

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DAN COLEN



The quintessential art-world bad boy boozed, brawled, and snorted his way through the 2000s—and somehow survived to tell the tale. His work has been savaged by critics—and with each skewering, his popularity and prices have soared. Now, with two new high-profile exhibitions, the 34-year-old is primed for his next act and trying to make sense of his darkly charmed existence.

Above: A not-yet-titled Colen piece made by pounding flowers into the canvas. **Opposite:** Colen in his Brooklyn studio.



1. *Secrets and Cymbals, Smoke and Scissors (My Friend Dash's Wall in the Future)*, 2004—a meticulous re-creation of the late Dash Snow's East Village apartment wall. 2. Snow and Colen unveil *Nest*, 2007, at New York City's Deitch Projects. 3. *Untitled*, 2008—a "painting" made with chewing gum.



IT'S NOON ON A WARM WINTER DAY ON DAN COLEN'S FARM IN NEW YORK'S Hudson Valley, and the 34-year-old artist is hunting for his cows. He's wearing a denim jacket over a black Hawaiian shirt, faded blue Levi's, and inappropriate-for-shit-kicking black Chuck Taylor high-tops as he trudges through streams of melting snow mixed with cow manure. "I have no experience with the animals," Colen says. "Sometimes I get weirded out by them." Colen bought this 40-acre spread in 2011 for \$1.5 million and, by the looks of things, spent at least that much renovating it, transforming the barn into a studio, constructing a state-of-the-art building to house livestock, and hiring a hippie couple from Washington State to manage the farm. He loves the vibe out here and the rituals it inspires—a robust run at the crack of dawn, a breakfast of his own hen's eggs, some reflective time with the *New York Times*. Now Colen is cresting a hill when he encounters a half-dozen of his cows. They look up and stare. "I like the cows the most," he says. "You can't relate to them the way you can with the pigs and the sheep. It's harder to personally connect. They move around the property every day in the same pattern, carving paths in the grass. But I love just seeing that."

It's hard to reconcile this tranquil, wholesome country gentleman with the coke-hoovering wild child who, as part of a rowdy Brat Pack that included the baby-faced photographer Ryan McGinley and the late graffiti artist-slash-human wrecking ball Dash Snow, tore through New York's downtown art scene in the 2000s. Back then, getting high, fucking shit up, and making art were interdependent pursuits—and together produced a reliably effective commodity. Bad boys sell. "Oh yeah, everybody likes that," Colen says matter-of-factly. "And even the people who don't like it want to be a part of it. It's marketable. We were never the most famous artists, but we were the most notorious." The pressure to sustain such an outsize reputation can be fatal, as Colen, who's been sober since 2009, knows all too well. "It's crazy that I'm still alive," he says. And with two major solo exhibitions coming up, Colen is out to prove—to others but perhaps even more to himself—that his storied adventures in extreme bohemia aren't his only selling point.

In May, he'll be feted in grand style when the art collector Peter Brant puts on a survey of Colen's past works at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Greenwich, Connecticut. Located across the street from Brant's 200-acre estate, the foundation is a showcase for his massive holdings of artists, including Andy Warhol, Julian Schnabel . . . and Dan Colen. (Brant has lost track of how many Colens he owns: "I don't know exactly—a number.") This fall, the stakes will be much higher when Colen debuts

all-new work at Larry Gagosian's West 24th Street gallery in Chelsea. It's his second major show under Gagosian's "big top," following 2010's critically reviled "Poetry," in which works were rumored to be priced at \$300,000 a pop. Though the association has made him wealthy, Colen says he's just "a drop in Gagosian's bucket. He's selling Picassos and Jeff Koonses for \$20 million. Larry maybe hopes that one day my sculptures will have the same value as a Koons, but right now I'm just a kid." One who happens to be arguably the most successful American artist under 40—at least in the eyes of the market, a fickle animal that requires constant management and feeding.

It's lunchtime on the farm, and Colen heads up the hill toward the house. In the massive studio that he constructed atop the bones of a 19th-century barn, the big job of the day is employing a homemade propane-fueled wood steamer to make long planks pliable enough to curve into semicircles for a large installation, which will be unveiled this September in Harlem's Montefiore Square. "Obviously, these guys are the experts," says Colen, referring to the project's foreman and his team, "and I am along for the ride." A couple hours' drive south, in Tribeca, five assistants use stills from Disney's *Fantasia* as references to paint enormous photorealistic canvases, while across the East River, at Colen's new 7,500-square-foot studio in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn—which will soon eclipse the Tribeca space as the command center of Colen's growing operation—a team of six temp workers are poking metal studs into canvases while yet another assistant violently pounds fresh flowers against canvases with, by turns, a hammer and big rubber dildos. (These are some of the pieces that will be at Gagosian in the fall.) Then there are the veteran model-makers in Los Angeles tasked with fabricating Colen's sculptures, like the realistic movie-quality figures that they cast for last year's Lyon Biennale, in France: Wile E. Coyote, Roger Rabbit, and a naked Colen—mammoth semi-erect dick flopped onto his leg—all arrayed on the gallery floor, as if recovering from some human-cartoon orgy. Meanwhile, in Brooklyn Heights, where Colen bought his parents a \$2.6 million duplex last year, his 68-year-old mother, Harriet, oversees her son's business affairs, making sure everyone gets paid. "Over the years I've found different people who could devote themselves to these ideas that I have," Colen says.

But such industrial-scale production is made possible—and is in many ways required—when you're an artist represented by Gagosian, whose empire includes 12 galleries worldwide, with an overhead rivaling that of a major museum. And so, in 2010, Gagosian priced Colen's work 10

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF GAGOSIAN GALLERY; COURTESY OF DAN COLEN; COURTESY OF DEITCH PROJECTS; COURTESY OF DAN COLEN.

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4. From left: Actor Leo Fitzpatrick, OHWOW gallery cofounder Al Moran, photographer Ryan McGinley, artist Nate Lowman, Colen, OHWOW cofounder Aaron Bondaroff, and artist Adam McEwen at OHWOW in Los Angeles, 2011. 5. Two works from “Poetry,” Colen’s 2010 solo show at Gagosian Gallery: *Cracks in the Clouds* (foreground) and *In a Million Years* (background). 6. Snow, McGinley, and Colen, 2006.

times (and higher) what it had been priced at four years before, and then, as if by decree, Colen’s older work leapfrogged the new work in value. The law of supply and demand dictates that regardless of where the flesh-and-blood Dan Colen happens to be, Colens will continue to be churned out. According to McGinley, much of Colen’s 2010 Gagosian show was fabricated by assistants while he was in rehab at Minnesota’s Hazelden (Colen denies this). There are plenty of respected artists, such as Jeff Koons, who rarely lay a hand on the pieces that bear their signature, but critics tend to be wary. “Some artists have trouble embedding themselves in their work if too many people are touching it and they’re making too much,” says Jerry Saltz, *New York* magazine’s art critic. “I’m skeptical of the bullshit of overproduction.”

Reviewing “Poetry” in the *New York Times*, the critic Roberta Smith dismissed works like *Cracks in the Clouds*—reproductions of 13 Hell’s Angels motorcycles, pushed over like dominoes—as “numbing, boring feats of nose-thumbing.” She was more positive about Colen’s two large canvases featuring multicolored globs of chewing gum and wondered about “the kind of painter Mr. Colen might become if he ever decides to grow up.” There was no glimmer of affection from Saltz (Smith’s husband), who mercilessly declared the show “an array of ersatz art calculated to cash in on the mindlessness of overeager, oblivious collectors” and called Colen a “well-meaning but misguided . . . pawn in a dead-end game.”

Colen grew sick of receiving condolence calls from friends, especially when it turned out that the critical backlash had a big upside: hordes of rubberneckers. “The horrible press just kept on coming in,” he says, “but it brought a lot of people to the show. By the end, I found it thrilling. All I can do is touch somebody. I don’t know how they’re going to feel, but I want them to feel something.” No matter how loudly critics have proclaimed that the emperor wears no clothes, the market clearly hasn’t been listening. Last year, Sotheby’s auctioned one of his gum paintings for just over \$1 million—a rare milestone for such a young artist.

Of course, Colen is preoccupied not just with the issue of staying power but also with that of legacy—a frequent topic of conversation in his circle of artist friends. “We all love to look at old *Artforum*s and be like, ‘Who the fuck are these people?’” he says. “There’s a hundred ads in every issue from 1985, and there’s, like, three names you know. Is it different now?” Colen pauses to contemplate the heaviness of his own question. In one important way, he says, it’s very different: “Back then, there definitely weren’t 25-year-olds selling at auction for \$300,000. To see how artists fizzle away after people have invested that

much money in them will be interesting, I think.”

Colen doesn’t appear to count himself among the future fallen. Today, committedly sober, looking hale and outdoorsy in a beard, Colen sits down at a long wooden table with a half-dozen members of his crew and his soft-spoken girlfriend, Noot Seear, an earthy blonde model in a Grateful Dead T-shirt, to a lunch of sliced top-round steak with horseradish sour cream, twice-baked potatoes, and a salad, all prepared by a young culinary-school graduate wearing chef’s whites. I ask him whether he knows the name of the sacrificial cow that has become today’s entrée. “Tim,” Colen replies, sawing into the meat. “He was well loved.”

COLEN’S CAREER IN ART HAS UNDOUBTEDLY BEEN HELPED ALONG BY HIS staggering good looks. He’s got placid blue eyes, a thick head of wavy hair, and a massive six-foot-six frame that’s less imposing than ungainly, bringing to mind a young Ralph Fiennes with an appealing touch of Marmaduke. “Oh, he’s gorgeous,” says Melissa Bent, who gave Colen his first show in 2003, in the now-shuttered Lower East Side gallery Rivington Arms. “With every artist at the gallery, you have to be at least a little bit in love with them. With Dan, there was a charisma and confidence he had that was captivating.”

That’s a common refrain among Colen’s friends. “He exudes extreme confidence and is extremely stubborn,” says Ryan McGinley, who has been best friends with Colen since high school. “I feel like that’s his recipe.” Colen comes from Brooklyn Jewish stock, which is evident in his speech (he pronounces *because* as “bee-COSS”), but was born and raised in Leonia, New Jersey, right over the George Washington Bridge from Manhattan. McGinley’s from nearby Ramsey, and the two met at a skate park, bonding over art and rebellion. Colen was constantly in trouble at school, usually for committing acts of petty vandalism. “The essential problem was, I really couldn’t be told what to do,” he says. “Art class was my thing, but not any other class.”

Colen displayed enough talent to gain admission to the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, where he was always on the verge of getting kicked out—trouble with authority again, though the photos of hip-hop stars he covered in his semen were surprisingly well received. Meanwhile, he was venturing into New York City every chance he got to crash with McGinley, who was enrolled at Parsons School of Design. Colen felt at home among the punks, freaks, and gays that McGinley drew into his orbit. “Dan always wished he was gay,” McGinley says. Colen saw his heterosexuality as a lost opportunity for transgression.



Colen in his Brooklyn studio. In the background: his new series of silk screens inspired by mail-order catalogs.

“I just felt it’d be nice to be even more against the grain,” he says.

By the time Colen graduated and moved into McGinley’s East Village apartment, a thriving art scene had already developed around his roommate, whose photographs of attractive scenesters got more and more notice until, in 2003, at 25, McGinley became one of the youngest artists ever to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum. The gates of the kingdom swung open to Colen, McGinley, and their mutual muse Dash Snow, the heavily tattooed, Jesus-bearded cofounder of *Irak*—a confederation of drugged-out and light-fingered graffiti artists. Snow was a black-sheep member of the de Menil family, heirs to the Schlumberger industrial fortune and benefactors of the priceless Menil Collection, housed in its own museum in Houston. The trio gained entry to the city’s most exclusive parties, many of which ended, at least for Colen, with his being forcibly removed. He’d get fucked up and try to kiss famous strangers, like Kate Moss or Tom Ford. At a party for the art-and-fashion magazine *Visionaire*, Colen was wrongly accused of smoking pot, so he started smashing the bar’s martini glasses. After getting bounced from the bar, he located a huge piece of wood and threw it through a plate-glass window. “Being disruptive or destructive was somehow the thing that made me feel comfortable in these places,” he says. “It’s like I wanted to be there, but only to fuck it up.”

Even during his most debauched phases, Colen would work hard by day, painting in a makeshift studio in the back of his grandparents’ junk shop. He nailed a photo of Picasso to the wall for inspiration, which struck some visitors as hilariously audacious. He taught himself how to paint photorealistically, after previously relying on stencils and spray paint. “In college, I took the hand out of everything,” Colen says. “I was essentially learning how to paint with those paintings.” Meanwhile,

Colen was mentoring Snow. “I remember showing him Richard Prince and being like, ‘He didn’t even take the photograph, he just said it was art, you know?’” Colen says. “Dash was making stuff, but he didn’t get that it was art. I was just being like, ‘You know that ax that you just put on that thing with that crab claw? That’s a sculpture.’” With his mentor’s blessing, Snow appropriated one of Colen’s favorite techniques: jerking off and ejaculating on the *New York Post*. In return, Snow was Colen’s Neal Cassady-like instigator, insisting that they turn their lives into a constant performance. While traveling for art shows and fairs, Colen and Snow would make “hamster nests” in hotel rooms, which entailed shredding phone books, pillows, and blankets, getting naked, taking a ton of drugs (coke, mushrooms, ecstasy), then hightailing it before the sun came up.

“Dan was really entitled, which I think was part of his success,” says Melissa Bent, recalling the preparations for Colen’s first show at Rivington Arms (which also took on Snow). “He wanted us to pay for his studio and his assistants. I was flabbergasted. I was like, ‘You haven’t even sold anything!’” That changed in 2003, when Dean Valentine, a former TV executive and a trendsetting art collector, bought one of Colen’s paintings for \$13,000. The following year, Valentine bought *Secrets and Cymbals, Smoke and Scissors (My Friend Dash’s Wall in the Future)*—a meticulous re-creation of missing-child posters, *New York Post* front pages, and other ephemera that Snow had tacked to his East Village apartment wall—before Colen had even finished it, for \$30,000, then flipped it just a few months later to Charles Saatchi for \$500,000. (“I consider it one of Dan’s greatest works,” says Brant, who bought it from Saatchi in 2012.) The buzz was building, but everyone was getting rich off Colen’s labor-intensive paintings except Colen. So rather than miss deadlines

because of his poky pace, Colen increasingly relied on assistants while churning out salable work on the fly. "It was horrible to watch my thing turn into a sales pitch," he says. "But I had to do it, because I had no other money." When *Commes des Garçons* offered him \$10,000 for a piece to use in a traveling show, Colen bought a junk-shop painting of a pastoral scene and painted in a figure behind a tree, jerking off. "I thought he was a total hustler," Bent says. "I loved it. He's scrappy and smart. You need the money, you figure it out."

In 2006, after earning a spot in the Whitney Biennial, Colen ditched Rivington Arms for Los Angeles—and-Berlin-based Peres Projects, led by tastemaking curator Javier Peres, who happily paid for Colen's studio and art supplies. Colen says he always snorted a lot of coke and "anything else that was around." On special occasions, every month or so, he snorted heroin. But then the special occasions started happening more often. "I have a vivid memory of the first night when I was like, 'Oh, I can't leave my house anymore unless I get this,'" he says. *New York* magazine put Colen, McGinley, and Snow on its cover, dubbing them "Warhol's Children." Collectors came downtown to party, and the art dealer Jeffrey Deitch even invited Colen and Snow to reproduce their hamster nest in his gallery, Deitch Projects.

Colen's work was polarizing. The influential curator Neville Wakefield lauded the beauty of his whimsical series of candle paintings, but when critics even deigned to pay attention, the reviews were almost always dismissive. Colen's 2006 debut show at Peres Projects' Los Angeles space left an *Artforum* writer with "the impression of a conceptual circle jerk in which no one can quite get it up." Later that year, for his Berlin debut, Colen scandalized the Germans by producing flyers featuring a picture of himself naked from the neck down with a tallit—the sacred Jewish prayer shawl—hanging from his erect penis.

"I'LL SHOW YOU SOME VAGINA ENVELOPES," SAYS COLEN

in the stark white office of his upstate studio, flipping through a file of carefully organized correspondence from Snow. Snow apparently liked to test the United States Postal Service's patience, sending Colen bags of broken glass and mailers affixed with labia cut out of porn mags. "Oh, here's a really good one!" Colen says, pulling out a manila envelope with a tiny vagina glued to a corner. He then carefully unwraps another Dash Snow care package: a desiccated frog carcass with a cigarette butt in its mouth and a full head of hair. "He has a toupee of Dash's pubic hair," Colen explains. We look through his photo albums—the Polaroid that Snow took of Colen pissing into McGinley's mouth one night, a photo of guys doing lines off a beautiful woman's breasts. They look like they're having more filthy good times every night than most mortals have even once in their entire lives. "Yeah," Colen says wistfully. "It was fun."

On Colen's 29th birthday—July 13, 2009—Snow was found submerged in a bathtub at Lafayette House, an East Village hotel, dead of a heroin overdose. Snow was 27. "He met a junkie's end," the *New York Times* wrote, "but did so in a \$325-a-night hotel room with an antique marble hearth." When Colen heard the news, he rushed to the hotel, but paramedics wouldn't let him up. (He must've looked half dead himself: Colen says he weighed 170 pounds at the time; today he's a trim 220.) "I felt really alone," Colen says, "and really scared because of the way Dash died. I felt like people just weren't going to understand the essence of his beauty."

To keep from using heroin, Colen had long since traded it for Suboxone—which addicts sometimes use as a treatment instead of methadone—as a result of an intervention by McGinley three years earlier. But Colen was still drinking and snorting mountains of coke. "I just had no relationship to reality, not much control over my body," he says. "I didn't sleep at all, so I'd pass out at any moment. I don't even know how to describe it. Hallucinating." Snow's death was jarring enough to get Colen to commit to rehab. He was so broke that the artist Nate Lowman, his close friend and studio-mate, had to lend him the money. And even though the Gagosian show was conceived in this, his lowest period, he won't renounce the work. After all, in the midst of the critical strafing, Richard Serra, the master minimalist sculptor, sent Colen a supportive note. "Twenty-five art writers can write something bad," Colen says, "but if I'm getting encouragement from people like that, who I really admire, that's all that matters."

"When I go upstate with him," McGinley says of Colen, "and at 6:30 I hear him get up and he's like, 'You wanna go running?' I'm like, 'No, motherfuck, hell no.' Now he eats chicken and broccoli and brown rice. It's cool. I got my friend—he's alive. So whatever he's gotta do to make it work for him."

“**BEING DESTRUCTIVE WAS SOMEHOW THE THING THAT MADE ME FEEL COMFORTABLE IN THESE PLACES,” SAYS COLEN OF HIS CONSTANT PARTYING IN THE 2000s. “IT’S LIKE I WANTED TO BE THERE, BUT ONLY TO FUCK IT UP.”**

"NOBODY'S REALLY SEEN THESE," COLEN SAYS, STANDING

in front of a massive 15-foot-tall canvas in his Red Hook studio, studying me studying his work. Sharing his art still seems to be a fraught experience for Colen, who, after getting clean, had profound doubts about how much the lifestyle informed his work: "I thought that the drugs fueled the creativity." Colen says he no longer believes that to be true, but neither is he working in a vacuum: He's clearly aware that a great many people still see him as a stunt man, whose status in the art world is based on the fading memory of last night's party. And if he can never change their minds, then he must at least prove to himself that his work holds up in the clear light of day.

From a distance, the silk screens we're standing in front of look like nothing more than horizontal stripes of deep, saturated colors. Upon closer inspection, a weave becomes visible, and all at once it's revealed to be a stack

of multicolored sweaters. To the left and right are equally enormous canvases featuring pants, shoes, and cardigans. Colen asserts that his latest work—which will be exhibited at a subsequent Gagosian show—should speak for itself. "I don't think it's relevant, really, for the viewer to know what these things are about for me." When pressed, he concedes, "The source is kind of ridiculous. They're mail-order catalogs." There's a method and a reason, but they're hard to articulate. "It has something to do with things that arrive that you don't pick, that just force their way into your life," says Colen, running his fingers through his hair. "In the past, a lot of my energies were about contrariness, and I thought that the work really separated me from other people. And now I think the work really is about a way to relate to other people, what makes me the same as everybody else."

"Before I got a house upstate," Colen continues, "I didn't have more than a dirty mattress and a bent fork. And so I got this house, and I had to buy a couch for it and silverware for it. Once your name gets on these lists, I started getting all these fuckin' catalogs in my house. I was like, 'What the fuck?'" Colen grows increasingly animated—it's that confidence again—waving his enormous arms in the air. "But I want to make something worthwhile out of it," he says. "My new life." ■