New York Gallery Walkabout Winter 2020 – Ilka Scobie

Roy Colmer – © Estate of Roy Colmer; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Roy Colmer: Doors  Lisson Gallery – New York

During a year between 1975-76, Roy Colmer traversed Manhattan from tip to top and photographed over 3000 doorways. This is the first-ever comprehensive exhibition of his iconic conceptual project, with previous sections shown at the New York Public Library and P.S. 1.

Colmer explored boundaries between colour intensive painting, photo and film. Like his contemporaries Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman and Hanne Darboven, Colmer was prescient in his investigations of creative cross-pollination.

The London born Colmer, who studied in Germany, was also an early proponent of electronic signals. “Doors” is both a conceptual and serial landmark, as well as lyrical documentation of a lost city.
ROY COLMER

Lisson

In a brief artist's statement for the catalogue accompanying the 2006 exhibition "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975," Roy Colmer (1935–2014) mentioned video feedback no less than three times. Colmer's exploration of this process— whereby a video camera is trained on its playback monitor, producing ever-accumulating self-replicas— introduced to his painting practice a set of behaviors and effects, like movement, time, and delay, from outside the medium's usual purview. His line of inquiry seems to have concerned cross-pollination among mediums: how could television monitors and video cameras point abstract painting—regarded as outdated and conceptually bankrupt by the early 1970s—in a fresh direction?

The ten paintings shown in Lisson’s tightly curated exhibition (the first solo presentation of the artist’s work since his death) offer provocative if inconclusive responses to this question. For each painting, Colmer wholly covered a canvas with horizontal spray-painted lines of equal width in alternating colors, and then spray-painted either side of the composition with a highly saturated or dusky hue, partially obscuring the stripes and leaving a glowing, irregular mandorla form at center. Despite the circumscribed set of parameters, there are significant variations in the paintings, which evoke patterns and effects of analog electronic media, including those that arise when the transmission of images and sound is interrupted by static and noise. Some of Colmer’s stripes are not quite straight, and some, by way of minuscule snarls of acrylic, blend into those below them. In certain works, the slight misalignment of masking tape during his multiple stages of paint application resulted in slivers of underpainting that peek out from the stripes’ edges, such as threads of maroon and yellow glimpsed between carnation pink and ocean blue in *Untitled #49* (1970). Works like *Untitled #112* (1972) bear stripes of contrasting colors.
at their tops and bottoms that lend the compositions an uneven visual weight and produce a sense of vertical scrolling, as if the bands are forever cycling upward or downward over the central motif, enhancing the images' allusion to the horizontal registers of static that appear on tube televisions when they lack reception. The paintings also conjure another visual characteristic of such TVs: the luminous flash of an image sucked into a downward vortex when the boxy machines are switched off.

Colmer was exposed to media theory through Almir Mavignier, his adviser at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, and would have been attuned to the insights of cybernetics, including the notion that communication is not a one-way flow of broadcast information but a circular system of information exchange. Colmer began experimenting with video feedback in 1971, creating closed-circuit works that, in effect, show the camera watching itself see. His paintings likewise seem to probe questions of spectatorship, particularly since his recurring mandorla shape formally corresponds to the intersecting fields of view inherent to binocular vision and thus prompts the spectator to confront her own act of seeing.

Perhaps paint on canvas felt to Colmer increasingly inadequate as a means of exploring such aspects of lived experience; in 1975, he stopped painting entirely and began documenting his environment with a camera. Through the 1980s and 1990s he produced collages (seven of which were shown at Lisson) consisting of snapshots stacked in neat grids, with each composition focusing on a single subject: discarded, crumpled letters; empty flour packaging; silvery sidewalk fence poles; blistering tree trunks; the Canal Street subway station's fire-engine-red columns. For the collages depicting vertical subjects, Colmer aligned the forms into composition-spanning bands, arranging quotidian items into striped images that echo his mandorla paintings and affirm that his work is best considered not in isolation but in relation to the world.

—Elizabeth Buhe
The standard story of 1970s art tells us that painting and experimental video were two discrete fields — that the artists who seized upon Portapaks and other new, time-based technologies found paint and canvas too conventional and commercial. This story is complicated, however, by figures like Roy Colmer (1935–2011), who in the early part of the decade made paintings inspired by video feedback and who claimed inspiration from Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock as well as Bruce Nauman and Nam June Paik.

A show of his early acrylic paintings and later photo grids at Lisson connects the dots with elegance and an invigorating hit of color. Made with spray guns and inspired by what Mr. Colmer called the “liquid properties” of video, the paintings interrupt silky, shimmering fields of horizontal stripes with vertical flashes of brightness. They remind you of Barnett Newman’s “zip” abstractions and of cathode-ray televisions flickering to life.

The line down the middle re-appears in Mr. Colmer’s photo collages, rhythmic repetitions of nondescript architectural elements around New York. (His most famous work, the self-explanatory “Doors, NYC” of 1975–76, isn’t here, but a portion of it can be seen nearby at the Dia Art Foundation within a sweeping photo archive, “Cultural History 1880-1983,” assembled by his friend Hanne Darboven.) Red subway columns at the Canal Street station, tree trunks along the West Side Highway and white posts at an undisclosed location read as tentative painterly disturbances to the rigidity of the serial photo grid. Mr. Colmer eventually abandoned painting to pursue his conceptual photography, and this show makes you wish he had kept on looking for bridges between these mediums.

KAREN ROSENBERG
Who Takes 3,000 Photos Of NYC’s Doors?

March 10, 2015 · 10:48 AM ET

LINTON WEEKS

Street View: New York City’s Doors: A Special Research Project of NPR History Dept.

A door is for closing. And for opening.

From the doorkeeper-to-God in Psalms to the wild night outside the door in King Lear to Charlie Rich getting Behind Closed Doors, the door is the ampersand between here & there.

It is the gateway and the getaway.

Often a door is an opening to the future — the doors of Let’s Make A Deal! for example, Tiffany, what’s behind Door Number Three? And Dante’s entryway to Hell: "All Hope Abandon, Ye Who Enter Here."

But while clicking through the New York Public Library's online exhibit Doors, NYC — which includes more than 3,000 photos of the city's doorways taken by Roy Colmer in the mid-1970s — we couldn’t help but think of those doors as portals to the past.

And of Colmer’s camera as still another kind of door that allows our imaginations to step into an ever-receding past.

So NPR History Dept. asked NPR multimedia producer extraordinaire Claire O’Neill to delve into these doors and she returned with
Between November 1975 and September 1976, a man named Roy Colmer decided to photograph New York City’s doors. Not all of New York City’s doors. No doors in particular, at least at first glance, and in no real particular order. But his aptly named Doors, NYC project amounted to more than 3,000 photos, which now live with the New York Public Library.

If you’re like me and want to obsessively look at every single one, the best way to do that is here. But then, I did that so you don’t have to. Firstly, note the door on the bottom left. For every dozen-ish nondescript doors, you’ll find a little treat — like a poster of a cat...
... or a great store name like "Clogs Of Course" (also bottom left).

"He's playful with the very definition of the door. He's shooting chain-link gates, dilapidated doorways with no door, or a door that's been bricked up," says archivist David Lowe, who works with the collection at NYPL.
Colmer was like a 1970s Google Street View camera — driving by and snapping whatever serendipitously ended up in the frame. The best images in the collection, in fact, are the ones that have been inadvertently photo-bombed.
But who was Colmer? And why doors? There's little about him on the Web. He was born in England in 1935 and went to Hamburg, Germany, for artistic training before moving to New York in the '60s. He was a conceptual painter and photographer — MOMA has some of his photos, too — and Lowe speculates this door series may have been inspired by German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher.

The Bechers were well-known in the art world for their photographic series or typologies, mostly architectural, of things like gas tanks, water towers and, yep, facades. But even if Colmer was inspired by the Bechers, he wasn't entirely derivative. His photos allow for some chaos, a lot like New York. They look like photos taken by someone in love with — and a little bit amused by — his city.

Colmer noted which streets he photographed — and that helped Lowe at NYPL plot the images on this map.
The coolest part: Each point on the NYPL map also contains a link to the current Google Street View. "It's always a joy when I see something that's still there — which is not often," Lowe says.

You can see the former New York Times building (left pair), and what's there now — or the ostensibly unchanged Time & Life entry (right pair):

In a little description on its site, NYPL explains that Colmer's Doors, NYC "was essentially conceptual" and "as much an exploration of the serial possibilities of photography as of its ability to capture a place."

Colmer "photographed the city as he moved through it on a daily basis, often by subway, from one neighborhood to another, and from one block to the next," the description reads. He didn't leave behind much more explanation, but in many photos, he still lingers.

And, Lowe adds: "He seemed to have wandered around with his shirt off a lot."