

## Man without a vessel: Jay Colton's improbable self-portraits

What were the chances that the two World Trade Center towers would be totally destroyed on the morning of 9/11/2001 by the willful collisions of two airplanes? It is both an engineering and intelligence question and experts on both fields would not have bet on it. When Jay Colton was producing his *Throw of the Dice* series in the 1980s, the nearby towers were intact and all the wars that involved the United States were abroad. It was the last decade of the Cold War, or, as one might want to consider retrospectively, the *Pax Frigida*. It was during that time that Colton was photographing himself in the midst of what seemed a spinning and fluid world in which his image seemed to float in the torrent. The fateful WTC towers are in the background of a couple of his improbable self-portraits.

World events --from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the development of the Internet-- had been the substance of Jay's *modus vivendi* for nearly three decades. He was a photography editor first for *Gamma Liaison* and then for *Time* magazine. Notwithstanding his credentials in journalism and those of his entire family (mother, father, and brother), Jay is a poet at heart. This fact used to mortify his father, whose ideal of image and text was "just the facts, man." To a great extent, however, his father's legacy lives in Jay's omnivorous interest for factual minutiae.

Yet one of Jay's true artistic progenitors is Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), the French symbolist poet, and author of the 1897 poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* ("A roll of the dice will never abolish chance"). This poem may very well be the first and most important calligrammatic poetic text in Western literature. In other words, it is a text where the spatial, typographic and visual arrangement of the words on the page plays an important role in the meaning of the work. As such, *Un coup de dés* is a precursor of the typographical extravagance of Dadaism, the image/text coitus of some Surrealism, and the textual ubiquity in Conceptual art. For Colton, whose mother is Japanese, Mallarmé's poem also connects poetic text with the beauty of Kanji ideograms. In fact, a more recent photographic series titled *Haiku of Flowers* (2006) by Colton, includes his own haiku verses drawn/written by his mother in Kanji ideograms. *Throw of the Dice*, on the other hand, pays homage not only to Mallarmé but also to chance in his life --hence the self-portraiture. They are not self-indulging portraits as may happen in Lucas Samaras's oeuvre; rather, they are --as will be discussed below-- simultaneously histrionic, heroic and theoretical.

Visually the works of Colton's *Throw of the Dice* are multi-directional, multi-layered and flush with meaning from corner to corner of the picture. The elements in the pictures are few: the artist, his hands, dice, marbles, a slinky, and the WTC towers. Like in Mallarmé's poem the elements of the work spread across the page and like Henri Michaux's drawings they avoid a center. A Latin alphabet text is usually read only from left to right and from above downwards. Of course that convention does not apply for viewing pictures and Mallarmé's poem undermines it because it asks to be not only read but also viewed, as if it were a picture. The other syntactical point is that most pictures are single-layered whereas Colton's *Throw of the Dice* series is built with the photographic technique of multiple exposures which results in many layers of images. Consequently, either Colton himself or something other-than-him in the visual world appears more than once in the pictures –often overlapping in one or more layers. These re-appearances are connected to another important element in Mallarmé's poem that takes it away from the Romantic milieu of Symbolism and places it within the modern game of probability. Moreover, there is an element of chance in multiple exposures that Colton reduces or relaxes to fit the particular work.

“God does not play dice with the universe,” argued Einstein contra the un-deterministic ontology of some quantum physicists. The controversy was generated by the role of the observer in modeling the universe. In Colton's works, the universe is represented poetically by colorful crystal spheres that appear to be spinning in orbit, as dice are cast. Colton himself states, “I was impressed that a French symbolist poet adumbrated the revolution in physics that was to come 30 years later and was able to articulate in a subtle novel way that posits the spirit instead of the substance. Chance by the very nature of the quantum universe rules our lives whether or not we concede to it.” The observer, Colton himself, is also in the picture; indeed, often more than once. The multiplicity of the images of himself in each picture translates to the idea that whoever he is, his persona, is at the mercy of chance, and his view of the world changes accordingly. He can be one person at one throw of the dice (or circumstances) and a different one at another. The artist is simultaneously observer of the world and part of it.

It must be noted that for years Colton entertained the possibility that he had multiple personalities given that (1) he was once diagnosed to possess them, (2) he is a Gemini born on May 22, and (3) his psychedelic experiments with LSD led him to believe as much. Thus the image of “2” that eventually leads to plurality is at the heart of this series: two dice, two towers, two hands, double exposures, etc. But 2 is generated by applying the recursive function “+1” to 1, and when applied to 2, you get 3, and so on *ad infinitum*; and infinity is another idea that Colton has obsessed about.

During the years when Colton was producing *Throw of the Dice*, we were also experimenting with the ideas of dislocating and/or expanding our selves by leading our lives according to chance. We had arrived at these experiments in living partly through exposure to Buddhism and more immediately on account of a reading of Luke Rhinehart’s novel *The Dice Man* (1971). The idea of living life like a game was not mere play, it was an exploration of courses of actions that were normally inhibited by the “controlling” self. It was the pursuit of living intensely whatever you allowed the dice to choose for you (the game consisted in picking some choices that you normally found distasteful). If one choice you gave the dice told you to play hooky and miss work on Wednesday, you were going to live the best Wednesday of your life. If the dice gave you the distasteful choice of staying home on Saturday and cleaning up your house, you were going to perform the best clean up ever. Whatever the choice the dice gave you—writing poetry, becoming a volunteer firefighter, fucking your neighbor, riding the E-train, etc.—you were going to live it as intensely as you possibly could. Thus, the many Jay Coltons in a single improbable self-portrait of the *Throw of the Dice* series may also be understood in the context of *The Dice Man*.

When I met Jay in an 8th grade art class, he was painting a picture where a minute navigator on board a small vessel was about to be swallowed by a huge wave that only the bravest of surfers would dare ride. What are the chances that both vessel and helmsman would survive? From where we saw it, the probability was not high, but perhaps from the navigator’s perspective it is nearly 1. That painting may very well have been a metaphor for Jay’s life and works and a harbinger of these improbable self-portraits.

-Fernando Castro R.