

ART & DEAL

ISSUE.116 VOL.14 NO.83 MAY 2018

₹150 \$38 €30 £28

**INTERNATIONAL ART
EVIDENCE OF FAILURE**

DAN COLEN INTERVIEW - RAJESH PUNJ

ART AS A CATALYST

- ARPITA AKHANDA

EMBRACING-

AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

- SANDHYA ANNAIAH

ABDUR RAHMAN CHUGHTAI

- MALLIKA CHAKRAWARTI



EVIDENCE OF FAILURE

DAN COLEN interview

RAJESH PUNJ

One of the things I love about art is that it is not static. That its meaning changes from person to person, from year to year. I love actually getting to witness that, especially in such an extreme way.

American painter and printmaker Robert Rauschenberg, during the 1950's and 60's in New York, was one of the greatest advocates of 'art by failure'. Seeing in material mismatches and mistakes a greater candidness of a work's visual value; so much so that Rauschenberg drew from his creative faults a fortune for something aesthetically more convincing. Saying of the fallout of failure "screwing things up is a positive, being correct is never the point, (and) being right can stop the momentum of a very interesting idea." For New York based artist Dan Colen everything that he applies himself to, appears as accidents into art. That likens his approach to two and three-dimensional works to that of a child enthused by one idea, only to discard it for another. Saying of his own shortcomings "a lot of the work is evidence of the failure. This sculpture (The Big Kahuna) is about failure obviously, so the idea of actual experience and actual material, and content and ideas, leads to my shifting from foreground to background often. Just that idea that 'is it a failure or is it about a failure? Of whether there is a difference to those two things, and is failure more interesting than a story about a failure?"

Cohen is a man playing with techniques to prove that they are all available to him, who is equally spurred on by the same kind of mental terrorism that Rauschenberg enthused about when he said, "I go into the studio, and I think 'Is this going to be it?' 'Is this the end?' You see, nearly everything terrorises me. When an artist loses that terror, he's through." For want of such adrenaline Colen's approach appears born of a cavalier curiosity for what it is to be alive, and far from being preoccupied with a notion of beauty, Colen revels in the idle absurdity of being in and of the world. That together with his appetite for unearthing emotions

^ Dan Colen, *The Big Kahuna*, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd



sees his art as a celebration of our self-worth and loathing. Applying himself very physically to his situation works or paintings, by pinning metal stubs to a series of canvases, *A Little Wooden Ship* 2015, *The Winter Witch* 2015, *The Rivers Bride* 2015, and revealing them as imperfect, for the sheer weight of metal multiplied. Of riotously treading over a painting laid flat, in order to impregnate its skin with an impossible layer of dirt and detritus, as the identifying situation and circumstances of its labour. And of attaching mouthfuls of coloured bubble-gum to a canvas, in order again as Rauschenberg saw it, that art 'could be more like the real world if it was made of the real world.'

In situ Colen sites his sculptural works (*The Big Kahuna* 2010 – 2017, and *Haiku* 2015 – 2017, among them), as being conceived of and carried by the ignition of an idea. That as ideas go, has him entirely unafraid of taking a thirty-five ton block of concrete and putting it onto a discarded American flag; with a twisted and contorted flagpole thrown in for good measure. And as Colen's individual artworks can be measured by his use of materials, so we see an overriding physicality to how he goes about everything. Explaining ideas not as formulas but as flight of fancy. "I have an idea to start with, and I will immediately abandon that as my goal, even though

the idea is about some imagined end point. I know that something much better than my idea will happen if I pursue my original idea."

Saying of the American flagpole piece "there are a couple of things that happened with the sculpture, that hopefully will continue throughout the exhibition, is that I have been playing with background and foreground a lot, so there is this situation of the block being on the flag, obliterating the flag (in *The Big Kahuna*), but just from a more formal standpoint I am trying to skew the subject matter of the piece from one thing to another."

All of which has Colen applying himself to painting, placards, and sculptures with equal bravado,

^ Dan Colen, *Marbles in My Mouth*, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright Dan Colen

> Dan Colen, *Sweet Liberty Gallery 4*, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd

referring to everything with the same kind of philosophy. As though materiality, volume and weight, the elements we associate with sculpture, can as easily be applied to his situation works. Explaining of his approach "it is amazing as much as I shift between things I am always looking for a new way of expression; a new way to consider form that so often comes back to very simple things." Moving between mediums, Colen explains his art as closer to a permanent condition rather than as someone creating a series of disconnected objects. And for all his efforts Colen is an artist convinced that art is our reward for being alive. Coaxing rich and ridiculous elements together, under the influence of (Marcel) Duchamp's ready-made, and (Robert) Rauschenberg's

before. I was working on it for a show at the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo, and it ended up being that the floor couldn't suppose the load. So in 2010 I made a study for it. It comprised of a hundred and thirty-foot long pole, that in Oslo was a thirty-foot pole, and the space was just like a chunk of this space. So this is the first time I am showing it as it was intended to be seen. Strange because now it carries such a different weight obviously (physically and metaphorically), both in 2017 and in London. It is such a different object than it was in 2010 in Oslo. I originally thought of it as a self-portrait, I still do. One of the things I love about art is that it is not static. That it's meaning changes from person to person, from year to year. I love actually getting



assemblages, to create works that read as the material backdrop for our corrupted lives.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: *The scale of this first work coming into the gallery is epic, do you want to explain this piece (*The Big Kahuna* 2010-2017) to me, and of how it appears as much to have been thrown into the gallery as it is site-specific.*

Dan Colen: It barely fits in here so in and of itself that could be considered site-specific, but it can go anywhere. It is actually a sculpture I started in 2010, but I have never shown it in this fully realised state

to witness that, especially in such an extreme way.

RP: *It is incredibly interesting to think of a work from 2010 having an even greater significance now in 2017. Do you feel that the work has really taken on a new narrative, as you imply? And what is as interesting is of your explaining it as a 'self-portrait'. A method or mode of practice we might consider more to do with an intimate likeness, instead of this colossal almost crippling work that is clearly more a metaphor for America right now.*

DC: Yes, like I was saying I don't feel like I control the interpretation and meaning of my work, so I see it as being able to engage with the culture and the

times as aggressively as this work (motivates me).

RP: *And in terms of the material elements of this piece, have you experienced any opposition to your positioning a concrete block over the American flag?*

DC: So the last sculpture in Oslo was much different, and we will see, as we are the first people really looking at this. It is obviously a blatantly aggressive gesture. I really tune into the awe of the piece, not just the depravity of what it is speaking of; but there is something quite majestic about that concrete block. Being ripped out of the earth and being given a second life. It is like you are pulling up a tomb or something similar. You mention the materials, and there are a couple of things that happened with the sculpture, that hopefully will continue throughout

RP: *And to reiterate again you explain this installation (The Big Kahuna) as a self-portrait, which is as interesting as it might appear ridiculous. How does this work reflect you?*

DC: That was really what I was trying to work with.

RP: *How do you see yourself in this work, or to put it another way how is the work emblematic of you?*

DC: I play with illusionism throughout the show, tromploud (trompe-l'œil) painting; but illusionism in many many ways. So what something is and how it has come to be, and having the opportunity to reconsider that after you are first introduced to a work, so looking at this (The Big Kahuna) in a way it is a ready-made where I was driving through upstate



the exhibition, is that I have been playing with background and foreground a lot, so there is this situation of the block being on the flag, obliterating the flag, but just from a more formal standpoint I am trying to skew the subject matter of the piece from one thing to another thing. I put these two works (The Big Kahuna 2010 – 2017, and Me, Jesus and the Children 2001 – 2003) in this room because they are both self-portraits, and they are both ambiguous. In neither of them am I clearly in the spotlight, and in this one (Me, Jesus and the Children) I am the backdrop. In this (The Big Kahuna) the American flag is the backdrop and this concrete block is on top of it.

New York, the Catskills and I saw it from there, the scale of the flag, and I drove over the highway and I found where it was coming from, an RV lot, an RV dealership, or winnebago dealership, and there was a sticker on the flagpole, and I called the number on the sticker and said 'I am over here and the flag is over here', and they sent it to me. And it came with instructions to dig a hole in the ground thirteen feet deep by five feet, and I did that. Which wasn't really the case in 2010, where it was a more of a fabrication. Just in terms of the base I really wanted to dig a hole and fill it with pure material, and one of my interests is to take something that is dripping with content and implications and turn it into a pure form, into pure



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material. So to say 'there is an American flag back there, and what is in the foreground? It is a thirty-five ton block of concrete.' But obviously it is highly engineered, even though it is a ready-made.

RP: *With regard to your explain the work as a 'ready-made', did you seek to intervene as little as possible with its delivery, or for a work of this scale does it become almost impossible to do that?*

DC: No, obviously it is a highly engineered thing. To move any thirty-five ton object doesn't have any ready-made solution. But with my whole show, my practice questions craft, but loves to investigate it at the same time. So the premise of the ready-made, as you say, was to call-it-in, which is what I do for this flagpole. But then I spent seven years trying to build it, and then a year trying to move it. And it is like where (can I put it). I dragged it to a field in upstate New York and installed it there for a little bit, but it wasn't like it is in here, as a site-specific piece. I did design it as an interior sculpture. And it is like 'where does the art happen? Where does something turn into art? Is it putting it on the boat and taking it across the ocean? Is it a site-specific thing?'

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< Dan Colen, Sweet Liberty Gallery 6, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd

RP: *Does it have to do with the fact that it is in here? Does its location determine it becoming an artwork?*

DC: Yes, I mean it can and it does sometimes. I



think that is much more of what I am interested in considering. I am not sure that this delivers that message. I could definitely see this (work) in another space. I was obviously able to modify it at any time, because it comes apart. But as I said, I set it up outside and it didn't have the impact that it has in this enclosed space.

RP: *And in terms of the materials for a piece, how do you determine their choice, and of the relationship of those materials? Is it something you are working on many months, years in advance?*

DC: Also again here I did make a phone call, and I did follow the instructions that they sent me, and this is how you install the flagpole. And that's what I did, before breaking it down and turning into this shape, but that took a lot of effort; it took a lot of creativity. It took a lot of craft, and it took a lot of technical consideration.

RP: *On one level it almost reads as the collapse of the country. I think of yesterday and what happened with the mass shooting in Las Vegas, and of its significance upon the work, and the work upon those horrific events.*

DC: It is painfully appropriate, in a way to gage everything that all of us should be thinking about for sure.

RP: *Going back to my last point, you appear to*

employ a very diverse set of mediums, and materials, and in order to create a cannon of such diverse works is it important to allow for things to happen, rather than determine everything by design?

DC: Yes it is important to my work, and it's been a challenge for me to figure out a way to present it to an audience in a way that they can digest it, because it is a lot to wrangle (with). I had a hard time getting the whole show as I wanted it, because I starved for so many new kinds of things all at once. This here is the first painting I made at art school, Untitled (Me and You) 2006-2007, prior to that I had never considered photo-realism, and I had never used an airbrush. So to get everything right the first time challenged me, and to select the range of things that needed to be in a space, to paint the picture of the entire through-line of the work, I obviously had to make edits, I couldn't show it all at once. I don't think that would have helped at all. Significantly with this show I feel like for the first time I am allowing the audience a real insight into what I do. For people who don't know everything that I have ever done, they can come here and understand everything I have ever done.

RP: *So do you see this as a survey show or possibly even an early stage retrospective?*

DC: I think for somebody of my age the word 'survey' is a little more appropriate. I started in 2001 and it finished in 2017. This is a piece from 2013 (Livin' and

Dyin') again fully realised in here for the first time, and this goes throughout the whole show, and is part of an actual object. So we are in a room of three self-portraits.

RP: *And I assume this is the first time these works have been shown together like this?*

DC: As I said this (The Big Kahuna) has never been shown like this before. The version of the piece at Astrup Fearnley, same thing but much smaller, really didn't have the same impact and it was at a different moment. That was really a study and it wasn't in a room.

RP: *Is that something you had a major bearing on, in terms of the curating or location of works into each of the spaces?*

DC: Yes I made this show. It is pretty site-specific, the whole show in a way.

RP: *You had a plan of the spaces well in advance?*

DC: I had been working on this show for two years, talking in depth with the gallery and making decisions with them. But yes it has been plenty of time in the making, so I haven't really been working on anything other than this; which has allowed me to really deal with it. It is something again that I saw as an opportunity to do the thing that I have essentially been failing to pull off. Creating a fuller spectrum for my audience, for 'an audience' not 'my audience', because it really is the thing that many people have seen one or two shows; and I haven't previously done as good a job of showing the full breadth of the work.

RP: *Are you more content now?*

DC: This is what I do right here.

RP: *And you are satisfied with what has happened, in terms of certain works being fully realised for the first time?*

DC: Yes I couldn't do any better than this. It's awesome; things often aren't finished for (different reasons). I have done the cut outs before but they had only gone

< Dan Colen, Sweet Liberty Gallery 5, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd

Dan Colen, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd

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through biennale walls, and they were always meant to go through proper structural architecture, and put themselves (about) in a permanent way. And again this thing (The Big Kahuna), I have shown it before, but it was quarter of the size, and a sixteenth of the weight.

RP: What proves interesting is not only the variable of mediums, but also the scale of works, as you go from the colossal to the more contained. What are trying to achieve by varying the volume of works?

DC: Yes and I guess this thing (The Big Kahuna) is the heaviest thing, and apply negative space to that too; so in that sense it is even more overwhelming.

RP: It is interesting in light of our discussing sculpture, that when I was looking over your work online I was inundated with images of paintings, but what strikes me is that painting is just one element, one facet of your practice.

DC: Yes and through that I think of myself as a medium based artist, but everything that I do comes out of my consideration of what it means to apply a stroke of paint to a canvas. This, these holes, they all come out of putting a mark on the world.

RP: So do you still see yourself as painting in one instance and sculpting, or constructing something in another? Are such distinctions applicable to how you operate, or does everything morph into an overall approach?

DC: The chain of thought that has come out of me considering making painting has bought me to this point, and so something like this germinated from that consideration. What it means when I put my paintbrush (to the canvas).

RP: It appears you have no fear, to go from painting these trash and oil canvases (Oh Madonna! 2016, Mama Mai, 2016), to cutting into permanent walls, and of playing with thirty-five tons of concrete. You have no boundaries to how you operate, is that how you see it?

DC: I don't have good boundaries, I don't know if I have no fear, but I am not scared to fail. I respect the failures as much as I do the successes. This show took me fifteen years to make and I think that it is full of very successful pieces, but they would have never have happened had I not been willing to fail leading up to them, and a lot of the work is evidence of the failure. This sculpture (The Big Kahuna) is about failure obviously, so the idea of actual experience and actual material, and content and ideas, leads to my shifting from foreground to background often. Just that idea that 'is it a failure or is it about a failure? Of whether there is a different to those two things, and is failure more interesting than a story about a failure?'

RP: I think of (Robert) Rauschenberg, and of his notion that in failure he found the greatest reward. Possibly the parameters of what we decide is failure aren't necessarily the case?

DC: We learn within the failure, within the growth, or we call them lessons. But just in terms of jumping between mediums, and jumping into unknown spaces, I would rather my process be about an education, than about hitting the bullseye. I would way rather learn something than close my eyes and hit the right spot. I want to watch this stuff happen.

RP: I recall when I interviewed Mexican American Bosco Sodi, he declared an interest in process over product.

DC: Yes definitely process, and again I think this piece (The Big Kahuna) is ambiguous, of whether it is process or whether it is about process? Because it looks like it is process, but then how the fuck does that get up there. You can't even bend this thing. It took so many machines, of which the rigors were blown away. The metal was so thick and so strong. It is a hundred and thirty feet (bend double).

RP: So there isn't a strict sense of chronology to the show?

DC: Definitely, chronology is not taken into account.

RP: And is that how you work, but thinking of a piece from nine years ago whilst concentrating on a work from last week?

DC: It is amazing as much as I shift between things I am always looking for a new way of expression, a new way to consider form that so often comes back to very simple things. I had to do a tour of the show for all of the staff (of the gallery) today, and it is amazing how many themes emerge, that I am very unconscious of as I was designing the show and considering it. But it comes together. That idea of my chest being the background (Me, Jesus and the Children 2001-2003), or the flag (The Big Kahuna) becomes the background -by which the content becoming the background. Something being on top of something else, which it almost like the pedestal being on top of the sculpture.

The sculpture is really about one thing being above another thing, and about one thing controlling another

> Dan Colen, Photographed by Prudence Cumings Associates, Copyright by Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd

thing. You lose a connection to what is controlling what, because they don't share a sensibility; there is just a core so you stop believing in it.

RP: It is definitely about much more than painting.

DC: Yes it is definitely much more than just painting.

RP: There appears to be a complement of ideas and emotions intrinsic to your works, as much as there is between the rooms of the exhibition - with the seriousness of The Big Kahuna immediately replaced by the satire of Haiku; by which you appear to want to induce multiple emotions as aesthetic positions if you like. Do you see it that way?

DC: Yes I guess I can't separate any of those things.

RP: As individuals we experience a whole range of emotions, thus are your works a reflection of our ungovernable energies, as opposed to offered up a flawless version of what it is to live?

DC: They come back and sometimes they overlap. So this piece I call it Haiku, designed with springs and joints that are all set to allow for the collapse of the dog in the way I envision. So (the work) doesn't just fall anyway, it falls in a particular way. And that circular container (attached to the ceiling) has all the mechanics and technology within it; yet it's still a relatively simple

construction. With three motors, one circular, one that has the dog going back and forth, and one that goes up and down. Sometimes they move separately, one at a time, where the cord attached (to the dog) just ascends to the ceiling and then falls from it, and then all three motors can operate at the same time. Haiku was based on a simple way to design the programming, where I decided I would use 575, a three-stanza machine - but the machine is meant like the text of a high coup, to give itself over to nature. The premise behind it is an amazing blueprint for communicating with the natural world as a text based thing. So in a way I see this mechanised thing, this hard geometric minimalist thing, as instilling in this animated dog a breath or a lightness; a whole series of different emotions that allow it to move in one way, or as part of a more complex cycle. I wasn't thinking about this at all when I was making the show, but seeing it I am really proud of how long it captures my interest, and of the way in which I want comedy to function in my work. Not in every piece because a lot of pieces are very tragic, but I want them to hold the comedy also.

RP: It is interesting how you value 'comedy' and 'absurdity', as much as your works have a 'seriousness' about them. The significance you hold for all of those emotions, those sensations.

DC: Yes

