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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

"Carnival" Curated by Joe Coleman now up at Jeffrey Deitch



Artist Joe Coleman at Jeffrey Deitch, New York, NY, 2025

By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST May 24, 2025

I've always admired Joe Coleman's beady-eyed hyperrealist paintings, which can take him years to do and radiate the feral energy which made him Charles Manson's favorite artist. He also performs. In a Downtown theater space, the Hotel Amazon, in the 1980s I saw him stride onstage, and bite the heads off several mice. He then applied a lighter to whatever was bulking-up his chest and blew himself up. This generated a number of exits from the front row seats but I went into full reporter mode, and began scrambling on the floor to check that the mice were actually headless. They were. And that was how I met Joe Coleman.



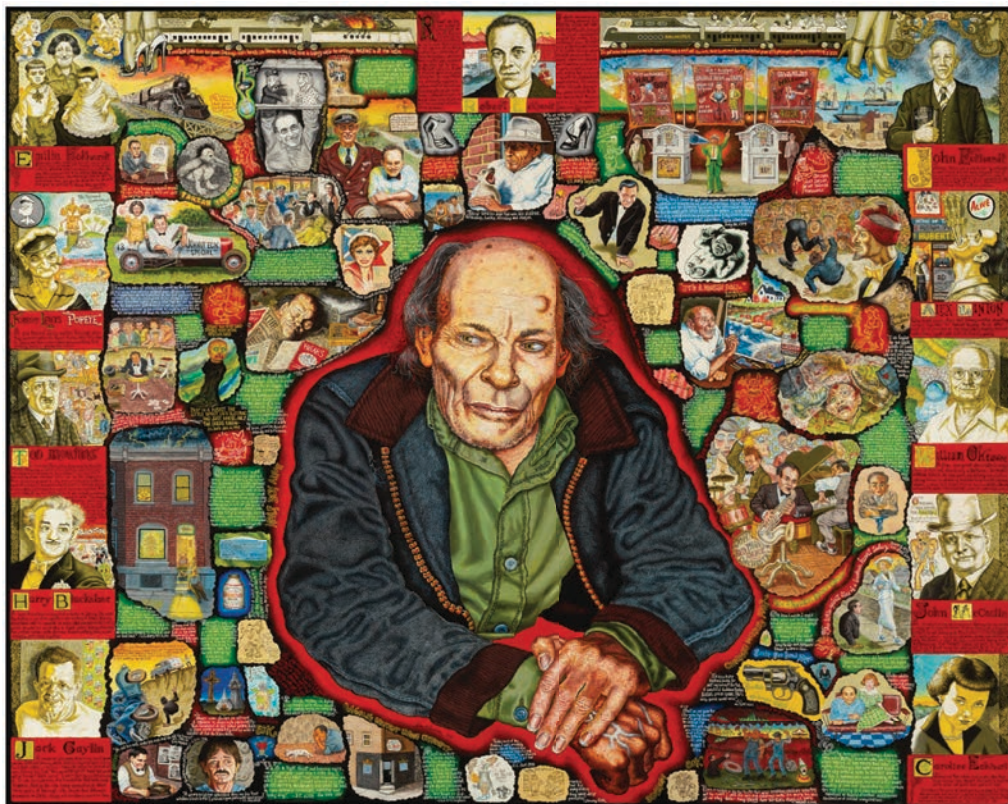
Crispin Glover and Joe Coleman with Johnny Eck sculpture by Spectral Motion, Inc. at Jeffrey Deitch, New York, NY, 2025 (Photo: Whitney Ward)

So it's unsurprising that *Carnival*, the Coleman-curated show now up at Jeffrey Deitch at 18 Wooster should be a remarkably strong one, taking you to one edgy eye-catcher after another, from the recumbent but hyperactive robot woman near the door. Passing by, for instance, five WeeGees on the stairs and an animal head by Walton Ford to the lifesize figures of Coleman and Whitney Ward, his loved one, upright in coffins against the far wall.

The pieces are full of story. "Those are coffins that were made of us in Ghana - and they are based on images of us from the wedding," Coleman told me. "That's Whitney's wedding dress she's wearing in her coffin." So too with a ventriloquist's dummy on view." It's in a cabinet next to JoJo, the dog-faced boy, and the pig-faced woman," Coleman said. "The ventriloquist was someone I met at a bar. He looked passed out and the dummy was insulting the patrons of the bar." The dummy, he added, had also officiated at his wedding.



At the opening.



Joe Coleman, Behold Eck (Johnny Eck), 2006, Acrylic on panel, 34 x 41 inches, Private collection.



Heidi Sjursen, Chris "Daze" Ellis, Joe Coleman, Brian Donnelly (KAWS), Jeffrey Deitch and Whitney Ward



"Carnival" curated by Joe Coleman at Jeffrey Deitch, New York, NY

Such are the parameters of *Carnival*: Dark grotesquerie, often charged with dark humor. How had the show been born, I wondered? Coleman said that soon after a fat book of his work had come out he had been talking with Jeffrey Deitch in his Los Angeles home. "And he came up

with the idea of doing this carnival show with me,” Coleman said. “He knew my knowledge of the subject. I told him I didn’t want to do a normal curatorial thing of just contemporary artists but I wanted to use people that were active in the carnival culture, whether it was burlesque or sideshow or mardi gras or even puppet shows. And contemporary art inspired by the carnival.”

So it has come about, plus adds of work by Coleman and Ward themselves and material from his collection of the ultra-weird, the Odditorium. Artists with work in the show were very much a presence. Amongst them were Kembra Pfahler, most known for heading the shock rock group, The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, who has two dolls in the show. Pfahler was just beginning to make art when she met Coleman in the early 80s. “When you’re nineteen, twenty years old no-one really takes you very seriously” she says. “I was very small. I probably looked twelve. Joe Coleman was one of the only artists on the Lower East Side that regarded me without devaluing me. And we did performances together that were very extreme. It was a traditional show in a real carnival, the sideshow by the seashore in Coney Island. There were real carnies from all over the country working at the side show. And Joe and I used to meet and engage with all those people. It’s really a huge part of his process and his interests.”

It’s been just so too for Chris Ellis aka Daze, the New York street artist. “I’ve known Joe for many years and we share a same interest in carnival culture and in particular Coney Island,” he says. “I’ve been working on a series about Coney Island since the mid 1990s. It’s an ongoing series and he is aware of that.” Daze added “I’m really amazed at how he was able to create his own Odditorium within the gallery. And take it beyond that sensibility and create something new.”

Coleman also has a very specific sense of what he wants in a show. Laura Kaplan, an old friend of Coleman’s, has been making some colorful work that she felt would be a good fit, but, no, Coleman was insistent on getting work from a specific group he had seen years before. And here they are, standing pinkish pieces, stockings and pantyhose, sinister presences, stuffed with hair. “It’s what he’s about and what I’m about,” Kaplan says. “Joe describes the *Carnival* as having an Outsider personality. All the emotions are extreme.”

Jo Weldon is also a longtime friend of the Colemans. They knew her as a burlesque performer and writer, not as an artist, but Coleman asked if she could translate her experience into a visual piece. “That was a flattering ask. And I was super-excited,” she says. She made “A tribute to sex workers and their influence on fashion and culture.”

Coleman told me that she had spoken at the UN on this subject. About what? “It was a special meeting to discuss methods of combating violence against women,” she said. She had herself, she noted, been a sex worker. So you are getting some dignity for the profession? “Yeah,” she

said. “I don’t want to glamorize it too much. It’s not an easy out. But it’s definitely served me well many times.”

A female form on an oblong screen, activated by the viewer’s touch, one the show’s eyegrabbers, is the work of Nadia Lee Cohen. “Basically it’s a hologram,” she said. Because the theme is carnival I thought of being a spectacle, and being observed, the relation to a freak show. What would be the modern day equivalent? And we’re in such a digital era that I wanted to work with technology”.

The image she created is based on her own body and reacts to touches on the screen. “It has a strictly limited lifespan so the audience can interact with the work through touch and attention. But when they do touch it, the piece kind of recoils with injury and pain. And when it’s getting attention it’s not getting enough attention and it results in eventual death. So the person interacting with it doesn’t know if they are going to be the one to kill it. And it still hasn’t died. So we don’t know who is going to be the one to kill it.”

Joe Coleman did not invent the aesthetic that combines grotesquerie with humor and sometimes horror. Check out the gargoyles of Notre Dame and such painters – all Coleman faves – as James Ensor, the Belgian, who painted *Two Skeletons Fighting over a Hanged Man* in 1891, and the Germans George Grosz and Otto Dix, but he’s got the ball and is running with it hard. **WM**

Carnival

Curated by Joe Coleman, May 3-June 28, 2025

[Jeffrey Deitch](#)

18 Wooster Street, New York



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