

Joe Coleman and the Shadow Self

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There is a world of difference between all the gestures of radicalism and the truly radical gesture. The former, though plentiful in our culture today, does little to disrupt it, while the latter is indeed rare and remains somehow viscerally upsetting to the body politic. Driven by the polemical polarization of politics, artists subsume the volatile force of the aesthetically radical into the language of identity, as if difference constitutes something unique, exotic and dangerous. Joe Coleman's paintings, loving and terrifying personifications of true difference, of what is evil and uncontrollable, locate the self in the other, breaking down difference as it is constructed by the hegemony into a profoundly disturbing commonality. Coleman does not dabble in taboo, he dives deep into the forbidden.

Emerging in the downtown New York scene of the Late Seventies and Early Eighties, a time and place where all manner of transgression seeped into the zeitgeist across myriad practices- most notably underground film, music and club-based performance art- Joe Coleman was fundamental to the great push towards the extremes of expression before the dawn of the culture wars, when what had been a relatively private subcultural conversation became public and politicized. Coming as it did after a century of modernism had enthusiastically followed the shock of the new, collapsing the pursuit of innovation into a stylistic surfeit of novelty, it may have seemed that Coleman and his community were simply amping up the last vestiges of outrage left. What was already evident in this rising culture of affront however was how it spoke to a new sensibility, more outlaw and outsider than the polite discourse of art world formalisms. In retrospect of course this was a heretic strain within the developing strategies of the post-modern condition, and as such it is vital to understand Coleman's art as deeply invested in the possibility of stitching together the furthest, darkest margins of our past and making of this historical pastiche something painfully personal.

Joe Coleman and The Shadow Self surveys the past twenty years of the artist's degenerate and deviant portraiture to consider how his subjects are at once subjective and self-reflexive; contemplations of the other as reflections of his own identity and abiding sense of community. Populated by dark muses, profoundly personal impersonations in the manner by which the best actors fully inhabit the personae of their roles, investigations of taboo as a deeper investigation into the darkness within all our hearts, in Coleman's paintings biographical and autobiographical anecdotes are brought together by a supreme act of empathy like some multifaceted societal communion. He looks outwards, to the abstruse and clandestine margins of aberrant, even abhorrent, behavior to picture to fathom a latent pathological commonality within the collective human condition. Whether self-portraits, depictions of his friends or- with the greatest affection, his partner Whitney Ward- or invocations of infamy including here insurrectionist abolitionist John Brown, medieval composer Carlo Gesualdo, who murdered his wife and her

lover and then put them on display, Swiftrunner, the Cree hunter who facing the alien European extinction of the buffalo and starvation murdered and cannibalized his family, or Albert Hicks. who when shanghaied let loose to kill the entire crew of the ship he was on, Coleman's art is painted with an impassioned degree of love and understanding that is rare and somewhat reviled in the profession of fine art.

More than even the greater affection Joe Coleman invests in his portraits there is a kind of reverence at work here, a faith and a fetish that is ultimately spiritual, seeking transcendence within transgression. Like many whose formative experience with the church was something of a trauma, Coleman never fully sheds the morbid fascinations of his childhood Catholicism but wraps its suffering iconography around a martyrdom of the misunderstood. Though grounded in an adamant atheism, neither a believer nor sheep looking for a shepherd, Coleman's biblical lessons extend from a sense that Jesus kept the company of prostitutes, losers and terrorists and works from this villain/martyr duality to measure pain as a search for humanity and redemption. The frames he crafts around these paintings, built of disturbing artifacts ranging from clothing to teeth to bullets, embellish the saintly aura of his problematic personae with the same fanatical and fantastical fetish of medieval reliquaries. Similarly his abiding sense of narrative, arising in this artist from the early comics he created as a pulp populism of atrocity, fracture linearity through a prism of simultaneity, never planned out but put together like a jigsaw puzzle quilted across time and the normative notions of cause and effect. It's all an act of painstaking scrutiny executed in the minutia of a single hair paintbrush, the more we look the more that is revealed, details discrete and individuated yet part of a whole, altogether personifications as imprecations that manifest and magnify the power of their personality.

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