

William N. Copley

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FEBRUARY 13, 2020



TRUE COLORS

A show of William N. Copley paintings opening March 11 at New York's Kasmin gallery explores the surrealist influences and sexual politics in the artist's work from the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Once beloved by Duchamp and Lichtenstein, he's now adored by Beyoncé. kasmingallery.com

ARTNEWS

True to Himself

William N. Copley at Menil Collection, Houston, Texas

ANNE DORAN

JUNE 1, 2016



William N. Copley, *My Father Plays Piano in a House of Ill Repute*, 1966, oil on canvas, 77" x 118". © 2016 Estate of William N. Copley, Copley LLC, and Artists Rights Society, New York/The Menil Collection, Houston.

A busy black-and-white painting hanging at the end of a light-filled corridor in one of the most serene museum exhibition spaces in the world depicts a man in a tweed suit and bowler hat. The man has evidently been playing piano; now he spins on his stool to reach for the curvaceous nude woman lying on a nearby bed. The man and woman's faceless, cartoonlike figures are boldly limned in with broken black lines. An eye-popping variety of patterning—stripes for the wallpaper, speckles for the bed's counterpane, flowers for the carpet, staccato dashes for wood grain, tweed, and ribbon—fills the canvas from edge to edge. Walls, floors, furniture, and couple undulate as if they, or we, were a little bit drunk.

Titled *My Father Plays Piano in a House of Ill Repute*, the painting is a classic image from 1966 by William N. Copley (1919–96), the heterodox American artist who signed his works CPLY and whose trademark motif was a randy, buttoned-up everyman who pursues life, liberty, and zaftig blonds while being pursued in turn by angry wives and policemen. The scion of a wealthy family, Copley began to paint in the late 1940s, developing a vernacular that combined the decorativeness of Matisse's canvases with the graphic punch of Krazy Kat—creator George Herriman's

cartoons and the multidimensional space of Mexican murals. Still woefully under known, he is only now having his first survey in the United States.

Recently conditions have come together to make an American retrospective of Copley's work seem not only relevant, but inevitable—among them: a widespread interest in self-taught artists; a groundswell of figurative painting by younger artists, many of them looking back to the Chicago Imagists of the 1960s, to Peter Saul, and also to Copley; the 100th anniversary of Dada; a particularly surreal election cycle; and most importantly, a curator intrigued by the artist's long connection with Dominique and John de Menil, whose private collection forms the bulk of the Menil's holdings and who owned no fewer than 17 of Copley's paintings and drawings.

"The World According to CPLY," initiated by Menil curator Tony Kamps, brings together over 100 drawings, paintings, and sculptures made by the artist between 1946 and 1995. With its major holdings of Surrealist objects, the Menil makes a fitting venue for the work of a man who considered himself a natural surrealist. The show, largely chronological with thematic insertions, is full of surprises, even for those already crazy for Copley. Without in any way downplaying his work's vaudevillian humor, the exhibition brings to light his often-neglected formal and conceptual strengths.

A patron, collector, sometime publisher, and artist, Copley was born in New York City. Abandoned as an infant, he was adopted at the age of two by the Chicago and San Diego newspaper magnate Ira C. Copley and his wife Edith. (The essential randomness of the universe was an early life lesson.) He attended Yale and fought in World War II, seeing action in Africa and Italy. Following the war, Copley returned to California to work as a reporter for his father's newspapers, which included the right-wing *San Diego Union-Tribune*. Copley liked writing, and carried his press card for the rest of his life, but things were strained between him and his conservative family—he was by then a committed leftist. A brother-in-law, John Poyardt, who had studied painting and who worked for Disney, introduced Copley to Surrealism. "Surrealism," Copley would later write, "made everything understandable: my genteel family, the war, and why I attended the Yale prom without my shoes."

In 1948 Copley and Poyardt started a gallery in Beverly Hills. They gave one-person shows to René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Roberto Matta, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, and Man Ray. Nothing sold, and the gallery closed after six months. Having guaranteed the artists sales of 10 percent, Copley wound up buying many of the unsold works, the first acquisitions in what would become a legendary collection of Surrealist art. (When he put the collection up for auction in 1979, Dominique de Menil snapped up eleven masterpieces—including Ernst's magnificent *Le surréalisme et la peinture* of 1942—which are on view in nearby galleries.)



William N. Copley, *La Muerticita*, 1984, acrylic on linen, 60½" x 45". ©2016 Estate of William N. Copley, Copley LLC, and Artists Rights Society (Ars), New York/Courtesy Paul Van Esch & Partners Art Advisory, Amsterdam/Private Collection, The Netherlands.

At this point, encouraged by Man Ray, who was then unhappily living in Hollywood, Copley began to make art himself. One of the revelations of the show is how assured his style was from the beginning; it remained substantially unchanged throughout his career, even as he continued to refine it. Four works hung adjacent to one another here represent the basic elements of his visual language, soon to be melded into a durable and highly individual patois: *Mack n Madge* (1962), a cartoon strip depicting the travails of an ill-fated couple; *Mexican Images (Dream of Oaxaca)*, 1948, a canvas divided into quadrants, each bearing the image of an object from a Mexican street market; *Reclining Nude* (1953), a woman in stockings and a negligee whose bare mattress and bidet testify to her trade; and *Fiesta de la Lune* (1957), a swirling, jumbled composition of flags, television sets, cigarette packs, a skeleton, and other items, which suggests the clamor and speed of modern life.

By 1951, though, America appeared to be a dead end for Copley. Figuration was out, and abstraction and Abstract Expressionism were ascendant. His gallery had failed, and his marriage was failing. Leaving his wife and two children behind, Copley sailed with Man Ray to Paris. He was 30 years too late for the heyday of Surrealism and a full generation younger than the Surrealists—many of whom had by then returned to Europe—but he counted artists

such as Man Ray, Magritte, and Marcel Duchamp as friends, and they encouraged his naive style. He stayed in Paris for eleven years, painting and filing articles on life there for the *Tribune*.



William N. Copley, *Rain*, 1973, acrylic on linen, 38¼" x 51½". ©2016 Estate Of William N. Copley, Copley LLC, And Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Olbricht Collection.

While living in Paris, Copley found his great subject: the world's fundamental absurdity, which he conveyed in "ridiculous images" using his now-characteristic technique of line drawings filled in with bright, patchy color. As Kamps writes in his catalogue essay, "Refusing to intellectualize Surrealism, Copley borrowed aspects of its interest in humor, sexuality and psychology. But he replaced the movement's uncanny with his own sense of the carnivalesque."

"The *commedia dell'arte* is a universal form," Copley told critic Alan Jones in a 1991 interview, "using the same characters time and time again—a jumping-off place for almost anything. And the same thing always happens, as in *Petrouchka*. I had never paid much attention to the *commedia dell'arte*, but when I did I realized that it was where I had been all the time."

An inexhaustible supply of comedic images could be found in the relations between men and women. (Copley himself was married six times.) "In my *commedia*," he noted, "it is always about being 'taken in adultery.'" An early gem addressing the subject is *A la mer (Remember my Member)*, a work from circa 1960 depicting a lighthouse at night. As the light moves over the beach, it pins several startled couples in its glare.

In formal terms, Copley began to experiment with collage-inspired compositions like *Fiesta* as a method of conveying simultaneity and flux. Often the central image in these works is an automobile, for him a symbol for movement through space, time, and life. On one wall three paintings are hung together: *Liberation sur l'herbe* (1955), in which a blue sedan, seen from both the inside and the outside, coils itself around a city park; *The Accident* (1983),

involving a car, a man, and a woman seen before and after a bloodless wreck—presumably of both the car and the liaison—and *Temptation of Saint Ouen (Gaité Bienvenue)*, 1956, with a bus and a dead horse at its center. It is groupings such as these that make this show so good, illuminating as they do Copley’s methodical thinking-through of ideas over time.

In Paris, Magritte, especially, was a mentor. As Kamps writes, “The bowler-hatted, umbrella-equipped men that recur throughout Copley’s work are homages to his Belgian friend and ironic emblems of the traditional bourgeois paths that both artists sidestepped.”

Yet, in his 2000 essay “Magritte and the Bowler Hat,” film theorist Peter Wollen challenges the notion of the bowler hat (originally commissioned by a British landowner for his gamekeepers in 1849) as an emblem of the everyman, insisting instead, and at length, on its multitude of cultural associations, including the detective (Hercule Poirot), the comedian (Charlie Chaplin), the Purist (Le Corbusier), the father (in the works of Samuel Beckett), and the fetish (on women, in works from *Cabaret* to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). And in much the same way, as this show reveals, Copley’s simple narratives, with their small cast of characters, are not just “ridiculous images,” but the vehicles for trenchant commentary on repressive social conventions, dirty politics, misguided nationalism, moral hypocrisy, and coyness of any sort.



William N. Copley, *The Cold War*, 1962, oil on canvas, 35¼" x 51¼". ©2016 Estate of William N. Copley, Copley LLC, and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/The Menil Collection, Houston.

On his return to America in 1962, Copley found Pop art on the rise and his work—incorporating images taken from the mass media, but more loosely painted, more narrative, and more personal than that of Lichtenstein or Warhol—viewed as a link between Pop and Surrealism. America of the 1960s also provided a wealth of new material for paintings such as *The Cold War* (1962), which shows a pair of women wrestlers in a tight lock, one wrapped in the American flag, the other in the flag of the USSR.

In 1968 Copley launched another ill-fated business venture—the limited-edition magazine *S.M.S.* (short for Shit Must Stop), which published multiples by such disparate artists as Ray Johnson, Lee Lozano, and Walter De Maria. It lost money and ceased publication after six issues. It was also around this time that Copley embarked on two of the most extraordinary series of his career: the “Nouns” and the “X-Rated” paintings.

The non-narrative “Nouns,” based on images from vintage Sears and Roebuck catalogues, depict ordinary consumer goods set against brightly colored, patterned grounds. The similarly non-narrative “X-Rated” paintings, based on images from hard-core porn magazines, show couples having sex on brightly colored, patterned beds, sofas, and floors. In the first series, a boxing glove takes on the aura of a fetish, while the relations between a French horn and a piano stool have a carnal flavor. In the second series, the eroticism of the images is overshadowed by their gorgeous hues and over-the-top decorativeness, as in a painting of a man (in a '70s patterned shirt) and a woman (in a lacy bodysuit) entangled in the corner of a sofa—whose green-and-white plaid upholstery is having a three-way of its own with blue flowered wallpaper and orange diamond-patterned carpeting. As Kamps writes, “Despite the series’ frank focus on genitals and sex acts—firsts in his career—[Copley] argued that the inanimate objects in the Nouns paintings were far more arousing. The X-Rated works, he stated, ‘are essentially still lifes: they are flowers.’”



William N. Copley, *En Garde*, 1962, oil and lace on canvas, 32" x 25¾". ©2016 Estate of William N. Copley, Copley LLC, and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/The Menil Collection, Houston.

In works from the 1980s and 1990s Copley continued to innovate, using text (the IBM “think” slogan was a favorite), cutaways, and silhouettes filled with imagery to create increasingly layered compositions. “Lately I’ve changed my way of working by trying to depend much more on the subconscious,” he said in his interview with Jones. “I start a painting and just leave it. I know there is bound to be some subconscious event, so I don’t stand and worry what to do next. I walk away from it. This was a big step for me. It got me away from my own formulas.”

In retrospect, though, Copley’s work seems far from formulaic. One of the show’s few missteps is the characterization of Copley as a “bad boy” artist, an idea that is floated in one of the catalogue’s essays. The term, which emerged in the 1980s in connection with a certain kind of swagger and scale, seems to have little to do with Copley’s low profile and behind-the-scenes patronage of other artists through his Cassandra Foundation and projects like *S.M.S.* Neither does it particularly apply to his art. While Copley frequently returned to the faceless characters of the blond and her bandy-legged suitor, works like 1963’s *The Bride and the Groom Stripped Bare by Each Other, Even*—in which scenes of men and women primping for each other alternate with images of common objects—evoke not casual encounters but the complicated dynamics of real-world relationships. As seen here, Copley’s work has as many affinities with that of certain women artists, among them Evelyne Axell, Christina Ramberg, Judith Linhares, Kara Walker, Anthea Hamilton, and Jamian Juliano-Villani, as it does with that of his male Pop and Surrealist contemporaries.

That this exhibition will only travel to one other venue (the Prada Foundation in Milan) is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising. Among the seeming impediments to other American museums embracing Copley’s work are the fear of being politically incorrect, the premium on technique, and the distrust of humor in art. Kamps’s courageous and important survey illuminates both the consistency and the sophistication of Copley’s vision and most importantly—especially to younger artists who might look at his work now—its truthfulness to itself.

ARTNEWS

Father Figures

Visiting William N. Copley's Drawings Exhibition With the Artist's Son

ANDREW RUSSETH
JANUARY 20, 2015



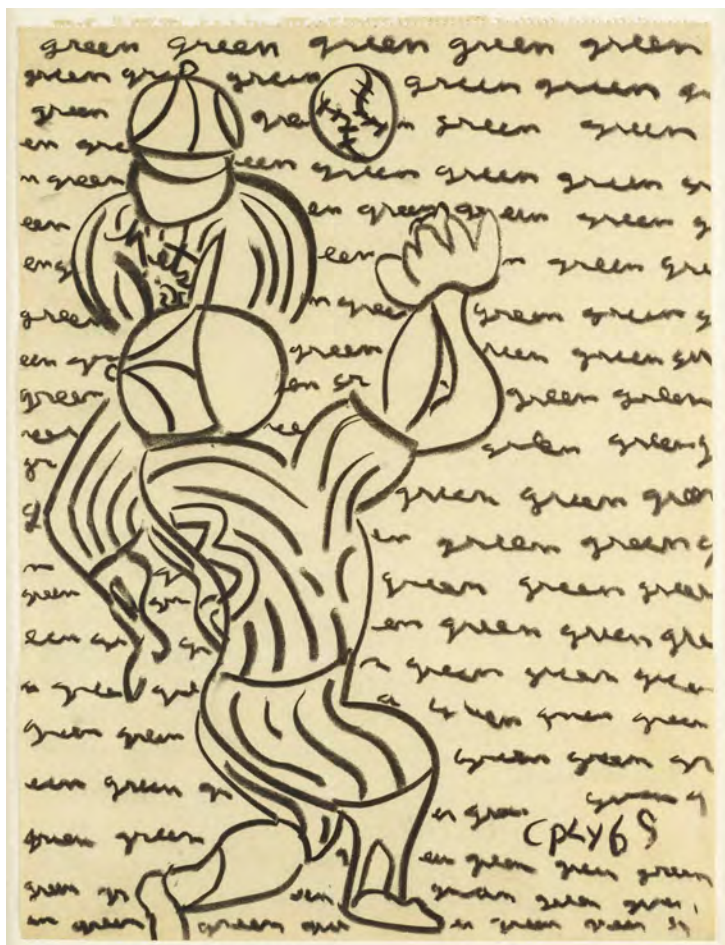
William N. Copley, *Untitled*, 1965. All Images: Courtesy The Estate of William N. Copley and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

Where do you begin with William N. Copley? There are almost too many good stories about the artist, collector, art dealer, patron, and all-around gadabout, whose life cut a wild path through some of the most intriguing moments in postwar art history. Born in 1919, probably to parents who died of influenza, he was adopted by Illinois magnate Ira Copley and his wife Edith, and grew up in immense privilege—he attended both Phillips Academy and Yale—but like many would-be aristocrats before him, he eschewed that life for one in art.

After serving in the army, he found himself in Los Angeles, where he ran a short-lived gallery with a friend, showing artists like Man Ray and Magritte well before their popular acclaim in America. They had a pet monkey, hosted raucous openings, and sold only two paintings. (Copley, meanwhile, bought 10 percent of each show, starting what would become one of the most formidable collections of Surrealism in the U.S.) The gallery closed in less than a year. But by then Copley was making art.

Copley—or CPLY, as he signed his work—painted cartoony, figurative scenes with thick lines that teem with antic drama. Nude, pink-skinned women are everywhere, sometimes embraced or accompanied by a man in a natty suit

and bowler hat, which one is tempted to read as the artist himself. Usually his characters have no faces. “I never had any luck drawing faces anyway,” he once explained. “Since I am only interested in men and women and the relationship between each other why do they need faces?”



Untitled, 1969.

The effect of his works, consequently, tends to be both comic and psychologically fraught. They have the feel of private fantasies brazenly shared in public—things that are more personal than one typically sees in either Surrealism (which they follow chronologically) or Pop (which they richly anticipate). They’re ribald, playfully skirting propriety and prevailing tastes.

A show now on view at Paul Kasmin in New York allows one to take a wide appraisal of Copley’s achievements, in a scaled down form. Titled “William N. Copley: Drawings (1962–1973),” it homes in on the artist’s work in that medium, which he came to late in his career. (Learning to draw was “an effort I put off for a long time just out of laziness,” he told Paul Cummings, of the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, in a 1968 interview).

One recent winter morning, Copley’s son, the artist Billy Copley, who strikingly resembles his father, took me around the show. Once his father started drawing, he said, he really got into it, working first on paper plates. “He would just draw for hours,” he said. “He would go on drawing jags. In the ‘60s he and my stepmother went to Greece, and he

had a little studio room, and he always worked. He would bring maybe 20 notebooks, and he would just draw, all day long. And then he would come back with piles of work.”



Untitled, 1971.

Though there’s no definitive listing of Copley drawings, the estate estimates they number in the thousands. One of the earliest works in the show dates from 1963, a scene with the nude woman and bowler-capped man scratched from a field of purple crayon. Of this choice of material, the younger Copley said, “He could have gotten that from myself and my sister,” since they were both in school at the time.

There are examples from Copley’s works involving his trademark domestic scenes, and also other recurring motifs: flags, baseball, and spare still lifes, which he termed “ridiculous images”—a trumpet, a razor, a vice, which bulge with luscious curves, bulging in an almost libidinous way. “He was a mail-order freak,” said Copley Jr. “He would see things in catalogues, and he would order them over the phone,” some of those finds making their way into his works.

Living in New York in the 1960s and ‘70s, Copley was a close friend and confidante of more popular artists. Lichtenstein got him to switch from oil to Magna paint, Copley Jr. said, and Copley sponsored Duchamp’s final piece, *Étant donnés* (1946–66). He’d lunch occasionally with Warhol. “Andy asked me to be in a movie when I was 16,”

Copley Jr. said, “but I was really too young to be able to deal with it. It was one where they’re all in prison. I think I was just too intimidated.”



Untitled, 1973.

But despite those connections and some success in Europe, his career has been slow to rise in the United States. (He died in 1996.) That is changing. Next year, Houston’s Menil Collection is organizing a major retrospective of his work, his first in the United States, and younger artists, from Andreas Slominski to Brian Belott to Bjarne Melgaard have taken him as an influence, particularly the luscious “X-Rated” paintings, which he began in the early 1970s and that show rather explicit (though still cartoon) sexual acts. A few drawings from the series are included in the Kasmin.

“I don’t know what motivated him to go this way,” Copley Jr. told me. “My sense was that it was really about confronting his own sexuality because he was a very Victorian man, really. He was adopted by this wealthy family, and they were extremely formal and business-like.”

“These are very loose, and they’re charcoal, so I don’t think he held back at all,” he said, as we examined the fulsomenly rendered works. “That was one of his goals. It’s true for most artists, really—that they loosen up as they progress. They want to make it easy, fast, and you know, it’s also connected to your subconscious. You want to close your eyes, and just go.”

ARTFORUM

ERIN KIMMEL

MAY 2016

MENIL COLLECTION

Over the course of his lifetime, the wayward yet prolific William N. Copley occupied three positions in the art world: those of collector, patron, and artist. “The World According to CPLY,” the first American survey of his work, considers each role in a sprawling exhibition that displays works that were formerly part of Copley’s personal collection alongside his own profuse output of paintings and the periodical editions he funded and published. Presented together, they reconstruct a world-view that is as dark as it is candied, as deadpan as it is expressive, and as infuriating as it is endearing. Abandoned as an infant on the steps of the New York Foundling Hospital in 1919, Copley was adopted by a politician and newspaper magnate and reared in luxury. Shortly after moving to Los Angeles in 1945, the budding collector was introduced to Surrealism, and within months he had tracked down Man Ray, who had left Paris at the outset of World War II and was living in halcyon obscurity in Hollywood. Soon after, Copley opened a gallery in Beverly Hills in which to show the work of Ray and other members of the European expat cadre. Absolute artistic autonomy and a guaranteed 10 percent of sales (backed by Copley’s family wealth) attracted other émigré Surrealists to Copley’s novice outfit. Shows of the work of Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy, as well as friendships with Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte, followed; sales did not. The gallery closed after six months, but by this time Copley found himself in the unusual position of serving as both benefactor and mentee to his new Surrealist coterie.

In 1951, Copley moved to Paris. By this time he had struck the vowels from his name and resolved to teach himself to paint under the nom de plume CPLY. The artist’s early works, laid out in the first rooms of the exhibition, are suffused with a carnivalesque aesthetic and a dopey Duchampian schoolboy humor unleashed in what can appear as unbridled celebrations of peephole voyeurism and the male gaze. Formal and narrative references to artists from Matisse to Francis Picabia abound in awkward, colorful canvases such as *Blue Mood*, 1964. Satirical political imagery and commodity fetishism seep into the work midway through the exhibition, coinciding with Copley’s move from oil to acrylic. Meanwhile, he begins to refine his pictorial punch with a patterning and flatness that evidences the influence of the American Pop artists whom he befriended and whose work he began collecting upon moving to New York in 1963. Copley’s bright and checker-patterned *Electric Chair*, 1970, for example, at once riffs on van Gogh’s



William N. Copley, *Lost Innocence*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 37 x 45”.

Disaster” series. The exhibition also includes issues of *S.M.S* (Shit Must Stop), a bimonthly art periodical that Copley published in 1968, whose contributors included Duchamp, Meret Oppenheim, La Monte Young, Bruce Nauman, and Yoko Ono. Predictably, the project failed to turn a profit and was shuttered after one year.

By 1979, a nearly broke Copley had auctioned off his art collection for a record-breaking \$6.7 million. The Menil family, friends of Copley’s who were already gaining notoriety for the studied eclecticism of their growing Surrealist collection, purchased seven works from the sale, including seminal pieces by Ernst, Magritte, and Jean Tinguely. These, as well as Warhol’s aforementioned *Lavender Disaster*, 1963, hang in the atrium in the preceding Surrealist galleries as a contextual forward to the exhibition. The restrained nuance of the Menil Collection collides with Copley’s brazen, fun-house worldview—folding the seemingly opposed but equally reverent commitments to the making and collecting of art into one another.

—*Erin Kimmel*

Playing the Renegade With Eroticism or Rage

ROBERTA SMITH
NOVEMBER 11, 2010



A detail of "Rain," one of 23 works in a Paul Kasmin Gallery show that essentially recreates a mostly overlooked 1974 William N. Copley exhibition. Paul Kasmin Gallery.

[EXTRACT]

Sanctified art movements aside, most artists worthy of the name are loners and renegades. They operate without licenses — or Ph.D.'s — striving to be themselves as only they can, as clearly and intensely as possible.

This is very hard work, and when they succeed, especially over time, we are the beneficiaries. We get what we tend to look for in art: something that to some degree we haven't quite seen before, that is, the sight of a unique individual exploring his or her uniqueness to the hilt.

At the moment two New York galleries reveal this very act, in solo shows of renegade painters known for being satisfyingly obstreperous visually, badly behaved in terms of subject matter and completely devoid of do-gooder ideology.

I refer to the uproariously erotic (if predominantly heterosexual) display of William N. Copley's "X-Rated" paintings from 1973-74 at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea, and the take-no-prisoners, fluorescent-hued canvases of Peter Saul, seen in a brisk 50-year survey at Haunch of Venison in Midtown.

Despite many significant, mutually illuminating differences, the Copley and Saul exhibitions belong together. They don't exactly finish each other's sentences, but they exude the same free-wheeling, devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. What's more, a shared penchant for comic-based figuration qualify Copley (1919-96) and Mr. Saul, who was born in 1934, as painters that Pop Art forgot. (Copley's painting in particular — which he usually signed CPLY — are proto-Pop, as Pop knew. The show's excellent catalog quotes Roy Lichtenstein: "Cply cmpltly cptvts me.")

Along with Robert Colescott, Copley and Saul can also be described as important points of origin of a lively political incorrectness that has since flourished under artists as diverse as Sue Williams, Kara Walker, Robert Melee and Carroll Dunham.

A congenitally wry and ribald man who was privately wealthy and married six times, Copley was briefly a dealer of Surrealist art (in 1946 in Los Angeles), then a respected collector of it and a philanthropist of the visual arts. (Through his Cassandra Foundation, Copley made one of 20th-century art's great gifts: Duchamp's "Étant Donnée" to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) And in the late 1940s Copley also took up painting, spending most of the 1950s and '60s in Paris, evolving a style that was more irreverent School of Paris than Surrealist, contaminated as it was by American popular culture and folk art.

The 23 canvases at Kasmin reconstitute to a large degree "CPLY: X-Rated," a show that Copley had at the New York Cultural Center in 1974, at the height of the women's movement. That show of lusty, curvaceous females and entwined couples splayed against brightly patterned bedspreads, upholstery and wallpaper, seems to have been poorly received, when it was noticed at all. (Almost nothing sold; all of the paintings here are still in the Copley estate. He gave one to the Whitney, which was last exhibited in 1995.)

Today, at a moment when the figure and high color are attracting artists in all mediums, these works seem extremely lively and up to date. They confirm the obvious, which was that Copley loved women, sex and painting, and that he was alert to most of the currents of modernism, which he used as he saw fit.

The contorted and entwined figures suggest a keen familiarity with Matisse's early, wonderfully clunky bronze nude sculptures. The rigorous balancing of the erotic and the decorative — the carryings-on of the tangled bodies constantly offset by various tartans, checks, stripes and floral prints in saturated colors — could be said to revel in Clement Greenberg's vaunted principle of pictorial flatness, if only as a way of further pressing flesh to flesh.

The paintings have wonderful details, whether the rather colorful tattoo of a fly on the buttock of a woman on all fours on a brass bed with lavender sheets in "Fly Tattoo Lady," or such recurring devices as curved, zigzag lines that

denote eyes squeezed shut with pleasure and off-hand impastos and mixes of color that seem reserved mostly for skin tones.

Over all these paintings don't shock, but their frankness is definitely energizing and oddly wise. Despite the cartoonish, abstracting tendencies that give them such visual juice, they also convey the comforting imperfections, desires and pleasures of real people, in fact consenting adults. And they put the fun back in sex — offering a useful antidote to the overzealous artifice of Jeff Koons's sex paintings at Luxembourg & Dayan uptown.

NEW YORK

MAGAZINE

JERRY SALTZ

DECEMBER 6, 2010

William N. Copley



In “X-Rated,” William N. Copley’s randy paintings show us every kind of sex: spankings, ladies in lace stockings throwing seductive glances, and fun-loving couples canoodling. It’s flat-out erotic fun, but it’s also really good painting. Copley combines the delicacies of Fragonard and Boucher, pattern and decoration, bawdy tattoo parlors, bodice-rippers, circus posters, porn, and pulp fiction to arrive at a full, happy, and relaxed rendition of one of the best things in life. — **Jerry Saltz**

THE NEW YORKER

William Copley

Galleries - Chelsea

NOVEMBER 2010

The rousingly randy sex scenes in this show, titled "X-RTD," will make you happy. Copley, (1919-1996), who dubbed himself "CPLY," is underrated. The artist's reputation as a cosmopolitan playboy, inspired by the Parisian Surrealists, occludes his talent. So does a tendency of reproductions to make his pictures seem merely like overqualified cartoons. Copley had grippingly sensuous ways with paint and color, and with gesture and pattern, which do more than amplify his libertine temerity. Not just about sex, the work is like sex itself by other means, in a spirit amiable, funny, and downright heartwarming. Through Dec. 11.

William N. Copley, “X-Rated”

Copley’s porny Pop Art resurfaces.

PAUL LASTER

DECEMBER 3, 2010



Photograph: Paul Kasmin Gallery

Artist, collector, patron of modern art, William N. Copley (1919--1996) was born in New York City, where he was orphaned as a baby. Adopted by a utilities magnate from Illinois, Copley was raised in Southern California in wealthy circumstances, attending Andover and Yale before serving in the army during WWII. He became a reporter, but discovered art when he was introduced to Surrealism by his brother-in-law, an animator at Disney. Copley opened a gallery in Beverly Hills, befriended Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, and was soon showing them, along with Max Ernst and Ren Magritte, among others.

Encouraged by Ray to try his own hand at painting, Copley (who signed his work CPLY) taught himself, developing a satirical style that drew upon cartoons, Matisse, and the erotic, offbeat content of Dada and Surrealism. His most overtly sexual works are the “X-Rated” paintings, which were first shown at the Huntington Hartford Museum in 1974 and are now on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery. These 23 canvases use hard-core porn as the point of departure for

hilarious romps through the bedroom. Adding a reference to Pop Art, a movement that Copley is considered a precursor to, the paintings are titled after films.



Photograph: Kasmin Gallery

A redhead splays her body on a checkered bedspread in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; a long-haired dude mounts a temptress in a tricolored corner in *Destry Rides Again*; and a tattooed hunk suckles a blond's nipple in a floral-wallpapered room in *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*.

Expressively rendered (and resolutely heterosexual), Copley's paintings possess the same manic energy as the '70s sexual revolution. Exuberantly explicit, they capture their subjects with cunning, outsidersy charm.

The New York Times

‘An Artist Who Can Make A Corkscrew His Own’

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JANUARY 24, 1971

That William Copley's new show at the Iolas Gallery is his second in nine months indicates the continuing energy and popularity of this curious American surrealist who signs his colorful, cartoony paintings "CPLY." Now 52, Copley was born in New York and began painting in 1946 in California, where he befriended and was influenced by the distinguished colony of refugee artists that included Max Ernst and Man Ray. Since then he has divided his time between New York and Paris, meanwhile staying remarkably faithful to his original inspiration, which might be said to owe equal fealties to the vivid decorative effects of French painters including Matisse and Raoul Duly, to the obsessive iconography of Magic Realists like Magritte, and to the bumptious charm of the comic strip. And, while scarcely "major," his work remains a singular and intriguing sidelight to American art of the last 25 years.

The content of Copley's subject-fantasies is typically sexual, but his execution of them is erotic only in its abandon. He has, as he once wrote with jocular self-deprecation, "a dirty mind" which he indulges with a childlike insouciance only slightly off-set by grown up irony. A mood almost of wistfulness pervades his pictures, which have usually been populated by a race of naked, faceless pink cuties and a race of equally anonymous bowler-hatter and neatly besuited little men, all these balloonish personages displaying or disporting themselves in frequently ambiguous but rarely ominous situations. Even when engaged in what appear to be acts of violence, they have obviously lacked sufficient reality to suffer anything more serious than a hurt feeling. Which is not to say that their antics are meaningless. If his tableaux dramatizing wishes and dreams are usually tender and humorous, it is perhaps only because Copley is a man who cherishes and enjoys his fantasy-life, in all its aspects, very much.

The 20 canvases in Copley's new show differ from his past work in their virtual elimination of the familiar cast of characters, which insinuates itself here and there only as a besuited torso or an uninhabited article of clothing. Common objects comprise the predominant subject matter, rendered with characteristically whimsical simplicity against backdrops brightly checkered or striped. Sometimes an object by itself communicates an air of comic menace—a straight razor, a corkscrew, a gun—or seems possessed of an odd sexiness—a clarinet, a bicycle, even a shoe. But the richest subliminal vibrations emanate from juxtapositions of objects, which bring to mind the famous proto surrealist opinion of the Comte de Lautréamont that beauty is "the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Thus the discovery of a pink plow on a bed or the alignment of a torso with a closed book, implying that in the algebra of dreams anything can stand for anything else.

There is nothing of Pop art in Copley, though the cartoon manner and now the mundane subject matter might suggest otherwise, for in his pictures both manner and subject matter sustain themselves as the expressions and icons of a self-supplied and utterly self-involved sensibility. But neither does he seem a doctrinaire surrealist. There is something irrepressible and spontaneous about his paintings. Part of it an infectious pleasure in the sheer act of deploying line and color, which bears no trace of the European cult of the unconscious, the sort of sentimental reverence for the irrational to be found in even such “witty” surrealists as Magritte and Ernst. This quality — ostensibly naive, rather hermetic— seems in fact a common characteristic of several artists who have, in their own ways, engendered very American offshoots of Surrealism.

One thinks in particular of Joseph Cornell, whose exquisite assemblages emit an ethereal metaphysical poetry, and Richard Lindner, whose formidable, fetishistic Times Square pimps and whores seem a darker version of Copley's universe. It is interesting to compare these three artists if only to observe how little they actually resemble each other, let alone seem to share a common “movement.” All have been not very helpfully credited with carrying on Surrealism and with “anticipating” certain aspects of Pop art, but all in fact occupy isolated positions in recent art history, almost as distinct from each other as from the passing parade of stylistic bandwagons. They seem finally to be hothouse gardeners, producing from delicate European seedlings, in the ambience of their own idiosyncrasies, exotic native blooms.

If, as the poet and art critic Gerrit Henry has suggested, American culture is so chronically and profoundly deracinated that “an American Surrealism is no Surrealism at all,” then the elusiveness of artists like Copley, Cornell and Lindner might be understood as a protective response to local conditions. Indeed, European Surrealism, conceived 50 years ago as a serious assault in the name of the unconscious on bourgeois notions of order and rationality, never really stood a chance on these shores, where “rationality” means “efficiency” and the efficiently manufactured mass delusions of advertising and the movies beguile even the solidest citizens. (Pop art, which treats the media and images of popular fantasy with esthetic detachment, has by the same token proven essentially alien to European sensibilities whose increasing “Americanization” has not yet advanced to the stage of shell-shock. Europe retains a functioning memory.)

Thus the thrust of works by American surrealists is necessarily inward rather than outward, away from the vulgar phantasmagoria of the culture at large and toward the relative sanity and refinement of private tics and yearnings. In effect, artists like Copley have reduced the original radical tendency of Surrealism to an essentially conservative and quietist permutation. Which is not to denigrate Copley, but perhaps finally to point up his special value—what might be called the “current relevance” of a nostalgia for a time when a person's inner life was presumed to be mysterious and unique. For those of us who often feel uncomfortable in our man-made world, it is still consoling to meet an artist who can make a screw his own.