. He now splits his time between town and country, for one, spending half the week in a sprawling sculpture studio located about 15 miles south of Hudson, New York. He’s also in the process of relocating his painting studio from TriBeCa to Brooklyn’s waterfront Red Hook neighborhood. “I’ve been downtown for the last 10 or 12 years, so it was a big decision,” he says. “But I’m basically able to get 10 times as much space. I’ll be able to open up in this vast space. The second I have it, I know I’ll know how to use it. I love spending time in Manhattan and I have lots of things I want to do there, but I have no interest in *being* in Manhattan. I’m really excited to have my daily life in Brooklyn. People with ideas and no money can still have opportunities there.”

Colen is thinking differently about his work, too. “Earlier on, I was more resistant to helping communicate these underlying things and more interested in just focusing on what I was working on at the time,” he says. “At this point, I’m just a lot more open to and interested in helping shape how it all fits together.”

Oscillating between pure representation and playful readymade, he wants to facilitate a curiosity in the viewer, explore different types of mark-making (be they via paint, confetti, gum or in-gallery airborne birds) and add layers to the experience itself. “I think it’s often easy to just stay on the surface,” he says, so he aims to embed within his work a sort of “trapdoor” that gives viewers “less of a choice to enter or not”—a wormhole into his process, a glimpse into his world.