



Joe Coleman

JOE COLEMAN IN MIAMI

"Unrealism" at the Gargosian Gallery, Moore Building, Miami, December 2-6, 2015

Palm trees. Boutique hotels. Gucci loafers. Art Basel in Miami is where designer-everything collides with the art world establishment.

It is probably the last place you'd look for work by Joe Coleman, a painter far more readily associated with terms antithetical to the big name, big business art world, words such as "outsider," "subversive" and "underground".

Yet Coleman was not only present at Art Basel this year, his most recent painting, a life size portrait of his wife, Whitney Ward, became one of Art Basel's primary avatars, representing the watershed cultural event in mainstream media outlets such as Vogue and The Financial Times.

His portrait of his wife was exhibited for the first time, and for the first time it hung next to its corollary: a life size, self portrait of Coleman himself. Together, the two works represent the past eight years of Coleman's life; his infamously dense style (he paints with a single-hair brush using a jeweller's loupe, completing less than an inch per day) is becoming still more intricate and meticulously detailed.

The two portraits hung side by side in "Unrealism"; the high profile

show curated by the art world's most heavyweight dealers: Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian. The show focused on late 20th century figurative painting and sculpture, much by highly established artists, including John Currin, Urs Fischer, Elizabeth Peyton and David Salle, and Duane Hanson.

Followers of Coleman's work, highly biographical and often, autobiographical and often, know his paintings look unflinchingly and in excruciating detail at subject matter almost guaranteed to keep it at a safe remove from the mainstream. Serial killers, freaks, disease and all that is dark in the human soul and condition is what Joe Coleman is known for.

These two portraits, the most ambitious and detailed paintings of his long career, are also arguably his most accessible and immersive work yet. However, neither work shies away from the Dark Side. Amid portrayals of Joe and Whitney's friends, family and influences (ranging from singer Tom Jones to the early 20th century artist Frans Masereel), so too are there violent depictions of disease, childhood trauma and the darkest sexual fetishes.

Joe Coleman may have finally entered the mainstream, but he's there strictly on his own terms.

Rebecca Lieb