

filthy dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

ART

Starstruck by Headstones in Scott Covert's "THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK" at Derek Eller Gallery

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Scott Covert, *Pink Nancy*, 2006-2017, wax oil crayon, acrylic, and glitter on muslin, 46 x 48 inches
(Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery; Photo: Adam Reich)

Can you be starstruck by a gravestone? Is a headstone just a more permanent headshot? Is an epigraph a forever form of autograph?

I certainly believe so, given the thrilled tingle that shot down my spine while squinting at the layered names that cover Scott Covert's searingly bright, near ocularly painful hot-pink painting, *Pink Nancy*, currently on view in Covert's solo show THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK at Derek Eller Gallery.

At first, I only noticed a trio of names: the preeminent American Blonde, Marilyn Monroe, Jean Harlow's Downtown doppelganger, Candy Darling, and one half of punk's Bonnie and Clyde, Nancy Spungen (here joined by her epitaph: "Your odyssey is over—sleep in peace"). All glamorous white platinum-haired cinematic myths. All destined for tragic ends and early graves—the same graves that Covert preserves as mementos rubbed on canvas. Peering even closer, though, others appeared. Hidden in lighter grey-blue wax oil crayon deep beneath Covert's more prominent black text are two more doomed blondes: actress Carole Landis and child beauty queen and one of the most famous tabloid murder victims of the 1990s, JonBenét Ramsey. With each new star (and yes, I do consider JonBenét a star), I felt that familiar shudder of dual recognition and awe as if gazing admirably at a photograph of a favorite celebrity, a particularly desirable (read: stealable) piece of memorabilia, or a holy relic!



Installation view of Scott Covert's *The Dead Supreme* at Derek Eller Gallery (Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery; Photo: Adam Reich)

I don't use holy relic lightly here. Scott Covert's decades-long practice of gravestone rubbings, a series titled *Monument Paintings*, purposefully encourages tailspins of unbridled and unbalanced devotion. Just try to stop yourself from genuflecting in front of the monumental canvas, *Large Musical Composition*, a maddeningly expansive, almost-abstract formed by a tornado of musical talent such as Tammy Wynette, Albert King, Hank Williams, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, Liberace. It's enough to make me want to cry, cry, cry. For those who are blessed with a more literary bent, Covert provides plenty of fodder in *Midnight at the Oasis*, another sprawling canvas. On a deep blue base, bursting with shades of purple and sky blue, a smattering of names are represented in bright yellows, reds, and whites: Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac. Not every canvas in *THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK* is so crowded, however. Some are much more restrained yet still worthy tributes to singular figures, including the appropriately repeated Black and White Warhol and the similarly repetitious Red Guston, done in Philip Guston's chosen color palette of fleshy red and pinks. Even more spartan is *Petite White and Pink Marilyn*, which is perfectly shaped to the size of MM's crypt plaque in Westwood Village Memorial Park while mimicking its baby pink hue due to countless lipstick kisses. Other works create ideal pairings, such as *Blake Winehouse* with William Blake and Amy Winehouse, chosen, according to an interview with *The Guardian*, because "they're both poets." (As Blake's headstone reads: "Poet, Artist Prophet").

While playing matchmaker with the dead and organizing dream postmortem dinner parties as seen in *René Plus Guests*, in which poet, critic, and Covert's late friend Rene Ricard hosts a litany of other luminaries, from Jackie Curtis to Miss Baker, a squirrel monkey that was, as her epitaph boasts, "the first US animal to fly in space and return alive," Covert's Monument Paintings are also grounded in tradition. People have made grave rubbings for centuries. Of course, few have set off on a grave-rubbing excursion as monomaniacally as Covert, crossing continents and embarking on extended road trips in order to quickly and usually clandestinely procure a chosen tombstone. This extended artistic odyssey is captured in Lex Niarchos's short documentary, *Scott Covert: Up Until Now*, which splices together years of footage of the artist's many cemetery visits. With little sound but the continual scratching of wax oil crayon over stone, the film showcases Covert's methodical and meditative yet freewheeling process, scurrying through graveyards with an unstretched canvas in tow before returning to the car to drive onwards to the next plot.

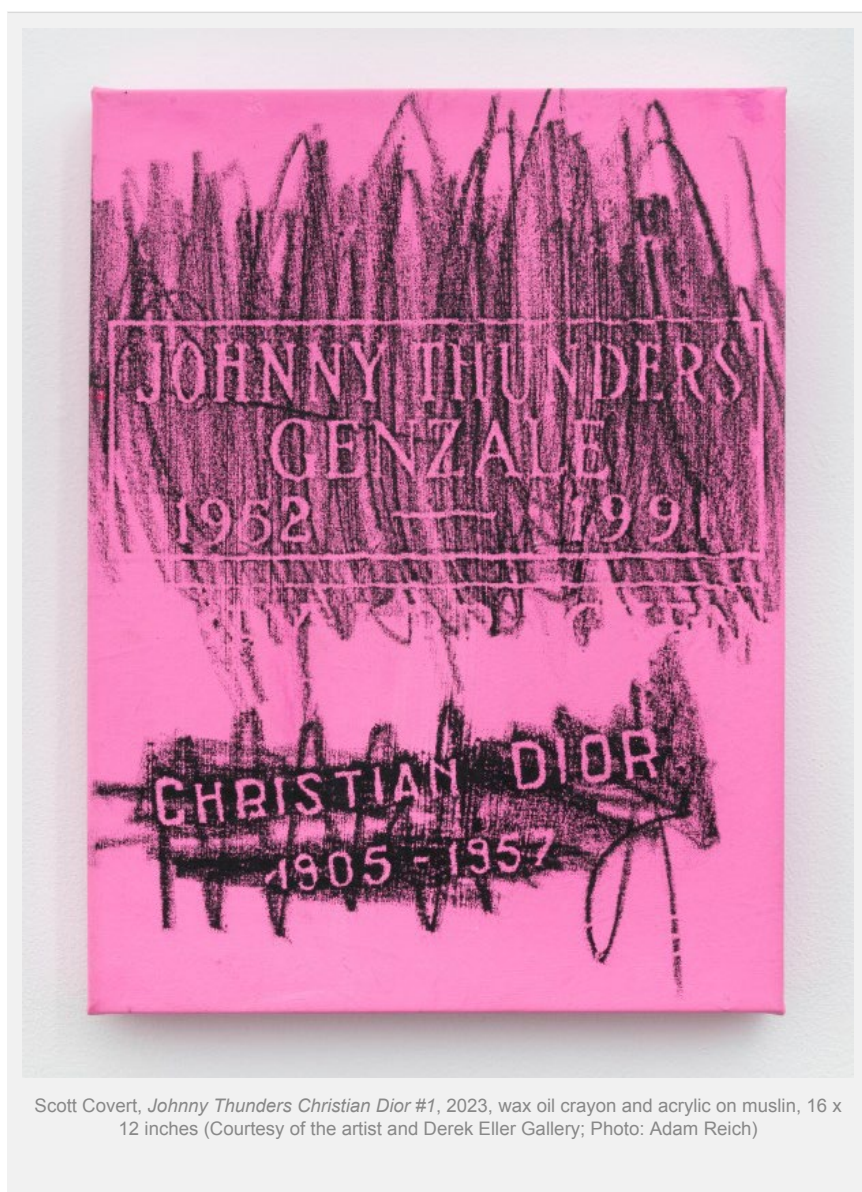


Scott Covert, *The Dead Supreme*, 1988, wax oil crayon and acrylic on muslin, 30 x 30.25 inches
(Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery; Photo: Adam Reich)

Despite being done with an unconventional zeal and a striking formal fascination with both the machinic repetition and celebrity fixation of Pop Art and the all-over color of abstraction, the quite conventional technique of grave rubbing imbues the paintings with a notable simplicity, which is as deceptive as it is refreshing. More than the fame and infamy represented by the names themselves, as well as the permanency of their resting places, the grave rubbings themselves act as a travelogue and the ephemeral remains of a palpable connection—a touch across time, if you will—between Covert and the dead. Something that was perhaps already understood by the person who initially encouraged Covert to follow this artistic path: Dreamlander, actress, writer, and sometimes crackpot advice columnist, Cookie Mueller. It was Covert's rubbing of Florence Ballard, a founding member of the Supremes and a particular favorite of Covert's who died in 1976, that drove Mueller to nudge Covert forward.

This dead Supreme is represented in Derek Eller with a painting titled *The Dead Supreme* from 1988, one of the most straightforward in the show—a slightly crooked purple rubbing on white canvas—that acts as the series' origin story.

This is not the first exhibition of Covert's named after *The Dead Supreme*, which was also the title of his dual shows at Fierman and Situations in 2017 (The Dead Supreme is also his Instagram handle). Even so, shamefully, this year marks the first time I've been fully enamored with Covert's artwork, beginning with his wall of works on paper plastered on the black wall of Company Gallery's basement for the early summer group show, *Dream Journal*. Interspersed with drawings of the gleefully fatalistic line, "It's Fun To Be Dead," and crucifixes, Covert's remnants of the final resting places of Jayne Mansfield, Aaliyah, Sylvester, Divine, and Jack Kevorkian, including Jack's martyr-proclaiming epitaph, "He sacrificed himself for everyone's right," tickled my morbid fancies. As did my subsequent encounter with Covert's canvases: a towering installation of Warholesque dedications in *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest* at Vito Schnabel Gallery (which I wanted to snatch).



Scott Covert, *Johnny Thunders Christian Dior #1*, 2023, wax oil crayon and acrylic on muslin, 16 x 12 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery; Photo: Adam Reich)

Even with so much Covert in a few-month period, Derek Eller's *THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK* presents a compellingly vast swath of Covert's Monument Paintings, from small singular gravestone works on paper to his DeKooning-like abstractions filled to illegibility like a pampisest, which take years to complete. In addition to his ability to transform gravestones into tactile expressionistic gestures, what also emerges throughout the show is his merciful (given all the death) sense of humor. For instance, I never imagined Johnny Thunders and Christian Dior mentioned in the same breath—let alone sharing a shock of pink canvas as in *Johnny Thunders Christian Dior #1*. It works, though, the convergence of Dior's famously elegant rose dresses and Thunder's glammed-up gutter-drag-punk New York Doll aesthetic.

While this small canvas tickles with a cheeky combination, others tend towards the pitch-black like the ironically lightly colored canvas, *Screaming with Laughter #4*, which I am so obsessed with that I considered hoisting it right off the wall and wobbling my way out of the door. With various shades of blue wax oil crayon on a white canvas, Covert combines a plethora of graves of legendary comedians—Rodney Dangerfield, George Burns, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Groucho Marx—with, well, even more legendary murder victims. This includes victims of the Manson Family: Sharon Tate, the LaBianca's, Jay Sebring, Gary Hinman, and Steven Parent.



Scott Covert, *Screaming with Laughter #4*, 2014-2019, wax oil crayon and acrylic on muslin, 54.5 x 54.5 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery; Photo: Adam Reich)

They exist (or, well, not) alongside other notoriously killed like Daniel Pearl, JonBenét Ramsey, and Nicole Brown Simpson. Not to be left out, at least two murderers also lurk on the bottom of the canvas, which adds new meaning to Dangerfield's silly epitaph, "There goes the neighborhood." They are Perry Edward Smith and Richard Hickock, the killers of the Clutter family (whose family name is also emblazoned in large-scale text at the very top of the painting), a crime made (in)famous by Truman Capote's true-crime masterpiece *In Cold Blood*.

Admittedly, out of all of the works in *THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK*, *Screaming with Laughter #4* really pushes the boundaries of good taste. Just maybe, though, the joke is on me—and the rest of you, true-crime-fixated creeps—as I reacted with just as much pleasurable zeal to the names of the Manson Family victims as I did Lenny Bruce.

If this all sounds a bit ghoulish, maybe it is. I've never been one to shy away from my more macabre inclinations—I find something soothing about wandering through quiet cemeteries (my favorite being London's Brompton Cemetery). However, it would be a mistake to simply brush off Covert's work and my admiration for it as some sort of death cult mania. For, as my block's resident crazy likes to repeatedly shout, "Everybody dies!" He may be unhinged but he's not wrong—better get used to the concept.

Covert's work, too, particularly as collected in Derek Eller, finds strange and, at least to me, quite heartening and even sweet commonalities in how we dedicate monuments to the dead. Sure, there are certain epitaphs in Covert's works that stand apart such as Frank Sinatra's "The best is yet to come" or Johnny Cash's chosen Psalm (Psalm 19:14). But more than one-liners and verses sent from the beyond, Covert's paintings expose certain consistencies. For instance, one that struck me was the frequent appearance of the descriptor "Beloved." *THE DEAD SUPREME NEW YORK* is entirely populated by beloveds: beloved fathers (Bela Lugosi), beloved wives and mothers (Florence Ballard), beloved sons (Allen Ginsberg), beloved grandpas (Milton Berle), and beloved granddaughters (Amy Winehouse). It's hard not to look at this lineup of beloveds—so many loved and lost—and not think about *your* eventual gravestone and whose beloved *you'll* be remembered as. Regardless of what our tombstone says or where we're placed (god forbid not shirking our opportunity for eternal stardom by scattering our ashes), we should all be so lucky to have someone caress our granite with as much care and reverence as Covert.