

Everything & Nothing: Dan Colen Reveals There Are Two Sides to Every Story

By Nick Haramis

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Boxes and boxes of gum, meticulously ordered by brand and flavor, sit on a table at the entrance to Dan Colen's Tribeca studio: Big League Chew, Dentyne, Doublemint, Eclipse, Excel, Extra, Hubba Bubba, Juicy Fruit, Trident. The air inside his high-ceilinged workspace is thick with the cloying smell of artificial fruit flavors. A small army of assistants busy themselves in front of wall-size canvasses covered with smears of boiled gum. Diamond-shaped metal studs, placed perfectly to form a light-reflecting grid, envelop an unfinished piece near the back of the room. Brightly-colored bursts of confetti have been applied to a few of the canvasses, dirt and grass stains to others.

Colen stands next to a table stacked with tubes of lipstick, considering the painting in front of it, which he created by applying and reapplying makeup with painstaking precision and then kissing the canvas at least a hundred times over. "You can imagine the kind of chafing that requires," he says. Dressed casually in jeans and a red T-shirt, he adds, "I have an obsessive nature. I always have."

The 31-year-old artist was born in Leonia, New Jersey, where, as a teenager, he befriended photographer Ryan McGinley at their local skate park. While a student of painting at Rhode Island School of Design, he and McGinley (then at Parsons School of Design in New York) were introduced to artist Dash Snow, with whom they became fast friends. In 2001, Colen graduated from college and moved to Manhattan, where he shared a downtown loft for almost 10 years with McGinley, the first of the three artists to establish himself as a New York gallery darling. While McGinley's work is celebratory (his first show, 2002's *The Kids Are Alright* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, featured naked youth running through nature), and Snow's aggressive (he framed front pages of the *New York Post* on which he'd ejaculated), Colen has always been fascinated in equal measure by light and dark. Sure, he's most famous for turning gum into paint, but he's also spent years turning paint into excrement as part of his "Birdshit" series.

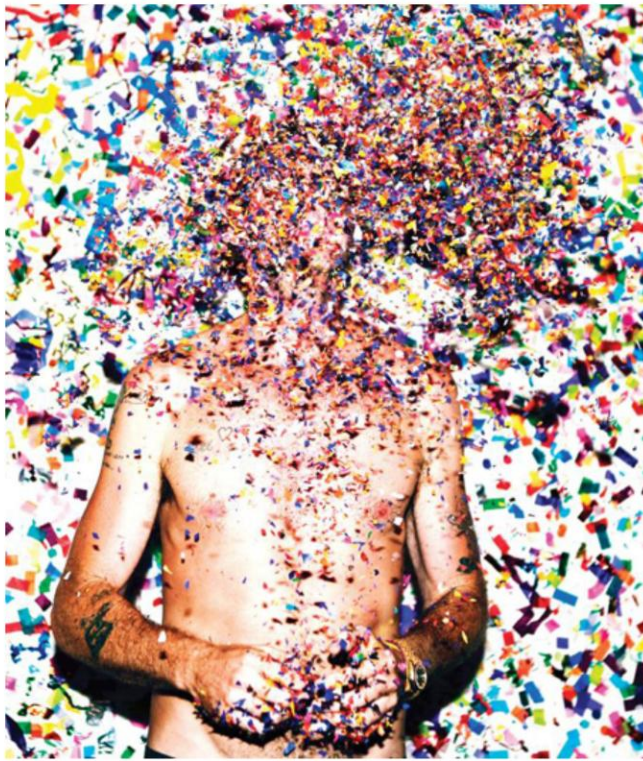
Colen stumbled onto the scene at the beginning of the century during a go-go period of wealth, excess, and possibility. He ran around town—drunk or high or both, and often causing trouble—with a group of free-spirited and likeminded friends that included artists Agathe Snow, Rita Ackermann, Terence Koh, Aaron Bondaroff, and Nate Lowman (with whom Colen shared a studio until recently). According to Colen, theirs was a bond rooted in "physicality rather than intellect. I'm not trying to make it sound like a sexy thing, but it definitely wasn't a cerebral friendship." Take, for instance, "Hamster's Nest," a collaboration between Colen and Snow that first showed at New York's Deitch Projects in 2007. An installation that involved 30 volunteers and 2,000 shredded telephone books, it looked very much the way it sounds. Meant to mimic the experience of a caged rodent, it was the canonization of the many nights they'd spent together trashing hotel rooms while naked, high on coke, Ecstasy, or mushrooms. "I led myself to some really extreme places back then," says Colen. "But through it all, I never stopped creating, even if I was getting deeper and deeper into a laborious study of nothing.



In 2004, for what would become one of his most arresting creations, Colen recreated Snow's bedroom wall with an installation piece called "Secrets and Cymbals, Smoke and Scissors (My Friend Dash's Wall in the Future)." It was plastered with baseball cards, newspaper photos of Saddam Hussein, and an assortment of skulls.

Dash Snow died of a heroin overdose last year on July 13. Recently, Colen overcame his own addictions, and today he looks freshfaced and clean-cut, his tattoos the only evidence of his reckless past. "I gave myself this one while waiting for a plane," he says, pointing to the words "Everything and Nothing" inked onto his right arm. "It was midnight and my flight was at six in the morning, and I knew if I fell asleep I wouldn't wake up, so I did it. It serves as a reminder that every thought, every object, every image, and every emotion has two sides."

It's a philosophy that bleeds into Colen's art. He looks over at one of his euphoric confetti pieces and says, surprisingly, "That one came out of sadness. I started on that series after Dash died and I suppose when I look at them now I understand that there was a party and now that party is over." The piece is part of *Poetry*, his solo exhibition at the West 24th Street Gagosian Gallery, on display through October 16. In addition to his paintings, Colen has created a number of large-scale installations for the show, chief among them a tight row of motorcycles toppled over, one onto the next, like dominoes. Of that work, an exploration of gang culture and violence, Colen insists, "It's supposed to be as straightforward a narrative as possible. It's like, things can fall down, sure, but we can also pick them up again." Colen himself is proof. "My life has changed in such a significant way, on so many different levels," he says, addressing, however obliquely, his struggles with drugs and alcohol. "My work today is a strong reflection of that. I couldn't have done what I'm now doing at an earlier point in my life, and I wouldn't have wanted to. I lived a life that I don't regret at all," he says, his voice betraying a curious mix of pride and loss. "I really explored that life when I was younger, but I couldn't wring any more juice out of it."



Sobriety has given Colen's more recent work a less tortured, freer feel. "I'm throwing confetti in the air—that's all I'm doing—because I'm trying to access something purer than painting," he says. But intimations of his obsessive nature still exist. "I'm also showing a painting at the Gagosian that I've been working on for two years now," he says. "It's not a painting that takes two years to make. Every time I think I'm close to finishing it, I'll add one more mark, which was informed by every mark before it, and then articulates that part of the canvas. The opposite corner then becomes hungry for that same articulation, but then it becomes even more articulate than the other one, and it never ends. I'll finish it for the show, but not because it's actually finished." He grins sheepishly, slightly breathless from his explanation.

Colen releases his assistants for lunch. This is what he says, anyway, but the truth is he'd like a little privacy while having his photograph taken. It's surprising to see Colen's bashful side. This is, after all, the same man who, when preparing for his *No Me* exhibition only four years ago, distributed flyers throughout Berlin that bore an image of a Jewish prayer shawl hanging from his erect penis.

He removes his shirt and dunks his face into a bowl of water and then into a separate bowl of confetti. In no time, his pants come off, too, and he is naked, covering himself with a tub of Dubble Bubble gum. Standing there in the middle of his studio, holding an ersatz fig leaf between his legs, he looks like one of the boys from *Jackass* recreating the Genesis story. He also looks a bit like his former self. But when a female assistant returns from lunch a few minutes too soon, catching a glimpse of Colen in all his glory, he panics and, laughing, covers up as best he can.



Photography by Marley Kate.