

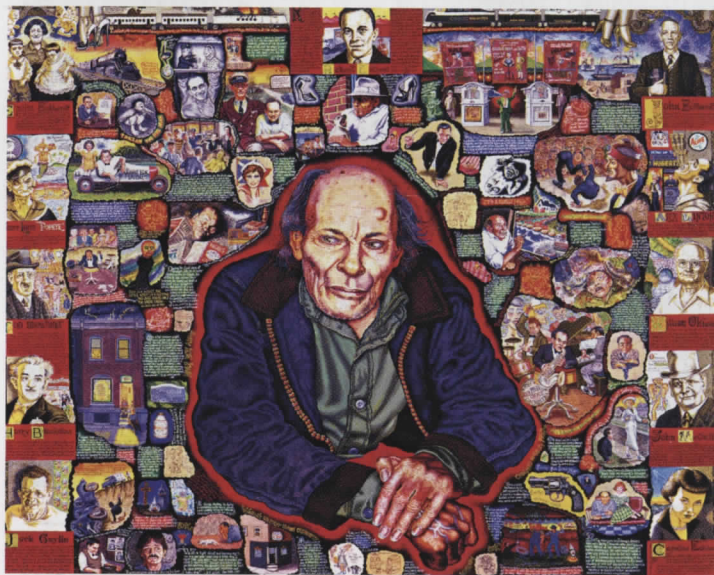
of Lari Pittman's flat narratives and Beatriz Milhazes's flamboyant decoration. The Claytons' paintings resemble storyboards plotting a day-in-the-life saga of locals in the rundown Los Angeles neighborhood where their studio is located, as seen through wild eyes.

—Leigh Anne Miller

Joe Coleman at Jack Tilton

As a downtown New York performance artist in the 1980s, Joe Coleman developed a circus sideshow persona, becoming notorious for performances, at the Kitchen and elsewhere, during which he bit the heads off live mice and “blew himself up” by igniting a vest made of firecrackers. He was barker and freak in one, but beneath the sensationalism and showmanship was a great Catholic theme, spiritual redemption through corporeal suffering. His instinct for self-preservation ascendant, Coleman stopped performing two decades ago, channeling that confrontational intensity into comics and, since the early 1990s, smallish, highly wrought acrylic-on-panel paintings. Operating outside the gallery system, Coleman exhibits infrequently in commercial settings, so this midcareer retrospective of 33 paintings provided an opportunity to weigh the artist's superhip reputation against the work itself.

Coleman's long suit is his mastery of a meticulous illustrational style derived from “Ripley's Believe It or Not,” medical textbooks, Victorian curio collections, and early Renaissance paintings, particularly those in which, consistent with a populist streak in his own work, narrative and visual description are paramount. Typically constructed around a central, iconic portrait image, the panels comprise a great wealth of funny and/or horrifying scenes from the subject's life. They are dense with text, often a meandering script that blends commentary and quotation. The paintings in which the



Joe Coleman: *Behold Eck*, 2006, acrylic on panel, 33% by 40% inches; at Jack Tilton.

artist refers directly to himself, such as *I Am Joe's Fear of Disease* (2001)—a cutaway view of the artist's viscera, bones and musculature playing host to malicious organisms, surrounded by renderings of medical grotesquerie—are prone to self-mythologizing. They are less winning than those that pay tribute to the artist's cultural obsessions: denizens of the lurid underbelly of American history and popular imagination, including psychopath Ed Gein; “Boston” Corbett, killer of Lincoln's killer; fallen bombshell Jayne Mansfield; and unstable abolitionist John Brown.

With their excruciatingly fine detail and relentless surface coverage, the paintings from the last few years show growing polish and finesse. Coleman's selective use of grisaille amid the many chromatically saturated vignettes provides visual breathing room, taming symptoms of horror vacui and suggesting a narrative hierarchy. Portraits of outsider artists Henry Darger and Adolf Wölfli are executed with breathtaking skill, as is that of Johnny Eck, the storied circus performer billed as the “Half Boy.” (It dawns on the viewer that the depiction anchoring this 2006 painting, which at first seems half-length, is in fact full-length.)

The installation itself was theatrical: the paintings, most less than 3 feet on a side, were each picked out of the darkness by a single spotlight, and against the featureless, black-velvet-lined walls they all glowed like stained glass. But the more elaborate of Coleman's picture frames, which he has embellished with sculptural flourishes and found objects, seem extraneous, a historicizing nod to altarpieces and reliquar-

ies. As *You Look Into the Eye of the Cyclops, So the Eye of the Cyclops Looks Into You* (2003) is not enhanced by being placed inside a console TV frame from which emanates a soundtrack of horrific moments in the history of broadcasting. This intimately confessional tour-de-force cites televised inducements to anxiety ranging from *The Twilight Zone* to the tube's complicitous promotion of the “war on terror.” Among the copious captions: “good and evil are continuously filtered through the eye of the cyclops.”

—Stephen Maine

Mauricio Alejo at Ramis Barquet

Mauricio Alejo, who was born in Mexico City and lives and works in New York, records everyday objects that he sets up in absurd arrangements, or more dramatically modifies by cutting, staining or painting them, or submitting them to laws of physics. The actual constructions cannot be experienced directly, but only in the beautifully composed photographs and videos that they gracefully inhabit. His large C-prints (43 1/3 by 55 inches) go well beyond merely documenting the ephemeral. Their range of hue and tone is rich, their physical and spatial tensions manifold. Alejo's work is laced with art-historical references, most notably to Arte Povera.

Alejo recognizes that some of the most interesting art results from “foolish” concepts and actions. For one image, he attached small clamps and clothespins of different materials to each other in increasing order of size, so that the smallest holds

e, 2006, mixed
at Bellwether.

