

In *Untitled (Obedience)*, 2004, a figure in a clown suit kneels submissively before others of his (or perhaps her) kind, extending a severed head as some kind of offering. In *Intermezzo* (2005), a scattering of sinister-looking tattooed clowns holding accoutrements ranging from a baseball bat and crowbar to another severed head are apparently undisturbed by the fact that the carnival tent in the background is ablaze. In *Progeny*, a similar frame surrounds an eerie orange and brown scratch-board (a type of etching) image of a coven of pumpkin-headed creatures. They wield torches and seem to be massing for an attack on a hapless scarecrow.

The black-framed paintings are all of recent vintage. The show also contained several earlier works, including a monumental painting from 1984 titled *Waitin 4 the Muzez*. Here a border composed of carnival-poster-style silhouettes and wooden cutouts of cowboys, Indians and various Wild West characters have been peppered with darts. Inside, a tangled scene unfolds, involving several familiar superhero figures who battle it out under the eye of a bound boxer with a toaster for a head. The style of the painting is more cartoonish than Colley's recent works, and the composition is far more complicated.

The new works distill the sense of chaos more effectively, in part because they encapsulate it in styles that are generally associated with reassuring nostalgia. Clown paintings and scratch-board images of city slickers in straw boaters, fedoras and derbies hark back to supposedly simpler times. However, nothing seems stable or certain. In *Calling of the Falls* (2005),

a motley crew of carries floats in a barrel downstream toward a waterfall, while in *Le Beau Monde* (2005), a lovely rural winter scene is punctuated by a single figure in a parka kneeling in the snow with his hands tied behind his back execution style.

Colley taps into the apocalyptic mood that seems rampant these days. However, instead of looking to horror films for reference, as do so many younger artists, he draws on traditions more commonly associated with reassurance than with dread.

—Eleanor Heartney

## Donald Owen Colley at George Adams

The old-timey world of traveling carnivals, Wild West shows and rural barnraisings is given a nightmare treatment in the cheerfully demonic works of Chicago-based artist Donald Owen Colley. In Colley's work, visual Americana is frequently used to suggest a world without order or compassion. Symbols of prosperity and benevolence—familiar motifs like sheaves of wheat, torches, wreaths, decorative urns and American eagles—are modeled in relief on the wide black frames that surround tiny glazed porcelain paintings of unsettling and often horrific events.

Donald Owen Colley: *Waitin 4 the Muzez*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, darts and painted wood, 82 by 115 inches; at George Adams.

