

HYPERALLERGIC

Unconstrained Paintings of Terror and Love

Joe Coleman is a hyper-realist who crams every picture with data, producing an image of all-over intensity that is at once a scrumptious meal and hard to stomach.



Anthony Haden-Guest

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Joe Coleman, “Swift Runner and the Colonialist Windigo Effect” (2017-2018), acrylic on wood panel with wood/resin frame and period artifacts, 33 1/2 × 41 inches (all images courtesy the Andrew Edlin Gallery)

A gallery goer was querying a staffer about a painting. “Is that character smoking crack cocaine?” he asked.

Apparently yes. And it seemed a perfectly proper question at a walk-around of Joe Coleman and the Shadow Self, the show at the Andrew Edlin Gallery. I was there to look over the work ahead of talking with Coleman, a full hour ahead, in fact, and this was no accident.

I’d been at the opening a few days before, and most art delivers the goods pretty swiftly, so just why did I need another, lengthier immersion before talking with the artist?

The answer was on the wall. Coleman is a hyper-realist, who not only paints every element in fastidious detail but also crams every picture with data, and produces an image of all-over intensity which, given his characteristic subject-matter, can make the work at once a scrumptious meal and hard to stomach. It speaks to the detailing and the intensity that magnifying glasses are available at the front desk. How many, I asked? “Seventeen,” said the director, Clayton Flynn. “Sometimes they get pocketed.”



Joe Coleman (photo: Whitney Ward)

Coleman materialized beside me, black-bearded, waistcoated, a late 19th-century magician, as I was decoding “Swift Runner and the Colonialist Windigo Effect,” which was painted last year. It portrays a Cree Indian, who killed and devoured his family during a famine induced by the settlers’ extermination of the buffalo. I had a tech question. How does he get his precision? A brush with a single hair, I proposed.

“One-hair brush we call them,” Coleman said. “But it’s actually two hairs for the finest details. And I use jeweler’s lenses. I balance with just my pinkie and I barely move it for hours. I work an eight hour day on a single square inch without sketching out the whole thing. Most figurative painters sketch it out before. But I don’t. I react to each little detail that I put in.” He works on hard surfaces, usually wood, and he will sometimes scrape out a completed square inch, but very seldom.

“Some of the paintings take four or five years to complete, the really big ones,” he says. “But even the smaller ones take up to a year to finish.”

We moved on to “A New York Pirate (A Portrait of Albert Hicks),” painted in 1997, and structured like an icon, with a cigar-chomping man at the center and smaller images along the edges. “I don’t know if there’s anyone that paints like me,” Coleman said. “I can’t think of anyone really, except maybe some of the medieval painters, the manuscript painters. I love Grünewald too, because there’s the detail but also a very emotional quality that I also strive for.”



Joe Coleman, “A New York Pirate (A Portrait of Albert Hicks)” (1997), acrylic on panel, mounted on shirt worn by Elmo Patrick Sonnier during his execution, 28 × 34 inches

As with Albert Hicks. “He was a mercenary who hired himself out to the gangs of New York,” Coleman said. “One night he was slipped a Mickey Finn in a dive and woke up in an oyster sloop headed to Virginia. So he killed the entire crew and the captain with an axe. After he’d gone it wandered into the harbor, like a ghost ship, covered with blood. They only found three fingers where one of the sailors had tried to hang on to the edge of the sloop. He was tried and became quite a celebrity. People came from all over to visit him. Barnum traded him a box of cigars for one of his suits.” Coleman adds that he was hanged on the island where the Statue of Liberty now stands.

There’s a strong investigative element to your pieces, I said.

“Absolutely,” said Coleman. “They are like novels or short stories in which the entire story appears at once. So you have to take your own journey into it. And the more that you look, the more it reveals itself to you. But you are going to have to investigate the painting.”

Smaller portraits of four other killers are on the corners. One is Elmo Patrick Sonnier, who was executed in 1984. “He was this fascinating character who is portrayed by Sean Penn in the movie, *Dead Man Walking*,” Coleman said. He mounted the painting on the shirt that Sonnier wore to his execution, which he obtained for his collection of dark memorabilia, the Odditorium.



Joe Coleman, “Tenebrae for Gesualdo” (2004), acrylic on panel, 91.4 x 71.1 cm

So on to “Tenebrae for Gesualdo” (2004), the icon-structured portrait of a medieval composer. “First off, he murdered his wife and his wife’s lover. And he kept their mummified remains in his castle on display,” Coleman says, adding that he admired his music. “He wrote these motets on The Beauty of Death that are really powerful. It’s just the human voice. He also does madrigals but I don’t find them so interesting.” No surprise that an occasional correspondent declared Coleman his favorite artist — Charles Manson.

Coleman accepts that his sensibility was shaped by a Catholic upbringing. “I was fascinated by Catholicism in childhood, the tortures and the torments of the martyrs and of Jesus,” he says. “And the fires of hell had fascinated me as well.” That, and his family. “My father was in the Marine Corps at Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal,” he says. “That was before anybody spoke of PTSD.” Post-traumatic stress disorder. After his military discharge, his father became a furious alcoholic, abusive, and unable to hold down a job, so the family was supported by his mother, who had dreamed of being an actress. He describes his childhood as full of excitement, desire, and terror.

Coleman began making art in church, using a pencil and crayons given him by his mother. “The only color I used was red” he says. “For blood.” His work got an unlikely first notice. “When I was in third grade at Tracy School in Mrs. Ryder’s class I did this painting of garbage. I was fascinated by garbage even then, I guess. She put it in this children’s art show in my hometown in Norwalk, Connecticut. And Lady Bird Johnson was traveling around with this campaign to beautify America.”

Lady Bird went to the show, gave it a prize. “She thought it was a great indictment of litter,” he says.

At what age did Coleman realize that he had a distinctly unusual vision? And had that caused problematic situations in his youth?

“Yeah!” he said instantly. “I tried to set my school field on fire. I got into trouble but there was something about seeing all the adults running around, trying to put out this thing that I had created.”

This had also been while he was in third grade. It cannot be easy to set a field alight, I noted.

“It was August. And all the grass was very dry. I was smoking cigarettes and riding my stingray bike. About 10. I set this grass on fire and put it out fast. Then I set it on fire again, and let it go a little longer. And put it out. And then at one point it just got beyond my control, the whole field was on fire. I guess that experience got me to thinking that there were all sorts of things beyond my control. This monster!”



Joe Coleman, "Doorway to Whitney" (2011-2015, detail),
acrylic on panel

But even when Joe Coleman is at his darkest, when words like morbid and macabre seem apt, his works never exhibit any slasher-movie-esque interest in merely making your flesh creep. "There's empathy," Joe Coleman says. "The works, dark as they are, are full of love too."

"A Doorway to Whitney" (2015), a luminous, multi-image acrylic portrait of his wife, Whitney Ward, exhales warmth, and it is one of several images of her in the show. There is also a portrait of Adam Parfrey, the late founder of Feral Press, as also of such utterly unthreatening figures as the comedian, Soupy Sales.

The artist continues, "There's great love even in the darkest of characters that I paint," he said. "I stand with the accused. Both the innocent and the guilty."

Joe Coleman and the Shadow Self continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (212 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 21.