

F Taylor Colantonio

COSMIA

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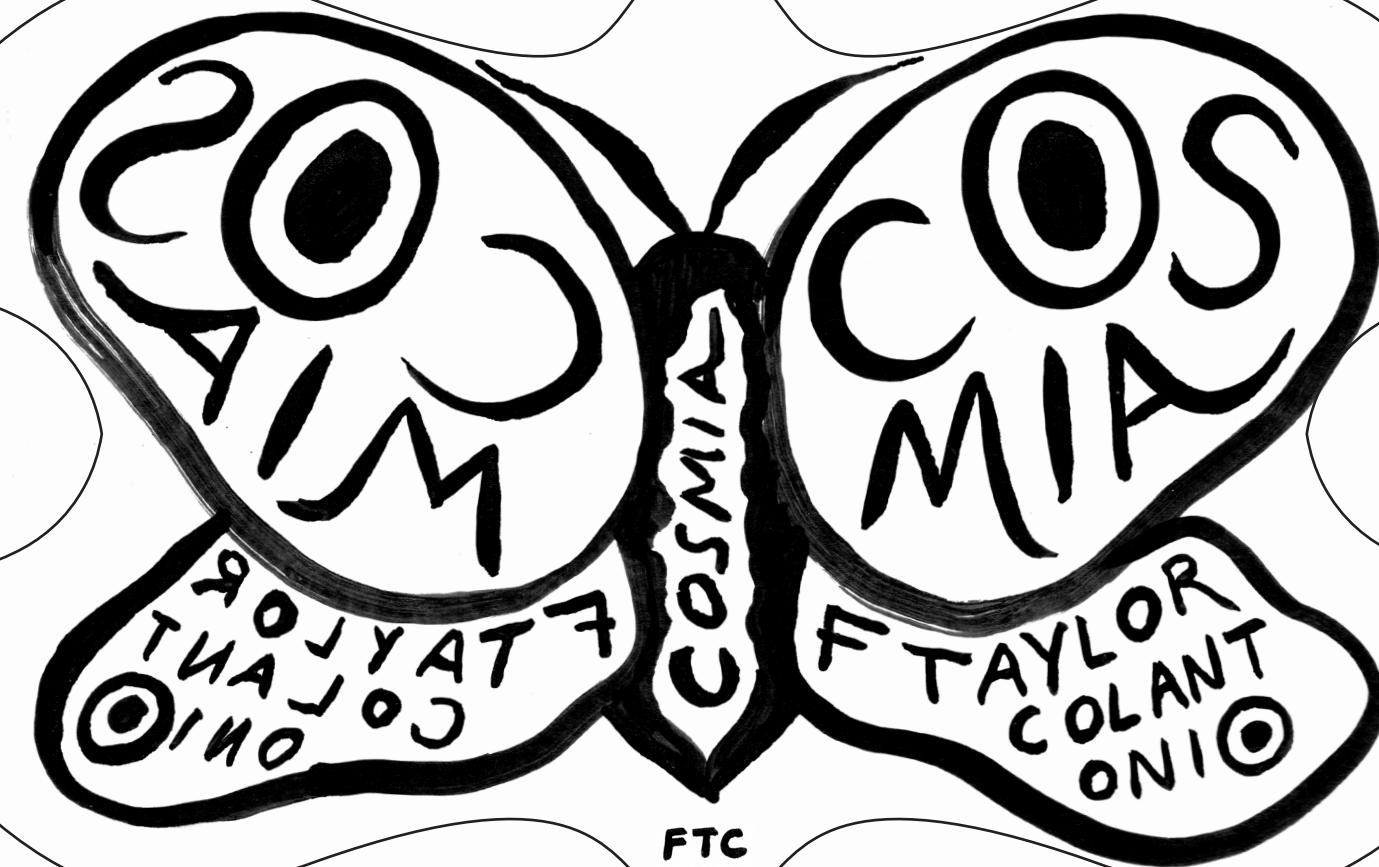
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“On *Cosmia*” by Rosa Lyster

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for Mom



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Nobody really knows why moths are attracted to the flame. There are various plausible-sounding explanations — that non-celestial light confuses them because they’ve evolved to navigate by keeping the moon and the stars at their backs, that they’re not actually attracted to light but to the darkness around it, that they think the

light will protect them from danger — but none of the theories fully accounts for why they behave the way they do. The scientific consensus is that it’s basically a mystery. Like almost all information about moths, this gets weirder the more you think about it.¹ Spiraling fatal-

¹ For example: scientists have recently determined that moths “know when plants are crying”. They have also observed that the male *Promethea* moth can track the scent of a female from a distance of twenty three miles. There is a special kind of Hawaiian moth called “the bone collector”, whose caterpillar lives in close association with spiders, covering itself with remnants of the prey the spider has discarded. There

ly towards the light is the key moth activity, it is what they are *about*, and we still aren’t clear on what they intend by it.

In the absence of explanation, we invent our own answers, and take advantage of their extreme

is a moth that has evolved to look exactly like a stick, and it is so confident in its camouflage that it doesn’t move even if you poke it with your finger. Doesn’t that suggest a level of self-awareness that we have always believed to be a solely human characteristic? Doesn’t that make you think for a long time about what a moth knows? Finally, as the entomologist in *Silence of the Lambs* points out to Jodie Foster, there is “a moth, more than one in fact, that lives only on tears”.

usefulness as metaphors. What other creatures carry such immense symbolic weight? And on such small, crushable, combustible wings! Moths emerge from the cocoon with formidable protection:² spots on their wings that resemble owls’ eyes, camouflage that makes them look like dead leaves or wasps or cobras’ heads (more on this later, but there is a moth that is more beautiful and luminous

² If you start to type into Google “how are moths protected against predators”, the first autosuggestion that comes up is “how are moths protected against themselves?”. A heartbreaking question, to which there is no satisfactory answer.

than everything else in the known universe combined, and it knows how to thwart bat echolocation). Then, armoured as they are, sophisticated as they appear to be, they orient themselves in the direction of the one thing that will definitely destroy them. How could we not project our own feelings onto something that does this? We read the opening and closing of their wings like the pages of a book. We look at moths and see implacable, self-annihilating desire, longing for the unattainable, and the inevitability of change.

Cosmia, a solo show by

the artist F Taylor Colantonio at Salon94’s Palais-Royal outpost, takes the moth as its conceptual anchor. Bringing together sixteen new works in polished cartapesta³, bronze, and fused glass, the

³ Polished cartapesta, an alchemical sculpting process that Colantonio invented which remains unique to his practice, involves layering strips of coloured paper with a flour-based glue slurry which has been tinted with mineral pigments like vibrant copper alloys and iron oxides. Like the creation of sedimentary stone, Colantonio’s works accumulate thickness about a hundred microns at a time, around the thickness of a sheet of paper, but over the course of weeks rather than millions of years. Once the forms are hardened and

exhibition takes its name from a song by Joanna Newsom, in which moths flit as metaphors for loss, change, grief, and love. Colantonio explores and expands on these symbolic possibilities throughout

dry, Colantonio grinds through their surfaces, revealing the marbling of the various strata of coloured paper and pigmented glue which constitute the material and are integral to its structure. The surface is then hand-polished in a fifteen step process that renders a refined finish similar to honed marble. Unlike the yield of other marble simulation techniques like scagliola, Colantonio's finished material *becomes* marble by at least one important common practice test: it remains cold to the touch.

the show, with many of the works titled after moth species whose common English names reverberate with mythological, psychological, or personal significance: *Feathered Gothic*, *The Seraphim*, *Comet*, *Emperor*.⁴

Colantonio connects ideas of transformation and desire, symmetry and irrationality, darkness and light, endings and beginnings through the hinge, thirty moth-like versions of which unfold throughout the exhibition, in various sizes

⁴ The common names for *Tholera decimalis*, *Lobophora halterata*, *Argema mittrei*, and *Saturnia pavonia*, respectively.

and forms. Hinges are exploited in almost every way imaginable, as integral mechanical components and as standalone works. Hinges carry electrical connection from one part to the next in a sequence of linked table lamps, and grow into long-necked lamps or amphorae in a series of mirrors. They bear candlesticks, relink segments of a chopped-up frame, join a family of five stools, and form the basis of a series of moth masks. The hinges are rendered in the most minimal and rudimentary way possible, made first out of papier-mâché and then refined and cast in bronze.

The process is an expression of Colantonio's ad hoc vernacular, informed by an economy of available material, which makes improvisation visible rather than attempting to erase it. All thirty hinges in the show have Colantonio's fingerprints on them, his touch baked into the final work.

Colantonio's work always involves a material shift, so that his objects appear caught in the act of becoming something else. In *Il Buon Tempo Verrà*, a long, caterpillar-like bench composed of five bronze stools hinged together, representing the five members of the

artist's family, appears suspended at the threshold of transformation. The title is taken from an inscription on a ring owned by Shelley; in English, it translates to "the good times will come".⁵

⁵ When Percy Bysshe Shelley's body was recovered after his boat sank in a storm in the Gulf of La Spezia, he was found to be carrying a copy of Keats' *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. Witnesses said that the book looked as if it had been hastily crammed into a top pocket, as if Shelley had been reading his dead friend's work just as the storm hit. It's not that much of a stretch to imagine that he was reading "The Eve of St. Agnes", and thinking about Keats' comparison of stained glass to "the tiger-moth's

The stools, made to individually link and detach from one another with removable hinge pins, allow for family members to drift away and return, for new configurations to take place, and old ones to re-emerge. Things won't stay the same, *Il Buon Tempo Verrà*

deep-damask'd wings". Both Shelley and Keats are buried in the non-Catholic cemetery in Rome, the city where Colantonio has lived since 2016. Shelley's poem "To— (One Word is Too Often Profaned)" was a touchstone for Colantonio as he worked on *Cosmia*:

The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow...

suggests, but something better will come, something different.

Colantonio's work can sometimes resemble artefacts retrieved from sunken ships, or recovered from burial mounds. His objects carry the force and crackle of discoveries that might send ripples of panic through the archaeological community of the future, prompting a re-evaluation of how our civilization is understood. Imagine the head archaeologist in her tent in the jungle, or the desert, or wherever it is that you picture. It's two hundred years ahead, or five hundred years, or whatever it

is that you have in your head.⁶ It's late at night. She and her team have just recovered *Leporello* (2026), a bronze diadem composed of a loop of eight hinges with silvan finials, exactly sixteen centimeters in diameter. The hinges, she can see, have the impression of somebody's fingerprints on them, and look like

⁶ These are only suggestions. She doesn't even have to be an archaeologist, if for some reason you don't enjoy picturing that. She can be the head of a discipline not yet invented, one which studies the way people in the twenty-first century thought about beauty, or line, or the relationship between the sculptural and decorative arts.

moths circling a person's head. A woman's head? A sad woman? A funeral rite, or something to be worn on the best day of a person's life? The archaeologist doesn't know what it means yet, but she can already tell that it's important, and that, at the very least, the discovery has made a mockery of her doctoral thesis. Now she is pouring herself a drink and writing "back to the drawing board, oh my god" in her notebook. Maybe she is sitting at her desk. Maybe she is working by candlelight, and the moths are spiraling round the flame. There is one with wing patterns that look

like the stonework and arches of Gothic architecture, and one with wings that look like scorched pieces of paper.⁷ She tries to guide

⁷ Moths are often credited with a kind of supernatural intelligence that extends far, far beyond what is realistically possible, given that their tiny brains are roughly the size of a poppy seed. We ascribe to them powers of telepathy, and we think they can tell when someone is about to die, or come into a lot of money. No scientist has ever come out and said this, but one reason that they seem so much smarter than they actually are could be that they often resemble objects that they have no business knowing about. What is a moth doing looking exactly like a piece of burned paper, or the panes of glass in a Gothic cathedral? What

them away from the flame with the back of her hand, but they keep coming back and coming back, and she wonders why they always have to be like that.

Moths are messengers — everybody knows this — but the contents of the dispatches they carry are not always legible. *Saturnia* (2026), a diptych mirror attached with a bronze hinge, the pin of which grows into a one-meter-tall electrified torchère, references the luna moth, *Actias luna*, a creature

do they know, and how did they find out about it? What are they going to do with the information?

so freighted with metaphorical weight that it's hard to believe it can fly, or even exist. Luna moths, green and gold and so beautiful they could make your heart explode, are born with only vestigial mouths. They cannot eat, and neither can they speak the message that they seem to have been born to deliver. By twisting their hindwing tails, they are capable of creating an acoustic decoy that messes with bats' ability to echolocate, but still they die after only about a week, opening and closing like letters that cannot be read.

Colantonio allows that

opacity and ambiguity to unfold in his objects: meaning doesn't stay fixed, but multiplies, each work prompting several possible readings at once. *Cosmia*'s exploratory spirit is perhaps most fully expressed in the series of wall-hung bronze masks, which form a sort of show within a show. When viewed together, the series describes a metamorphosis, tracing a progression from most legibly moth-like to most abstract. Viewed individually, each iteration becomes at once a disguise and a self-portrait. A departure for Colantonio, the masks betray a curious, tender vulnera-

bility that underpins the gravity of the exhibition as a whole. *Feathered Gothic* (2026), for example, which portrays two kissing doves whose necks form the outline of a folkloristic heart, references a motif found in his beloved childhood home. Sweetly nostalgic, yet ominous (the heart cleaves in two if the hinge is opened), Colantonio's version conveys the sense of something mysterious and deeply personal. Like the moth itself, the mask arrives bearing significance, but leaves interpretation to us. We can see ourselves in and through it; we can read into it what we like.