



LEWIS COLBURN
INTERREGNUM (1815–1969)
HALLWALLS 9*11*09 – 10.23.09



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SEPTEMBER 11 TO OCTOBER 23, 2009



Exploded View

Napoleon Bonaparte is credited with saying, “History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.”

Napoleon Bonaparte’s carriage is crashed on the surface of the Moon.

As realized in Lewis Colburn’s set piece *Interregnum* (1815—1969), its imposing thingness—even in splayed, defeated repose—has a monumental quality, even if mostly a monumental angst. It immediately evokes an exploded view drawing, in which a mechanism is visually blown apart to better illustrate its purpose and function, poetically suggesting that there is something being explained. Or an explanation being suggested. Or a suggestion being materialized.

That the work is an awkward marriage of improbable partners is perhaps the key ingredient that activates Colburn’s scene—it’s clearly all wrong somehow, yet in its wrongness it manages to appear comfortable and at ease. It is a large work but rendered concisely with a small number of elements, its overt theatricality tempered by the muted horizon behind it and a bed of soft, gray sand below. Viewable from a raised boardwalk, it is a life-sized diorama that, within its absurd demeanor, articulates sentiments about history, ambition, desire, ego and the spectacular failure of these impulses. But it is not about any one of these things more than another and ultimately points to the underlying subjectivity not merely of art, but of history, knowledge, and perception.

The dates provided within the work’s title frame the piece as a historical mashup between Napoleon’s defeat by the British at Waterloo in 1815 and the first manned Moon landing in 1969 as well as enfolding the space between these dates—its interregnum—as a zone of potential dispute. Both carriage and Moon, for different reasons, underscore the apparent unreliability of history. And both, for different reasons, have existed as objects of popular obsessions. They are stand-ins for nationalistic aspirations and the credulity of the public toward historical events.

In the case of Napoleon’s carriage—here used as a symbol for his final defeat—there is no longer any way to ascertain its provenance, despite a long, ignominious history. Once the British took possession of Napoleon’s carriage, it was presented to British royalty, used to pay off a debt, exhibited as a historical attraction during a period of pop culture fervor known as Boneymania (the public tearing off bits and pieces as souvenirs), and was eventually sold to Madam Tussaud’s Wax Museum for their Napoleon Room, until a 1925 museum fire, after which only a single, warped axle remained. In the case of the Moon landing—much closer in time to today and verifiable as fact in innumerable ways—the allusion Colburn is using is more well-known to us, the persistent urban legend that the paradigm-

shifting moment of humans setting foot on a body other than Earth was accomplished through a large, convincing sound stage and a panoply of Hollywood special effects.

Even collapsed, the carriage emits a certain undeniable glamour. Built at full-scale, its deep blue paint job, gold trim, and large red wheels are a seventeenth century pimped out ride, yet its interior is left intentionally bereft—entirely unfinished, it is the artist’s cue that he is not trying to trick us. It is important to him that we recognize its hollowness, its absolute lack of substance, its existence as a thing defined entirely by its swank exterior. It is a purposely overblown allusion to the notion that what appears credible on the surface may be easily revealed as lacking any real substance.

Four hundred pounds of concrete dust and a convincing painted mural combine to establish a convincing fakery while a slightly raised boardwalk functions as a slightly ludicrous gesture meant to evoke the life-sized dioramas of a historical museum or the forced viewing perches of nature preserves. There are multiple ground-level perspectives for the viewer, but Colburn’s boardwalk is not constructed to provide the optimal view, but to hint at the singular, specific framing that historical records often strongly imply. Whether one avails oneself of the proffered view may be an analogy for the ways in which we choose to believe certain facts (or not) because we cannot verify everything ourselves and often rely on the version of events given to us.

Strangely, neither Napoleon’s carriage nor the Moon landing had lasting value. The carriage, post-Waterloo, transformed into a sideshow freak while Moon landings became perfunctory to the point of banality until they stopped altogether. Except as a literary trope for egomania, Napoleon no longer exists for the public-at-large and we haven’t returned to the Moon following Apollo 17 nearly half a century ago. These monumental historical moments ultimately segue into props to mark historical time while floating increasingly free of useful meaning.

The space between these historical bookends—the interregnum or interval between events—is a whopping 154 years and Colburn is not suggesting that all history within this framework is false, but that there is room for perceptual dispute. Or, if we consider the histories he is using, that perceptual dispute is at least accommodated. It’s not helpful, historically-speaking, as facts and evidence do pile up occasionally to verify events and meanings. But it is a suggestion that history, like just about everything else, remains in a perpetual state of flux, an epoch-long remix of malleable facts and notions. More importantly—much more importantly—perceptual disputes are the fuel for imagination, for artmaking, for constructing meaning.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

Born in Cedar Falls, Iowa, Lewis Colburn received degrees in studio art and Russian language from St. Olaf College. He completed his MFA in sculpture at Syracuse University, and has recently produced projects for the International Prize for Performance in Trento, Italy and Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum in Berlin, Germany.

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