

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Creators Project

Dan Colen Exposes Himself | Studio Visits

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“At home” is perhaps the best way to describe the air inside Dan Colen’s Red Hook, Brooklyn studio, though the American artist might insist on a more active descriptor: at work. Assistants shuffle between tasks as impossibly mundane as they are unassailable. Strike the canvas. Press the stud. Chew the gum. Repeat. Yet here, inside the shell of the pre-Civil War warehouse, I am surrounded on all sides by that difficult beauty Norman Mailer called masculine. A factory, no doubt, but one driven, not led, by the clash between Manichaeian and mechanistic urges.

Of course, it’s also really beautiful. Like, people pay top dollar for weddings in the same Liberty Warehouse building-beautiful. Add, on top of that, the fact that many of the works I’m surrounded by will sell for upwards of seven figures, and you begin to understand the size and scope of this, but one of Colen’s New York abodes. No matter what way you cut it, a 12-foot-tall painting requires a 14-foot wall, and to get 16 paintings done at once requires 18 people.

It’s raining when I arrive, and the 36-year-old artist doesn’t quite know what we’ll talk about. Not for lack of words, but, in fact, *things* to talk about. The past days have been spent packing, shipping, and securing 55 individual works to Dallas, where Dan Colen awaits his largest-ever retrospective, at Dallas Contemporary, part of the Dallas Art Fair. “There’s kind of, like, different stuff going on,” Colen susses, and it becomes the most complicated use of the word I’ve ever heard—stuff. Not for lack of trying, though; in fact, Dan is one of the easiest artists I’ve

ever listened to, and not just because he's talking to *VICE* again. His work makes high-concepts, the kind you only appreciate after a long talking to, seem like a waste of energy, the same energy that explodes, quite literally, out of his work.

It's that selfsame energy I feel as we stroll past what's less a "greatest hits" album—those are in Dallas—than the "deep cuts"; of course there are gum paintings, confetti, flowers, and bird shit, but they're the bookends of each series, sat alongside the scaffolding for tomorrow's masterpieces.

The energy suspended between every floor is at equilibrium, not in the static way, but at the *triple point*, where fluid, form, and formation meet. The dynamic between artist and assistants bears less the Pop-authoritarianism of Tom Sachs' studio than what I imagine John Baldessari's CalArts classes to be like: full of the tension, inside and out, that promises something great. And yet, while it's impossible to talk about Dan Colen's work without mentioning pressure, I fail most spectacularly to get even one rise out of him.

Instead, he finds his own intentions in the equal and opposing forces within himself, palpably invigorated every time he notices something new in the way he describes works he's talked about probably one thousand times each. And it happens, often. "My process, as it applies to everything you'll see, has been almost-educationally-based. I'm not comfortable getting better and better and better at one thing. I really like that versatility, and I really like starting from scratch, and so a lot of the most inspired moments in the work happen in this place of unknowing," he clarifies for both of us.

We pass through a tunnel created between a wall of plastic, stretched from floor to ceiling, and two walls bearing infinitely complex paintings of impossibly fundamental subjects: shirts. "I started them in 2010 and, like most of the things I work on, it's about this kind of learning process," Colen explains. "The big thing is, back then they were actually Epson prints." Now, they're CMYK silkscreens of images Colen clipped, quite literally, from his own life.

"Basically I made them when I moved upstate and my life was transitioning into this new phase, and it came with these new markers of normalcy, or something like that. I never owned anything before I moved upstate, and when I moved I had to get a bed, I had to get silverware, and sheets, and towels, and so these catalogs started coming to my house," he grimaces. "It's such a silly story, but it's the truth."

"The catalogs represented this kind of painful transition, almost, and they're so absurd, too, because they just go straight into the garbage." This transition followed a time when Colen, too, spent a bit of time in the refuse, sometimes literally. He explains the relationship:

"I was working on a sculpture at the time that was a tribute to Dash [Snow], actually. It was this monument to him. It was these broken shackles, all different restraints. Police things, and sex things, and animal things, and child things, you know, all these different things that would restrain somebody, that were all broken apart. It was a scatter piece, and it was definitely a piece about my past. And I wasn't connecting them at the time, this body [the shirts] and that [the shackles], but it started turning into a thing about my future, in a way. They were in the same studio space and I just started noticing these dichotomies, but also similarities; One of them happened to be about this current dilemma, and one of them happened to be about this past dilemma, let's say. They met in the middle."

What's missing on my visit are the shackles, which were fleeting, and Snow, who's immortal.

The works I'm treated to in-studio, thus depict a side of the artist that has yet to face the barrage of critics, and is in fact one I do not believe the art world at-large, in all its pomp and pecuniary pedophilia, is quite ready for. As seemingly unable—or unwilling—as they were to deal with that time Colen brought 101 kids from the Department of Homeless Services out to the Brant Foundation, or his sobriety. So, too, should they avoid Colen's new body, which will be, in five words, perfect—if it's ever finished.

On my way out, I stop by Steve's Authentic Key Lime Pies, a local haunt on the same stretch where Brando's man in *On the Waterfront* falters only to rise again. I'm from Florida, yet it's the best I've ever tasted, itself a dichotomy in the least likely of places, hitting that profoundly American zenith between flavor and filler, brick and mortar, fluid and form. It's ironic, a term Colen now bears with endearment, not least while talking about things he says he's appropriated but that have always been his own; his relationship to graffiti; his shirts; his artwork's energy; the meaning of absence. It's all there, loaded into every brushstroke, even where there was never paint to begin with. Perhaps the most ironic part of his remarkably short, yet fully-lived career, the one that riles his detractors most, is that it works.

Dan Colen: Oil Painting opens at Dallas Contemporary on April 16, 2016. [Click here](#) to learn more.