

**CARMON COLANGELO:  
BIG BANG TO BIG MELT**

By Paul Krainak  
November 2008

Carmon Colangelo's work emerges from a form of Surrealism incubated by the collaborative traditions of American and Canadian printmaking. His drawings and paintings resist standard readings: free-floating symbols and texts converge in an aggressive exploitation of wet and dry media while details and fragments of biographical narratives are conveyed by modifying selected graphic conventions. Nevertheless, Colangelo's seemingly impenetrable visual matter is illuminated by the symbolic and spatial topologies the artist himself provides. A careful review of the images Colangelo has conjured up over his career leads to an internal logic of a lifetime's journey.

Colangelo's work of the early 80s was dark and dense, mythic in tone and conceptually raw. Steeped in post-modern appropriation, he sampled the canon of Italian Renaissance painters and architects, and took narrative cues from contemporary artists like Enzo Cucchi and Francesco Clemente. Colangelo's work absorbed the fallout of a heady imagist movement—one that re-considered and critiqued both older art and the cooler and more distant work of the late 70s. His prints and drawings of that period offered a constantly mutating plane in which biographical anecdote integrated with traditional and contemporary pictorial codes. His images swung from the obsessively personal to the openly topical, allowing disparate formal structures and semiotics to inspire remarkable forms, freeing themselves from their preceding contexts and grammar. As the formalist vs. conceptualist debate receded, Colangelo endeavored to call forth a site for his personal view of visual culture. He recognized that the fading of modernist dogma left a vast expanse that each artist could repopulate.

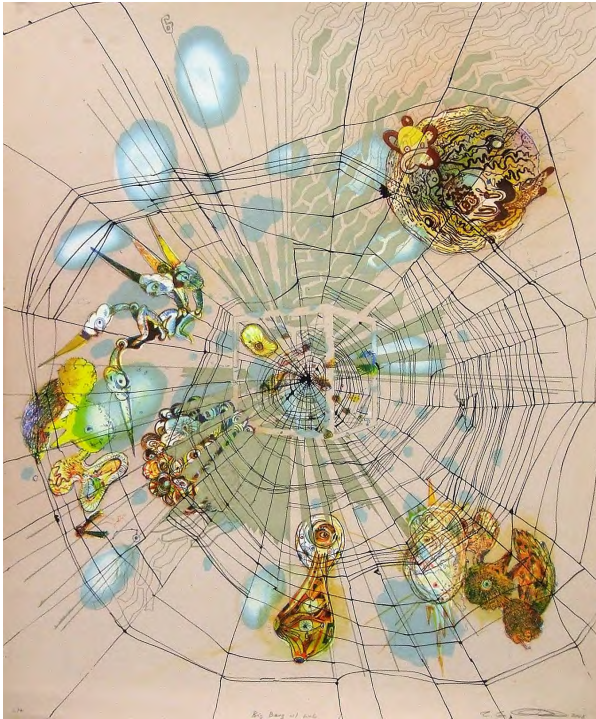
In the late 80s he began exploring computer-aided compositions that enhanced the contour and scale of each impression, brightening his imagery and allowing greater transparency. Silkscreen and digital printing techniques expanded his regular repertoire of intaglio, lithography, and colographs. Heretofore conflicting arrangements of borrowed forms and idiosyncratic drawings became increasingly subtle and seductive.

His compositions became simultaneously open and punctured with dense intertwining of line, texture, and image.



More recently, biology, medicine and ecology have become seamlessly absorbed into Colangelo's regular forays into the material language of the print. The work calls attention to language inherited from artists who are masters of collage and montage: from Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein to Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger. Ultimately, his dense catalog of personal symbols and impressions of the world joins two strands of Modernism - the geometric /technological strand fuses with the organic to breed a third strand characterized by a more cerebral/poetic kind of expression.

The critical streams of Modernist art that have revealed themselves regularly in the narrative and image banks of the last half-century, starting with the American Neo-Dada, have not been lost on Colangelo. Mainstream critical perspectives of the period have generally swung between descriptions of gestural and geometric abstraction. They generalize about the nature-based content of intuitive and gestural art and the urbanist implications of a rational, pre-determined kind. It is reasonable to locate the original context for this dichotomy in the 1920s as a nervous response to new technologies and economies and a radical worldwide shift in cultural power. Whether geometric or organic, each classification of the modern established a formal negation of classicism and afforded a possible escape from a painful and turbulent present. One historical reaction signifies an idyllic reconnection with our “primitive” past while the other offers a soaring voice of utopian promise. However,



mediating these two strains is the more cerebral play of art production indebted to Surrealism, one that may also engage popular forms of kitsch. Surrealism was capable of mediating both nature and culture. It dramatized and idealized past and future, but stressed both as conceits of the present. The Surrealists spent their time picturing the fullest dimensions of experience of the artist just as their role in society underwent revolutionary change. An intense examination of the self allowed them to strike harder at the pre-digested narratives of the classical order even if their art making would also be cryptic and situational.

That Colangelo sits quite comfortably in this intercessional space of Surrealism is made evident in his most recent body of work, “Mondrian Tower” among them. In this print, a black and white digital photograph of an industrialized Weimar-era city is populated with pedestrians with whitewashed faces trooping down the central thoroughfare that is flanked by two towering whitewashed billboards. Stretched beneath them is a horizontal orange ellipse. Wavy lines dance across and reinforce the peculiar impression of a surfboard or Tiki pendant. Streaming down the center are red, white, blue and yellow light rays that resemble a filleted detail of Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie Woogie”. The blank billboards and faces parody a theory of radical reductivism filtered ironically through the mind of a folk artist -- just the kind of dichotomy that high modernism could not abide but nonetheless thrives in the culture at large. While Colangelo gives form to modernist negation and recalls its historical context, he suggests that it is only a transparent screen without the comparative frame of kitsch. The city could easily be Dessau, Berlin, Detroit or Chicago. A somewhat mystified rendition of the spirit that negotiates two crucial art paradigms is observed here, in an alienated remnant of the indistinct past and the prediction of a hypothesized future.

“Big Bang With Web” contains a spectrum of representational and abstracted fragments, some coming apart at the seams and others fused together from the heat of the composition’s explosive heart. They include some of Colangelo’s more familiar inventions, part object and part idea, such as convulsive bird appendages, entrails and ectoplasm. All emerge from the core only to be snagged in a mammoth spider web, that suspends them, momentarily, on the surface of the print. At the center, a transparent cube reinforces the web as a kind of flexible domicile of confinement and menace.

In “Big Melt” all eyes gravitate to the center and then quickly recede due to a threatening rhinoceros image. Two hands frame a silver square in which the rhinoceros is seemingly incarcerated, these elements embed the image and calm the mutability of the background for a moment. But a dark tower looms behind, resembling a fairytale sandcastle reduced to a final stage of decrepitude. Is this a monument or a ruin? Does it commemorate the arrogance or presage the vulnerability of civilizations? Silver ribbons and pulses of color, random marks and fragments of landscape crowd the perimeter. Behind the rhino is an explosion of energy that oscillates between ecstasy and chaos, a frozen catastrophic millennial spectacle. The image is at once hallucinatory and elegiac. It demonstrates a notion of the present that has moved beyond the post-modern—one marked by a kind of stasis, not only a suspension of this moment, but of all historic periods at once.

Colangelo takes us sleuthing through the clutter of art crimes and misdemeanors in “Sandcastle” — a partner image to “Big Melt”. A thick, dark sea and a luminous sky divide the plane. Above the horizon, the same towering form rises, looking here more like an elegant Thai temple. A platinum-hued, nimbus-like starburst anchors the space to the left of the tower while the artist’s globular abstractions erupt from the water. A nocturnal ocean encases the base of the melting ruin as frenetic pools of black and soft blue ink surge through the deep. As in “Big Melt” Colangelo establishes a cacophony of combustion and decay that the viewer must unravel to determine cause.



Carmon Colangelo merges warnings, arbitrary observations and anecdotal truths. His subjects are not just the extension of a drawing language or a sociopolitical concern, although he is motivated by them. The work is also about the depiction of non-

linear thinking, the translation of language and the sequencing of striking visual poetics. These he has inherited from his discipline and the conflicted domains of art culture and ordinary experience. Here he balances the tongue-in-cheek with the solemn, the sublime with the tragic-comic, and allows images to just beget images, conversationally, to register a visual text that rings true with art history as well as with the interior lives of viewers.

—Paul Krainak

Paul Krainak is an artist, critic, and Chair of the Art Department at Bradley University. He has exhibited widely in the US including the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, NC, The Ukrainian Museum of Modern Art and The Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, Fay Gold Gallery in Atlanta, the Bemis Center for the Arts in Omaha, Artist Image Resource Center in Pittsburgh, Semaphore Gallery in New York City and NEXUS Gallery in Philadelphia. He has lectured at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, Czechoslovakia, The Academy of Art in Bratislava, Slovakia, The Academy of Fine Art and Design in Beijing China and the School of Fine Art in Nanjing China. His writing has been published by Indiana University Press, Afterimage, New Art Examiner, Dialogue, Sculpture Magazine and Artpapers. Paul lives and works in Peoria, Illinois. This essay is one in a series of the gallery’s exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

**Mondrian Tower**, 2008, Screen print, wax, with dry pigment and oil paint, 35-1/2 x 29- 1/4 inches

**Big Bang with Web**, 2008, Screen print, wax, with dry pigment and oil paint, 36- 1/2 x 3- 1/4 inches

**Carmon Colangelo**, at the Hand Print Workshop International, Alexandria, VA.

#### ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.