



JOE COLEMAN AND THE SHADOW SELF

Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

October 25 – December 7, 2019

This survey of the American, New York-based artist Joe Coleman's acrylic-on-wood-panel or mixed-media works served as a retrospective look at his production of the past 25 years. Born in 1955 and brought up in Connecticut in a Roman Catholic family, Coleman began drawing as a child and became familiar with his religion's theology and saints. Influenced by underground comics and fascinated by the endless parade of eccentrics and peculiar events that litter the narrative of American history and pop culture, he developed biographical and autobiographical paintings that depict individual subjects but amplify them in densely packed compositions filled with meticulously rendered, supporting vignettes.

These visual sidebars describe people, events, or ideas related to a painting's main subject, illuminating his or her personality or historical significance. Coleman's storehouse of pop-cultural and other references is diverse in its embrace of the unlikely and the bizarre. *Tenebrae for Gesualdo* (2004) depicts in painstaking detail – Coleman often uses a single-hair brush – the seventeenth-

century composer Carlo Gesualdo, who famously killed his wife and her lover, and then displayed their corpses. The painting offers a list of the instruments for which Gesualdo wrote, a discouraging pronouncement about human nature, pictures of the lovers alive (and sexually aroused), and snippets of the composer's scores.

The 1960s singer Tom Jones turns up in Coleman's large portrait of his wife and muse, Whitney Ward (*A Doorway to Whitney*, 2015), as do assorted cartoon characters, the actor Ernest Borgnine, a pair of Siamese twins, tiki statues from a Polynesian-style restaurant, and Frankenstein in a Santa Claus cap.

In *As You Look Into the Eye of the Cyclops, So the Eye of the Cyclops Looks Into You* (2003), a painting mounted in a replica of an old television-set cabinet, the actress Joan Collins, the American cult leader David Koresh and the Islamic terrorist Osama bin Laden buck up against TV game-show hosts and the country-music star Dolly Parton. Like Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, that grand dissertation on whale-hunting and life at sea, Coleman's art is exhaustive, encyclopedic, and obsessive. It captures the spirit of a confluence of the weird and the wondrous with a palpable sense of subversive delight.

Edward M. Gómez