

**Interview by Tibby Rothman – Venice Paper, October 2006
Beyond the Image – Artist Greg Colson**

There are the titles the artist gives his work: *Why Men Eat Poorly, What Working Women Want, Corporate Profits by Industry* and *Workplace Perks*. Greg Colson has a wry sense of humor. He laughs at the understatement—his head leaning down keeping his eyes to himself in his self-effacing way. You could meet him on the street or in his territory—the studio—or at one of his own openings and never know that you were talking to an artist with works in the collections of MOMA and Met in New York and LACMA closer to his Venice home.

There are the pie charts that the titles identify. Colson's breaking up and rearranging of the empirical data that frames and defines American life. America sure that is has the answers. And that the answers can be organized.

When Colson visited the informational medium he introduced his own ironically selected imagery into slices of the pies he created, slyly contrasting his visuals with real-life pie-chart category names. In the pie charts, as in his maps, sculptures, or new paintings, his ironic use of familiar imagery encourages the viewer to defy previously imposed definitions. The most mundane icon—a computer mouse, a simplistic line drawing of a tractor, a box of french fries is freed—open for your own interpretation.

"You could use 500 different things to represent 'failure at work' or 'casual dress' and depending on how you play it, the icon you select can have as much to do with how the information comes across as the hard data itself," he says.

VenicePaper: Does the business world's organization of material and clear-cut lines in pie charts and graphs impair our ability to think creatively or contextually?

Greg Colson: Information is typically dressed up to make it more attractive, palatable, or interesting to look at—appealing to the eye. And the interesting thing about the pie charts is the way you have this supposedly objective information, this long view of some kind of behavior that you're analyzing, and it implies objectivity.

My interest is in having these incidental elements take the pie chart information to a completely different place. So you get these accidental collisions between the icons. It's interesting to me how when you present something, anything visually, how many different things it can become, depending on how you represent it and play with it. You can just warp it or twist it so it connects with all sorts of things that weren't part of the original intent.

VP: What connects your new series of work, the black-and-white paintings that combine different images we see routinely?

Colson: These works reflect the fragmented nature of how we live now, how we receive information and how everything is up for grabs. The smallest most insignificant thing—if it catches the media's eye—can have the same impact as something of huge importance. Everything is up for grabs. The trivial and the significant exist on the same plane.

I've talked about my work in terms of trying to capture *the texture* of something, where the small thing over here has equal importance to whether we're going into Iraq—that's just very weird. I'm trying to capture **that feeling** of things, rather than explicitly say, "Well, this is good" or "This is bad." I am primarily motivated by making art. If you abandon the pleasure and the visual interest and make something totally a political statement, to me that becomes less interesting.

VP: You grew up in Bakersfield; how did you decide to

go into art?

Colson: I thought of myself as an artist early on. My brother and I were always drawing and my parents encouraged that for some reason. My father was a social worker, so maybe he saw some value in this. When I was about 9 or 10, we lived in East Bakersfield and our neighbor was a wildlife painter. That was the first person I had seen actually making art. I don't know if that triggered it or what. My father made us some stretcher bars on the table saw and bought some canvas at Standard Brands and showed us how to staple up stretched canvases. So we were painting. Around this time I was also fascinated with comic strips, and my brother Jeff stumbled upon *Mad Magazine*.

I had a great teacher in high school who exposed us to the Surrealists and Cubism, and even Rauschenberg and Johns, which was a pretty radical thing to do, and particularly in that region—this was in Bakersfield! So my folks saw that Jeff and I were interested in art, and we began making trips to New York and Philadelphia and visiting the big art museums there. I look back on that, and I'm just very touched by how my parents encouraged us to pursue this interest. We'd drive cross country with a trailer or a top rack, and I remember being in Manhattan, and we were driving around the block trying to find a parking space to get into MoMA. It was just insane ... the '68 Chevy Impala and this homemade top rack.

VP: What makes art as relevant now as it was during the Renaissance, when there weren't other informational means?

Colson: During the Renaissance, art was sponsored by aristocracy or the religious institutions, and now it has more of a life of its own. Today, art has its own support structure.

Sometimes art is in danger of becoming overwhelmed by the marketplace and the trading where it becomes more about the buzz around somebody or the marketing of it—the connections, auction results, rather than the thing itself.

I would imagine that if you were de Kooning or Philip Guston in the 1950s, or George Herms or Ed Ruscha in the '60s, there wasn't a set career path to becoming an artist. You just were one; the motives were purer. The audience and support structure was tiny compared to now, when art is assimilated so quickly by the culture. Today, art is so legitimized, and the market is so big, you have people attracted to it for all kinds of reasons, for better and for worse.

VenicePaper: How do your pieces evolve, do you see an image that you then build a piece around. Or do you have a theoretical idea that you want to express visually?

Colson: You know, the famous line is, "Artists don't know exactly what they're doing," I think that's true. I think it's good because if you're too conscious about it and you're gearing everything to be appropriate to your big social statement, I don't know ... I'm sure some artists pull it off—we all work differently. But to me, I couldn't work like that, because I start out with a visual interest and the materials, and then I'm sort of wandering around in the culture and something's gonna rub off ... The idea of an artist as outsider, I think that's what the value in it is, because it's someone who's spending their days, by themselves, for the most part, in the studio, and they have the time to struggle with their neuroses and their reactions to this or that, and go for a walk. And other people that are working at more conventional jobs, people that are just caught up in the day-to-day can't. They don't have all that time to waste, really. And at the same time I don't necessarily think it's the healthiest thing to be an artist. But somebody's gotta do it.