

“FUCK OFF WE MURDER WATCH OUT”

by David Woodard

While still in first grade, Joe Coleman found himself placed in a class for the emotionally unstable, a place where the physically and psychically misshapen are forced to intermingle until their fates may be vaguely presaged. I remember the frightful classes well: “Special Ed(ucation)” pupils were commonly referred to as “tarders” or, if they were lucky, “spazzes.” Back at home there were monstrous secrets to be kept, not that Joe would know how or to whom to tell them. From this experience, little Joe learned to identify himself as one of the forlorn contemptibles—he is to the present day not inclined to fancy himself above others. Personally open and sincere, like the Maharishi, Coleman is a jovial kid—almost.

I like hurting little things that can't fight back.—Mary Bell, And a Child Shall Lead Them (2000)

28

David Woodard

When viewers open their hearts, Coleman’s paintings are still not easy to read—they are nightmares the more difficult to shrug. Violence and dementia, serial killers and cultural antiheroes, Charles Manson, Hank Williams, Harry Houdini—subjects presented are rich in color and draftsmanship, psychotic Wagner operas rendered in acrylic, the figurative Renaissance infused with Pop megalomania, comic books and an obsession with the horrible yet also the honorable. Coleman’s works are American Folk Art in their attention to detail—incredibly dense with information, each available space crowded as if by divine fiat or at least religious zeal.

American Venus (1997) is a portrait of Jayne Mansfield, all-American 1950s goddess. Mansfield’s willingness to exploit her physical charms—in a culture governed by a severely hypocritical morality—yielded the headlines she desired, whilst slowly destroying her career. Death by decapitation, in a 1967 automobile accident, solidified her immortality. Coleman portrays Mansfield at the moment of death—hovering above her blond head, as it rolls to a stop along the side of a road, is a crown at last. Sharp triangles in the background suggest at first the shards of windshield that penetrated her neck, yet they also remind us of the Holy Trinity and the mythological love triangle that may well have resulted in this tragedy. Anton LaVey, Founder/High Priest of the Church of Satan, was also a hopeful Mansfield suitor experiencing jealous discomfort. He had placed a curse on Mansfield’s manager who at that moment was driving the car—it is a case of next time maybe being a little more careful about what you wish for. Amidst moths, insects, and butterflies (corruption, sin, and metamorphosis), an incidental text reads “Miss One-for-the-Road,” a beauty pageant Ms. Mansfield had won.

Motherly love is best.—reverse inscription on middle left arm of hermaphroditic, anthropomorphized arachnid wearing a high-heeled shoe and bejeweled cap, toward bottom of panel, The Victory of Hell (1995)

When rung, Joe's television could be heard in the background, Cho Seung-Hui's campus massacre at Virginia Tech having just occurred that morning. "So far, 33 dead including the gunman," he noted rather slowly and dreamily, perhaps reflecting on the parallel number and its Christ reference.

DW: What was he using?

JC: He had two guns—one automatic, and one was a small caliber, only a .22. He had lots of ammo, too, supposedly.

DW: Good for him. And he disappeared for a couple of hours?

JC: Yeah, from what I understand he went on a shooting spree at one location, then was not caught and showed up a couple of hours later at a different location.

DW: He was pretty clever. I wonder where he was hiding.

JC: Yeah, I know, during those two hours.

DW: He probably could have gotten away, if he wanted to.

JC: Yeah, obviously he could have after the first shooting.

DW: Maybe not, though. He might have been conspicuous. Whatever he looked like was probably known.

JC: Yeah. They're saying that he's Asian, but they haven't released any names. No one really knows anything about him, even if he's part of the school or not.

DW: There was something about a shooting last year, where an escaped jail inmate shot somebody elsewhere but then went over to that same campus to hide, and they caught him there.

JC: Yeah, it's pretty amazing. It's a groundbreaking day. Pretty amazing.

DW: And prior to this, the biggest shooting was that thing with the truck going into a cafeteria ...

JC: Oh yeah, the Libby's Massacre.

DW: Which was only 24 or so ...

JC: Yeah, this tops that.

DW: Pretty hard to top.

JC: I know, it's pretty amazing.

DW: Then there's the McDonald's Massacre, but that was also ...

JC: Yeah, that was also less. James Huberty.

DW: James Huberty, yes.

JC: I think the fact that he was able to elude the police and then come back for a second ... rampage, I think that really allowed him to total the ante to a pretty amazing amount.

DW: That's what really distinguishes him. Escaping for a couple of hours and then coming back for more. That's really impressive.

JC: Yeah, that he was able to cool down and, you know, build up the rage again and go out. It would seem that that's not easy to do. How would he stop himself, to one degree, and then he'd have to build it up again, within a short amount of time.

DW: True. During those two hours he would have been experiencing tremendous anxiety. He would have had to rewire his emotions and thoughts.

JC: Yeah, he'd have to be going through so many different things.

DW: He would be thinking, "Okay, this is it. Should I commit suicide?" Maybe in the process, he realized that he could accomplish more first and then reconnected to his earlier spirit.

JC: Yeah. It's speculation, but maybe at one point he thought, "Hey, I can just leave and not get caught," and then maybe he rethought it. Who knows at this point? It's often a suicidal act to begin with, but it's just amazing that he disappeared for those two hours. I mean, where was he and what was he doing?

DW: They don't go into that at all yet, do they?

JC: No, no one knows right now.

DW: I read something about students being irate about not having been warned about the first shooting, so they just stayed on campus without knowing about the earlier murders and that the shooter was at large.

JC: That's pretty shocking as well. There's going to be a press meeting soon, so they're kind of waiting for that.

DW: Are they showing pictures of murder victims?

JC: Yeah, they were showing some video footage that was shot by one of the students' phone cameras. You couldn't really see the shooter, but you could hear the gunfire, and you could see the cops running toward something. And there are a lot of stills that they're showing now as well, of dragging bodies out of a doorway, and some students jumping out of windows.

DW: Oh yeah, I read something about that. These were probably just second floor windows, but the wording in the article I read seemed deliberately skewed to trigger memories of drones leaping to their deaths from upper floors of the World Trade Center.

JC: Yeah. Supposedly the gunman chained the doors closed during the first shooting, so no one could leave and no one could get in.

In 1987, in New York, a book was published providing psychic catharsis for tendrils of a generation fearing that the aesthetic sensibilities evolved during the late 1970s and early '80s were being consumed under the same umbrella co-opting the fruits of hippiedom. Over the next decade, *Apocalypse Culture* seemed to catalyze a new breed of intellect in urban America. A collection of essays by artists, criminals, religious zealots and clinically diagnosed schizophrenics covering a berth of subjects though together distinguished by a peculiarly defiant naiveté, the book's cover featured a painting completed eleven years earlier by Joe Coleman: *Passion Murder* (1976). This was the first time that many had seen the artist's work—it was a fitting, inspired choice on the part of editor/publisher Adam Parfrey.

Asked to comment on Coleman's prestigious KW retrospective, wherein a troubled boy's artistic skills combined with motherly encouragement and a penchant for staring with disbelief into his fears have advanced to pierce the inner sanctum of the art establishment, Parfrey instinctively defaults to "twinning," a good omen for the twinned:

What's odd to others may not be so odd to Joe Coleman or me. We might have a different standard for what constitutes a "norm." It's normal for us to be drawn to the work of outsiders or people who do not fit into the mainstream aesthetic, or what makes many people feel safe and comfortable. Surely, in some respects, Joe and I find the unobservant exclusionary mainstream to be a dull sort of "odd" in itself.

The cover of *Apocalypse Culture* made an impression on me as a blossoming youth. It is heartening to see Joe Coleman emerge as America's End Times chronicler and artistic conscience.

From the perspective of Europeans surveying American contemporary art, Coleman's influence might seem to predominate in the realm of Lowbrow, i. e. the world of Robert Williams' Juxtapoz Magazine, which tends to showcase work of up-and-coming Colemanites when it is not opportune to publish images of actual Coleman paintings. For some, the name Joe Coleman evokes images of the Eternal Teen fixated on that which others *just wouldn't understand*: physical deformities, decapitation, psychopaths, dismemberment, pervasive skin ailments ... But within the distractions is a preponderance of Coleman's friends and other personal heroes.

An underlying Messianic current of empathy and love secretly justifies the belligerent cannibals, dangling eyeballs and gaping genital cysts. The obvious components serve as a smokescreen triggering knee-jerk reactions from the profane whilst protecting from the same viewers Coleman's vulnerable, Christ-like sentiments (the sorrow and compassion) occulted within.

All of my work is the microcosm and the macrocosm. The world within the world within the world within the world.—Joe Coleman

Coleman's wife Whitney Ward, close friends Hasil Adkins, Jim Jarmusch, and Indian Larry, and iconic heroes Hank Williams, Henry Darger, Barbara Steele, and Klaus Kinski are also treated with sincere respect, usually accompanied by concise painted texts recalling the illuminated manuscripts of Blake or Spare.

In *As You Look Into the Eye of the Cyclops, So the Eye of the Cyclops Looks Into You* (2003), a painting built into a 1950s TV console, Kinski is described as "Intense, demented, haunting. Klaus started in memorable supporting roles, like the hunchback in *For a Few Dollars More*, and went on to star in a series of films by Werner Herzog that made him an ICON." Of Sidney Woodrow Parfrey *Cyclops* says, "A kind of sad pathetic tragedy hangs over every character he played. His best role was the spree killing milktoast who is finally shot down at the Coney Island Wax Museum in an episode of *Naked City* called 'Burst of Passion.'" Similarly earnest introductions accompany each *Cyclops* subject, prompting the viewer to wonder from what perspective the oracle speaks. The authoritative voice seems to emanate from outside the circles of time, from above, an avuncular Zarathustra descending from the upstairs room to illuminate what's really happening within the glowing box and its pagan cosmology. In this way *Cyclops* recalls Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, granted without gloating or sarcasm. Of Buster Keaton *Cyclops* says, "It is strange that when I watch my favorite silent film comedian, I never laugh. I am too transfixed, hypnotized by his otherworldly presence and the dreamlike universe he inhabits. Most haunting is *The Playhouse*, in which he plays every part, male, female, animal."

The pictorial/textual narrative of Coleman's art consistently achieves an indivisible hybrid of diary and history—there seems to be no division separating personal life from the world of popular tragedy at large.

Indian Larry's Wilde Ride (2003), a portrait of a motorcycle enthusiast and close friend of Joe Coleman and Whitney Ward's, highlights an emotional shift in the Coleman catalog. While, as before, focusing on the heroic/tragic in a subject's life, and incorporating personal talismans—not only is the painting itself mounted on one of Indian Larry's favorite striped shirts, surely a powerful element to those who knew him personally, the frame is made from his actual bike parts (Joe designed it, the guys at Indian Larry's shop welded it together)—details show less of what viewers find gory and ghoulish in Coleman's work, and instead we are struck by a more immediately recognizable sense of personal loss, mourning, remembrance.

*I think I've finally found the onramp to the road of life.
My insanity purged my demons away.*—Indian Larry

Indian Larry had been designing and building bikes since childhood, beginning with a lawnmower-powered tricycle. He appears as a stately, handsomely tattooed gent with electric blue eyes unencumbered by lashes. One of dozens of biographical vignettes surrounding the handsome hybrid is an explosion next to a hand, followed by the words: "Larry attempted to construct a pipe bomb with the intent to blow up the Catholic school which was the source of his torment. The bomb exploded prematurely, causing Larry the loss of one finger on his left hand."

*When you have only four fingers on one hand, you get into tighter spots.
It makes you a better mechanic.—Indian Larry*

Catholicism recurs, and the viewer learns of Indian Larry's deep abhorrence of nuns. Beneath a dreamy black-and-white rendering of St. Thomas School: "The only group of people that Larry had a deep hatred of was 'nuns.' As a child the nuns at his Catholic school used to beat him and lock him in a closet for hours." Beneath the school, a woman in heels stands on top of Indian Larry's chest; shirtless in high-waisted gold lamé trousers and Petrouchka slippers, Indian Larry takes it easy, supine on a bed of nails—"JUNKIE," it says to the right, followed by "Pins and needles! Needles and pins." To the left of the school a bug-eyed, hefty nun with a third eye and pointy fingers hoists diminutive Indian Larry into the air by his hair, "Just a step away from Hell" written in white letters against the red flames licking from behind. The nun's mantra: "The closet is dark. The ruler is hard." Three short vignettes away, Indian Larry says to himself: "When I die, I want to ask God: what the Hell were you thinking?"

A long-winded version of a children's rhyme appears beside a deeply regretful fallen egg, over which an owl coos "Meerrder:" "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again." The Sartre-mouthed egg, donning a bow tie and clogs, has issued from the vagina of Indian Larry's widow Bambi, who wears a feather mask and pasties while standing with arms outstretched beside her familiar, a highly ornamented hummingbird with eleven suction cup-tipped tentacles extending toward an effigy of Indian Larry. Next to this image of Bambi is a larger, apparently more wholesome rendering in which she gazes into the viewer's eyes and smiles, hair in pigtails, a heart amulet around the neck. To the right is a third portrait of the widow as mermaid, and beneath this mini-triptych is a generous Coleman couplet:

*The Ultimate Mythic Romance between Fire and Water,
Bambi was the greatest love of Larry's life.*

Bambi makes another appearance as mermaid on a bottom section of the painting bearing the words "Sea of Love," where a dreary swordfish, crab and lobster socialize vacantly with a wall-eyed, hook-armed, footless midget lady wearing a sheer babydoll. "Hey wait, come back, I'll make breakfast," the feminine blob says to Indian Larry. Towering over the scene, the Canon Bomb Mermaid smiles radiantly, eyes wide, ecstatic. Above Bambi an illustrated vignette describes Evil

Knievel, Indian Larry's idol: "The greatest shaman of all daredevils. His courtship of Mistress Death left him with 35 broken bones and a liver transplant and as a true American HERO."

The mild tone of *Indian Larry's Wilde Ride* first suggests itself in Coleman's portrait of Hank Williams, *A Picture from Life's Other Side* (1998), coincidentally the year the artist had met Whitney Ward. It is a tone inflected with seemingly better-adjusted humor, the laughter less toothy, emanating perhaps from a more confident, reassured place in the artist's heart. Though subsequent paintings return to the comforts of utter cravenness, *The Philosophy of Humbug* (1999), a portrait of P. T. Barnum, and *The Mad Hatter* (2000), a portrait of Boston Corbett, the man who killed Abraham Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth, are yet further exceptions. A quiet sense of reverence and worship surrounds Coleman's treatment of Williams, Barnum and Corbett.

These works are softer and openly sentimental, finding their antipode in Coleman's violent urban street scene *Ecce Homo* (1994), which became the cover of *Apocalypse Culture II* (2000), a Russian edition of which (2005) was banned and committed to flames under Putin's rule in 2006.

In his self-portrait *Coal Man* (1997), the artist appears Buddha-like and highly attentive in a suit and tie at the center of a circle within a circle, gazing into the viewer's eyes through highly magnified jeweler's goggles whilst holding in his hands a previous self-portrait, *Faith* (1996). At the bottom left border, Coleman's father, inebriated at a traffic signal, clutches a large bottle of vodka in one hand and three paint brushes in the other. The latter is the only gift the elder Coleman would ever give to little Joe, a most memorable occasion. Along the bottom right border, Joe's gorgeous mother fellates the nail pinning the Messiah's feet to the cross, one hand caressing the wood behind his shins, the other gently wielding a cat o' nine tails. But it isn't Jesus Christ on the cross—it's Joe Coleman, apparently turgid beneath a modesty cloth. Just within that border, surrounding the outer circle, images reminiscent of a bad Christian afterlife suggest horrors on Earth, Stations of the Artist's Cross, which JC has miraculously survived and turned to his favor.

To the right, Coleman's childhood home, painted a colonial red, looks deceptively comfortable. On the chimney sits little Joe, naked, head in hands, before his towering bombshell mom. Grotesquely ambulating Bosch-like demons, poking scissors through their vaginas, or with gardening tools for limbs, or surgery instruments eternally propping their eyes open, heavily populate a fiery sky surrounding the early Coleman hearth.

Across the street from the house, as indeed was the case with the artist's childhood home, is a cemetery. The seven tombstones we see here are those of Otto Dix, Ivan Albright, Ed Wood, Jr., H. Houdini, Browning, Leone, Joe Coleman.

To the left is St. Mary's Church, which Coleman attended, and its cemetery. The seven tombstones here represent Masonic virtues: Truth, Friendship, Commitment, Faith, Family, Love, Loyalty.

Within the outer circle surrounding Coleman are objects friendly and familiar to the artist: a paperback first edition of *Nightmare Alley*, a "Ripley's Believe it or Not" mug, a bottle of Extra-Strength Tylenol (in America, during the 1970s, a disgruntled Tylenol factory worker poisoned a batch of the mild headache pills favored by children, resulting in a slow wave of kiddie death), a Penguin edition of Schopen-

hauer's *Essays and Aphorisms* ("I hate you with all my heart." "The human body is a lonely place."), a packaged Lifestyles Vibra-Ribbed condom ("Hellfire," "Sin"), a syringe ("self-administered efforts at obtaining relief from internal dangers"), a bottle of Cockspur Rum, a partially used tube of Rembrandt blue acrylic paint.

Within the nucleus dominated by Coleman are many short phrases and words: "You'll be sorry," "Wake me up!" "Out of sight, out of mind," "Falling rock zone," "The Jews didn't kill Jesus, it was his own father." The inner circle itself, like the outer, consists of text: "Today is the time of peril. Age of tears, anguish and torment. Lonely above all. Full of bitter pain and dread. Sometimes the dread feels too big for my soul to contain. An explosive release is desired."

Catholicism is Trinitarian: it believes that, while God is one in nature, essence, and being, one God exists in three divine persons, each identical with the one essence, whose only distinctions are in their relations to one another: the Father's relationship to the Son, the Son's relationship to the Father, and the relations of both to the Holy Spirit, constituting the one God as a Trinity. When one examines the relationship between Wagner and his biological father, a Jewish actor with whom his Aryan mother was having an affair and whom she would eventually marry, we gain insight into *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, and the troubled tone of the Master's collected essays, *Religion and Art*. Coleman's relationship to his father is at least as important to the zeitgeist of his work.

35

David Woodard

DW: Emotive Disturbance is a term Stravinsky coined on his deathbed whilst interviewed by his interpreter/biographer Robert Craft. Asked how he had been able to compose the three Earth-shattering ballets of his early career, between 1909 and 1913—Rite of Spring, Petrouchka and Firebird Suite—Stravinsky invented the term to describe this period of his life. He was simultaneously married to his provincial cousin, with whom he had had a child, and pursuing a ménage à trois with Sergei Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky, of the Ballets Russes, with whom he was touring. Unable to speak of one to the other, and thus occupying two mutually exclusive romantic universes, Stravinsky channeled his madness into these works. This was how he felt, as he lay dying, his masterpieces had come into being. Your masterpieces, on the other hand, seem to be prompted by a more reliable source—the muses have granted you more than five years.

JC: Even in early childhood, drawings of the Stations of the Cross or things like that, they're still going in a particular line, but the line has become more refined, more precise. And even the way that I think about it, and the way that I feel it, and the way that I portray it, even my fingers move less, they're more concentrated. The brushstrokes are so much smaller now. The hand moves in smaller movements, searching for more information that's on the surface. So it is a continuous line, but that still is a circle because it goes back to the beginning.

DW: And maybe that beginning would be something like the class you had to go to when you were six.

JC: Yeah, that could be where the circle returns—where it makes a circle.

DW: And then it proceeds through a cycle of themes related to Christianity: confession, guilt, triumph ...

JC: ... and physical and internal pain.

DW: Yes, that's very much going on—a combination of physical and internal torment. How would you describe your body type when you were six years old? Were you like a little version of you now?

JC: I guess, well I would have to be, but how would you describe that? I was smaller than the other kids in my class. Generally, I've always been kind of short.

DW: Were you physically capable of defending yourself against asshole jocks, for example?

JC: I was picked on for a while, but the way I was eventually able to overcome that was that the scariest person in my life was my father—and I would channel his spirit. So when I was pushed to the point where you have nothing to lose, then I drew on this power that I got from my father, or at least from the fear of him, if not the actual person.

DW: It became useful for you to channel his rage, his power.

JC: Yeah.

DW: Has your relationship with and marriage to Whitney caused significant changes in your work? For example, has it contributed to an inclination toward finer brushstrokes?

JC: I think Whitney, I mean she brings so much to my life, and maturity does too. Being able to push things harder. But it's not the maturity of years. Like some artists, when they have a certain amount of success, they slow down, or they don't challenge themselves. But over the years I keep challenging myself, pushing myself to what I'm capable of. And it's kind of a desperate feeling, too, because I don't know how much longer, how much time I have, so there's a feeling of desperation. How much longer can I control my hands, and my eyes.

DW: Ah, yes.

JC: And all of the work has a fear of, I think about the loss of the eyes, because I have to put so much on the surface. I think it speaks of the fear, though, of blindness, and the eventuality that's undeniable that I will, you know, I'll lose everything eventually—'cause we all do.

DW: When did you and Whitney get married, and how did you meet?

JC: The way I met Whitney was that we had a mutual friend, Jonathan Hayes, and he's a medical examiner here in New York and also a Food & Wine critic

for Martha Stewart. He brought Whitney to the opening with a friend of his who is blind. And he described in great detail, which he could—he's very good at that—each of the paintings to his friend that was blind, while he was with Whitney ... and that was when I first met Whitney. And I just felt Whitney was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And such an amazing person inside, which, you know, I just barely would know at that time. That's how I met Whitney, but I was with Dian Hanson at the time. When Dian Hanson and I broke up, Whitney and I began seeing each other—and we've been together ever since.

As we've begun pondering Coleman's psychosexual parallel to Wagner, let's proceed to *Tenebrae for Gesualdo* (2004). Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613), Prince of Venosa, was the only composer to prefigure Wagner's use of what would eventually be termed *chromaticism*, or *tristanism*: the colorful use of accidentals, excessive to the point of tonal ambiguity, which the Master definitively introduced in the "Love Death" of *Tristan und Isolde* (begun 1856). Although Gesualdo composed some of the most hauntingly beautiful choral works of the 16th century, he is best known—like O. J., another Coleman subject—for having neutralized his trophy wife and her uncared-for lover. Gesualdo's inner torment following the debacle, for which the sensitive composer was spared prosecution, contributed favorably to the genius of his music—Emotive Disturbance in extremis.

The domestic row affected Gesualdo deeply. In atonement he, like Macbeth, razed the forest around his castle so that his shame would not be hidden. He built a monastery with a chapel, for which he commissioned a painting showing himself, the wicked uncle Don Giulio, the corpses of Maria and her lover and a child thought to be his spawn by Donna Maria who was also reported to have been quieted, or, alternatively, Cupid representing the silencing of Love. While there is no documentation of the birth of a child, a wet nurse on duty during the attack is said to have screamed at the top of her lungs that at least the child should be spared. Tradition holds that the composer suspended the child, resting in its cradle, by silken cords:

... The crib was subjected to wild undulations until, through the passion of the motion, not being able to draw breath, the child rendered up its soul to Heaven.

Stravinsky, having sought out the painting, found it quite dirty and yet undamaged. When he returned three years later, it had been cleaned and torn just above Gesualdo's head.

Contemporaries revered Gesualdo as a leading composer of madrigals (six volumes), in which he extended the style to extremes with a maximum of expressive intensity, anticipating the music of two centuries later. His music exhibited sudden tempo changes, emotions wrung out to maximum effect—the texts were often highly erotic. These madrigals were deemed sufficiently remarkable to be published shortly after his death in one of the earliest examples of the printed full score.

Stravinsky, fascinated by Gesualdo's music, orchestrated and completed some of his works. In the process, he took it upon himself to visit Gesualdo's hometown.

... I visited the seat of the composer's family name (Gesualdo, Avellino), an unpictures-

quely squalid town ... I had come to Naples by boat—my last such expedition I had resolved. The debarking ordeal alone took longer than the transatlantic flight, not to mention the simultaneous marathon concerts by competing brass bands, continuous pelting by paper streamers, and orgies of weeping by separated and reuniting Neapolitans. I remember that on the way to Gesualdo we visited the Conservatory of San Pietro a Maiella, and the Fish stalls near the Porta Capuana; and, at Montevirgine, we watched the procession of a parthenogenetic cult, a parade of flower-garlanded automobiles led by boys carrying religious banners and running like lampadephores ...

Gesualdo's castle was the residence then of some hens, a heifer and a browsing goat, as well as a human population numbering, in that still Pill-less, anti-Malthusian decade, a great many bambini. None of the inhabitants had heard of the Prince of Venosa and his deeds, of course, and in order to explain our wish to peek at the premises, some of its lurid history had to be imparted to at least some of the tenants.—Stravinsky

The attitude of Baroque art, per Erwin Panofsky, may be defined as “based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however, merge into a subjective feeling of freedom, pleasure even ...”¹ The paradigmatic example of this for Panofsky is a sculpture: Bernini's *Mystical Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila* (1644–47). This famous altarpiece in Rome depicts the moment in St. Teresa's hagiography when an angel of Christ has pierced her heart with a golden, flaming arrow. She swoons, overwhelmed by excruciating psychic pain and sexual ecstasy, her expression betraying a divine short-circuit, streams of light in golden rays suggesting the Heaven-bound trajectory of her soul. The sculpture floats in space between Earth and Heaven, the drapes about her body further suggesting movement within their crisp representation of disheveled, whirling forms. The statue combines picture, relief, plastic grouping. The crucial element together distinguishing the music of Gesualdo, the sculpture of Bernini and the painting of Coleman is Emotive Disturbance as defined by Stravinsky.

At Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, in Rotterdam, Coleman exhibited *The Man of Sorrows* (1993) in a section of works by artists influenced by Hieronymus Bosch, alongside James Ensor, Pieter Brueghel and Salvador Dalí—each an obviously profound influence on the former New York cabby's psyche.

Joe Coleman has said that he paints what frightens him the most. A precedent to such an MO, appearing at about the same time as Charlie Manson's Family admonition during the late 1960s to “Get the fear,” is described in the conversational pages of Dalí's *Unspeakable Confessions*. The Paranoid-Critical Method, the showman/shaman's early scrying technique, involved attainment of a dreamlike state and the hyperconscious, Rorschach-like interpretation of vaguely suggested images hiding within a visual field. The practitioner draws interpretations from his/her deepest and most challenging fears, as if sources of antagonism are everywhere lying in wait, camouflaged; s/he then renders and articulates the frightful images. The method seems operative in Coleman's work thematically, if not visually. In the tradition of Plutarch, Coleman is chronicling definitive events of our times in accordance with his belief that history is defined by certain key determinants, such as murder, glorious death, true glamour:

¹ Erwin Panofsky, *What is Baroque?: Three Essays on Style* (Boston: MIT, 1997), p. 80.

Murder is the principal agent of historical progress.—reverse inscription within central spiral, The Victory of Hell (1995)

It is an ability to scry, or see beyond knowledge, through paranoia, that enables Coleman to determine which event entering his consciousness—via the evening news, or his personal life, or the cultural sector—may resonate meaningfully with history and thus be incorporated. Posterity, what's left behind and what will matter after we die, seems the central focus of Joe Coleman's concerns.

Coleman has had an interest in parallel numbers since childhood, mystified by their recurrence in his own life and the lives of others. Born on 11/22/55, his childhood home was located at 99 Ward St. (Encircling the central explosive crest within his '00 study of the history of explosives, *The Big Bang Theory*, are the painted words: "November 22, 1955, a megaton-range hydrogen bomb called 'Joe' explodes in Russia.") Joe Coleman (JC, grokking in fullness of JCdom) and Whitney Ward (WW: 2323) chose the year '00 for their marriage on 11/11-'00 also being the only year that Coleman has deigned to blow himself up, in New York, since his final Professor Momboozoo performance eleven years earlier during his mom's death. The day of his flight arrival in Berlin, for the present show, was the 11th.

Love Song (1999), a portrait of Joe and Whitney's courtship mounted on a bed sheet on which the archetypal couple mated, intricately combines images of "struggles and triumphs of a modern day showman" with Bible verses, friend Hasil Adkins, favorite desserts, and what seem like pet phrases between the lovers ("I just want to see you so bad," "The Bride of Spankenstein," "Lil Puddin Head," "I can't wait to see my baby," "Do you want to see my jar of tumors?") and proclamations ("I felt like Prometheus himself, and the fire I had discovered couldn't be extinguished by all the oceans of the world," "In life we search but seldom do we find. I've looked for you a long, long time."). One tiny vignette within the painting shows a dragon with six horned heads pulling the couple in an elaborate golden carriage over the words "HUMAN BOMB + #1 BOMBSHELL = THE NITKO EXPRESS." A dangerously aggressive-looking satyr shoots a golden, flaming arrow near the words "GO FOR WARD."

I remember the dread and awe surrounding obscure Long Island Satanist Ricky Kasso's naughtiness, when first reported in America. Kasso and friends had ritualistically murdered another boy. Resultant news stories effectively communicated what it is to be young and alive and profoundly arrogant, well beyond restraint. A similar edgy feeling was visited when other Coleman subjects were first introduced in the newspapers: Columbine kids Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, of course, and copycat soloist Kip Kinkel. A quiet, barely noticeable boy in his teens or early twenties occupying a desk in a classroom, through a mysterious rerouting of mental circuitry, catapults to near-religious icon status. It happens instantly.

The name written in red on Cho Seung-Hui's arm, "ISMAIL AX", is an anagram for "SALAMI XI", as deciphered in accordance with texts of the unique Shamanic Buddhist religion practiced in ancient Korea.

The meaning of SALAMI derives from the Italian verb salare, meaning "to salt," a reference to salting the Earth, the practice of spreading salt onto fields in order to

render them unharvestable. Salami was practiced in ancient times, at the bitter end of some wars, as a severely punitive scorched Earth tactic.

The Latin symbol for the number 11 (XI) is the reference used by Cho Seung-Hui to signify his authority to salt the Earth—the number 11 is ascribed by ancient and modern numerologists to great artists, religious leaders, prophets, leading historical figures. The number 11 is considered the “highest” of all numbers.

Another indication left by Cho Seung-Hui lies in the mythology of his ancient Korean homeland, wherein he believed in his right to become “Shin” (Godlike, divine, supernatural), as evidenced by Western media reports of his religious devotion to a song entitled “Shine”.—Pravda (April 19, 2007)

Coleman often places a beloved totemic figure at the center of a work, examining his interest in the subject by creating a massive border of historical vignettes. After months of meticulous labor, using tiny brushes, each square millimeter of panel is covered with quotations, glyphs, documents, dramatic scenes and gapingly willful creatures.

Persistent in self-challenge, Coleman has led American art into forensics. The viewing of finely conceived/rendered acrylic biographical portraits of contemporary and historical killers may be initially funny—haw haw. The sensitive viewer then perceives that Coleman possesses compassion for most of his subjects. His images reside outside the dialogue and lesser chicanery of the museum walls to which they now oddly belong, comparable to the way Mark Twain’s highfalutin sarcastic moral outrage was never quite accepted as literature during his lifetime. The case of Coleman also recalls the erstwhile outrageous legal technique of 33° Freemason Melvin Belli (Demonstrative Evidence—e. g., the exhibiting of human remains or parts at public trial), which the flamboyant attorney practiced successfully and without precedent beginning in the early 1940s; later in Belli’s long life, when the practice was accepted, Demonstrative Evidence secured its place as a requisite chapter in the textbooks of American law. Belli client Jack Ruby, whom little Joe had watched murder Lee Harvey Oswald on live television, in 1963, would figure pensively in Coleman’s *The Mad Hatter* (2000).

My mother developed lymphoma then cancer of the spleen and the pancreas. It was like there was a war going on in her body. She was being destroyed from the inside and there was nothing I could do to help her.—I Am Joe’s Fear of Disease (2001)

Joe corresponded with John Wayne Gacy. So had many, but what he describes with the clown is mature and distinguished. Gacy, a Chicago area KFC franchise owner convicted of smoking marijuana cigarettes with and torturing and killing a series of 33 teenage boys, whose rotting carcasses he would bury under his cellar (eventually extending his personal cemetery into the backyard, his undoing), was also a professional clown and amateur portrait artist. Gacy was the only person to express sympathy to Coleman when Mrs. Coleman, the dearest person in the artist’s life, passed away—Gacy sent Joe a precious hand-illustrated card of condolence.

The painting *I Am Joe’s Fear of Disease* (2001) is mounted to the gown he wore whilst admitted/treated at a hospital, a magickally charged object as are some of those comprising the *Odditorium*.

If the study of emerging diseases shows anything, it is that hosts and parasites dance, however differently, to the same tune. They are constrained by each other and evolve together. –I Am Joe's Fear of Disease (2001)

Coleman's late mother had collected newspaper clippings, which the artist keeps and cherishes. He also owns a cache of photos taken by and of his father during WWII, including one of the abusive elder Coleman gripping the freshly decapitated head of an enemy soldier he had just slain. Other photos veer more squarely toward the pornographic.

The *Odditorium*, on the shores of Brooklyn, is where Coleman holds court over a collection of artifacts, evidences, keepsakes, family friends—life-size wax figures of O. J. Simpson and Fidel Castro, of vampires and politicians; vintage murder weapons, mummified body parts—in a jar of formaldehyde “Junior” Coleman, Joe and Whitney's adoptive son from the pre-formalin era, sits poised to examine the surroundings and guests. Books, taxidermied creatures, and art dominate the living room of a four-room apartment, across the water from where the World Trade Center towers once lit up. The windows are permanently shuttered to prevent the sun from ruining the artist's preferred single clear 100-watt bulb-illuminated environment.

It is here that Coleman toils over wooden panels, with jeweler's lenses and single-hair brushes, searching and struggling with details of complex worlds within worlds, purging, embracing, cajoling demons.

*I'd like to be a nurse. Because then I can stick needles into people.
I like hurting people. –Mary Bell, And a Child Shall Lead Them (2000)*

Coleman's vision is a reminder that fear has always been and always will be with us. When an artist's work has consisted of the unspeakable—biting heads off live mice and swallowing them if they are seen to represent his mother and thus worthy of incorporation, exploding himself at pretentious parties and thus prefiguring copycat Palestinian suicide bombers years later—his oeuvre gives the unspeakable rudiments of language.

Oh, I know he's dead. I want to see him in his coffin. –Mary Bell to Martin's mother