

Artists Dan Colen and Adam Marnie first met at the Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1990s, where they both took Dike Blair's singularly important painting class. After graduating in 2001 and moving to New York City, each in his own way has relentlessly interrogated the boundaries of sculpture and painting in galleries the world over, often taking bird shit, tipped motorcycles and punched drywall as subject matter. Marnie caught up with his old school chum and talked shop for TOP at New York City's Ace Hotel one morning last winter.

Adam Marnie: Your work follows two paths—one painting, the other sculpture. The painting has gone from the hyperrealist cartoons to the recent trash paintings, which I see as fairly pure abstract expressionism. The sculptures started with trompe l'oeil and have moved primarily to the assisted readymade. Those paths cross and coexist in the gum paintings and the bird shit paintings, in what I'm going to call "readymade gestures"—an idea set off by the bare brick wall sculpture was in the entryway at your New York Gagepoint show, a moment with no picture.

Dan Colen: I could bear about it in a million different ways but there is something very direct about that. There's so much from the bird shit to the gum, illustrating the transition from trompe l'oeil to readymade, from paint to sculpture, from real to fake, from actually presenting what happened to presenting the idea that happened. I have been thinking about it a lot recently. In the elevator on the way up here I was talking to you about LA sculptor Charles Ray. For a moment, I called myself a painter, but always had some frustration, wanting to be more "an artist" or something like that. I love thinking about a row of kicked-over motorcycles as painting-based, but I don't know if that's what it is. Like that white thinking about painting, you know, it's a sculpture.

AM: Right, the bikes are decidedly not painting.

DC: I needed to make some paintings before I made that. I was actually walking down the street just the other day—

AM: Dan's Back Wall, Scissors and Cymbals, Snake and Scissors: My Friend Dan's Wall in the Future, 2004 was a three-dimensional painting.

DC: Yes, there was a progression.

AM: So you were walking down the street...

DC: I was thinking about what I have been enjoying of my own stuff. I was

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thinking about the motorcycles and this other piece that I made in dedication to Dan, actually [Dan] Snow, Colen's friend and fellow artist, died in 2009. I [Disappearing Act] is a collection of readymades that I scattered around a gallery. It's a sculpture, but I am very conscious of how I scatter marks all over the space, with all these different objects making different gestures. The bottom line on the motorcycles was the impact of a single gesture, and the beginnings of my thoughts about a single gesture came from thinking about a single mark, or a single brushstroke, so I do come from there.

AM: What's good about a single mark?

DC: Maybe nothing, maybe it wasn't enough, maybe I had to make a line of motorcycles. So, no, but what's good about a single mark is, well—

AM: I don't know. I'm invested in the single mark.

DC: I could almost switch the interview at this point—I just had that feeling, so maybe you'll take over—but the single mark in point is powerful. I don't know why. And basically I've decided to devote my life to figuring out why. The sculptures help me think about that. Because really I'm curious about the power of paint—the material, and what's behind that material. What's the mark, or the faith in the mark? I'm interested in the gesture, like in kicking or punching something. There's an obvious impact in that. Having all these motorcycles to fill in for that, I'm interested in making a hole, in general, I'm interested in creating emptiness. What we are doing that's the same when I'm kicking the motorcycles and when you're punching the drywall? Or are you punching the drywall? Do you punch it?

AM: Yes, it's always my hand or foot. Or a knife or other tools. But rarely tools—although maybe more and more so.

DC: How do you see that stuff in terms of painting and sculpture?

AM: I don't relate to that Irwin quote that much. I think he's distinguishing between creating in his mind and creating in the physical world, right? I don't value the time I spend in my mind as much as he does. Matt Keny wrote this essay about me and it touched me. It ended with a statement about my love for making things. Whether I'm making with my hands or I've conceptualized it and I'm directing, it's all worthwhile until we actually made the thing. Like with the bikes—as much as I'm interested in thinking about kicking them over, what was important was the three months that it took to make them.

AM: Irwin goes on to admit that he has suffered in terms of production, which is both what's super-compelling about him, and maybe what's flawed.

DC: Because his things so often look like shit.

AM: Totally. But it's so interesting that he was like he did in the '60s. He worked through so much. And made an extremely finite number of works in that decade, like 100, working super-slowly, and got to a point where he gave it all up.

DC: Charles Ray has also only made 100 things in the last decade, right? It's really so conceptually driven, but he's obsessed with making things; he makes them over and over again. We only see a part of the process but he's obsessed, he's in love with making things, and it's all about that, right? His work acknowledges that it's about a thing—he's just chosen these things. He does all this stuff that's like the chicken or the egg.

AM: You have to make a decision. You have to pick something to meditate on. I'd like to pick nothing, but I want to share it with people so it has to be something. But I want to do everything or nothing. I don't want to do one thing. You have to pick, I don't have that much appreciation for the conceptualization because it should be the thing and the next thing and the next. All ideas are equal, right? It can't be about great ideas. I don't think they exist.

AM: What Irwin was doing during that time was reducing the focus to the viewer's perception or experience exclusively, increasingly without an object, or with an only slightly mediated experience.

DC: Irwin thinks optics—or those specific things that he feels are worth more than other things—will be more effective for bringing about a response from the viewer? When I'm talking about the mark, what is it that is powerful? Is it the stroke of paint, is it the artist's hand or the artist's belief in it, or is it the viewer?

AM: Where I was going before—I was going to talk about output. I make a lot of stuff now, but I really do appreciate the readymade that Robert Irwin or Charles Ray has. What's the thinking part, what's the making part, what's the showing part? I've been thinking a lot about that now, the amount and the impact that each thing can have when it's distributed in a certain way.

DC: I don't even know if it's important that I make art. I just have a relationship to art so that's what it is. Maybe I call too many things art. Maybe I should call fewer things art. Maybe I should call more things art. I don't know.

AM: It's always difficult to pinpoint what you're most interested in. Once you say it, you're actually interested in this other thing, not that thing at all. But do you have pieces of drywall that don't make the cut? Like, what's the gesture worth? That's often what I'm interested in. I make a lot of decisions like that, wasn't the right punch, that's not the right hole.

AM: It's complicated how aesthetics enter into what I'm doing, because I'm trying to set up a very limited set of conditions in which to perform. Bringing in photography as a sculptural material has really changed what I'm doing. It is lending this other very aesthetic thing to what I was doing before, which wasn't non-aesthetic, but I was trying to reduce it so that it was just about a very small number of things. You know, like intense performance, framing, the picture, presentation. But it wasn't about aesthetics exactly. Even though it was! Of course!

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AM: I haven't made a painting for a long time, although much of my work is in conversation with painting. I have been interested in the way an immediate gesture can capture a moment in time, and even though it is related to an instantaneousness more related to photography.

DC: I was at Joe Bradley's studio yesterday talking to him about this. In his paintings, it's really obvious that there's something uniquely special going on, and I think it's because of this. He keeps the paint in front of his line. And I try to do that. There's reflection at different points, but mostly you're chasing it—you're chasing the art. I try to set up all these stages for my process where art's like a ball and I'm trying to run after it, and when it's good it's going downhill. And then it stops and I have to reflect and react. It's good things and I make decisions but all the good shit happens when it's in front of me. I don't know if that's what you're getting at.

AM: I think it is. My idea of reacting, or how it was presented to me recently, is that it is reactionary—offended and resentful and fucked up in some way. Response is thoughtful and creative and generative.

DC: Right, one's more of a conversation, and the other's more like a dilemma or something unexpected and having to react to it.

AM: All of my punch pieces have a drawn X, and the Xs are impacted. In the nose of the works are there random acts of violence. The order of the marks is clear. It is a presentation of violence. I'm really interested in the tension between the artistic of performance and the truth of the action.

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Adam Marnie, Death Wish/In, 2012

Dan Colen, Disappearing Act, 2011

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Adam Marnie, Law Rule (red and blue) X 2011