

John Coplans: *La Vie des Formes*

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By Joe Fyfe



John Coplans, *Hands spread on knees*, 1985. Gelatin Silver Print. © The John Coplans Trust.

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In one of the more instructive passages in *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno observes that well-made texts are like spider's webs, "Metaphors flitting hastily through them become their nourishing prey": When things begin to click with your subject, everything of use that gets near it gets stuck in it. One afternoon, reading *The Waterfall* by the English writer Margaret Drabble she described a real place in England called the Gordale Scar, a roofless cave with an interior waterfall, "a lovely organic balance of shapes and curves, a wildness contained within a bodily limit." I thought of my ongoing research project on John Coplans (1920–2003). His life and work was very much *a wildness contained within a bodily limit*.



John Coplans, *Upside down No. 1*, 1992. Gelatin Silver Print. © The John Coplans Trust.

Coplans was a magnificently perverse character and a major force in the art world of the later decades of the past century in every department of it: criticism, curation, promotion, publishing, mentorship. In his later life, he returned to his artistic practice, exhibiting self-portrait photographs of his aging naked body to estimable and notorious success. His posthumous career has been respectable, with, at the very least, yearly solo gallery exhibitions in cities including Madrid, Stockholm, Zurich, Bologna, Berlin, Nice, Paris, and Geneva, and he has had institutional solo exhibitions in museums in Essen, Reykjavik, and Amsterdam, among assorted group shows.

Last October, a retrospective of Coplans's photographic work opened at the Fondation Cartier-Bresson in Paris. Titled *La Vie des Formes* (The Life of Forms), a borrowing of the title of the canonical Henri Focillon book, it was organized by Jean-François Chevrier and Élia Pijollet. Chevrier, the art historian and critic, has, since the 1980s, done some of the most perceptive writing on the changed status of the photograph within the history of art as well as being Coplans's most active advocate, one of the reasons that this artist's photographs have been and continue to be more widely known and admired in Europe than in the States.

The exhibition was accompanied by John Coplans—*Un corps*, a paperbound, paperback-sized catalog with an indispensable sixty-eight page essay that detailed both Coplans's intellectual history and Chevrier's long friendship with him. Eleven essays by Coplans on topics ranging from Robert Smithson (a close friend of Coplans who he tremendously admired) to Brâncuși photographs, and Philip Guston, among others, were included. Additionally, there were two artist statements, translated into French for the first time, by Pijollet and Jean-François Allain.

At the time that I saw the exhibition, I had mostly dug into Coplans's early years: his family history, back to the shtetl in Lithuania where his grandfather was from, his illustrious aunts and uncles, many who were in the medical field and served in the British Army in the Boer War, in the First World War and onward, his admiration and close relationship with his polymath father, what it was like to fight on the rugged grasslands of Ethiopia and in the fetid jungles of Burma against the fierce Japanese infantry, what it was like to be an artist in London in the fifties, etc.

I knew much more about his life in relation to the work, by then having interviewed at least fifty people who had known Coplans from many different times in his life. Chevrier and Pijollet focused on the work and their own memories of him—Chevrier knew him well since the 1980s—and how it intersected with the history of photography. I had a Zoom meeting with Chevrier and Pijollet a few months previous, and incidentally, I was already a great admirer of Chevrier before I had any idea he had been involved with Coplans and his work. As a part of Mick Finch's Tableau Project, which took place among a consortium of London Art Schools, Chevrier gave a series of lectures and seminars on the intersection of painting and the photograph and the picture form that I had watched (it's on YouTube now) at least thirty times.

The exhibition contextualizes the work as photography, but one must ultimately see it as a dry run for something in a larger institution. Much of Coplans's work depended on the large exhibition space. The larger photographs transpose painting and sculpture *into* the photograph. The variegated surfaces of Coplans aging flesh, as described in the photographs, provide a frontality akin to a painting. He started as a painter, and one can look at his skin as the skin of the painting, removed and stretched like a pelt in the picture. These large works, when in a suitable exhibition space, complete this transformation.

My take on Coplans at this point is as an important American artist whose work was primarily in photography. It can be understood in fragments, which, to be contradictory, in some ways its limited size is perfect in that regard. The previous criticism, life experience, the brochures he designed for other artists, add to it. Perhaps the best argument for this work is that it is like one of Adorno's well-wrought texts—confronting Coplans's photographs and ephemera, all kinds of notions come winging towards them.

There were already two problematic aspects of Coplans's photographs. Both his own ideas about them, both connected, having to do with the idea of universality which is why he says he always excluded his head, so he could be Everyman, also why he printed some of them so darkly, as to pigment the skin, the intent to encompass a larger racial context.

He stated that his work gives the lie to classical notions of beauty, but there is also the bookend of modernism itself, a further demonstration that beauty itself is a mechanism. Seeing his work in Paris, I was reminded of Atget, of his photographing a disappearing Paris, of Coplans photographing his disappearing body.

One image I had no previous knowledge of, *Hand, Two Panels, Vertical* (1988), a little bigger than 6 by 4 feet. It is what it describes: a vertical diptych of the outside of a hand, fingers pointing down. In the upper frame the broad area between knuckle and wrist takes up the whole frame. My research of the Burmese front in World War II—where Coplans fought—indicated that it was the most strenuous jungle fighting, with the most serious parallel dangers of disease. There was no front line in Burma. One was forced up close against a harsh, tangled landscape. There were no horizons or vantage points, as there is not in this image.

The picture was an example of the body as a cosmogony: the crackled skin, the hair on the back of his hand, his fingers were fissures of lost identities, replicating to my mind a memory of having a hostile landscape forced on you. One description of the misery of that front was that "Burma during the war was like grass trampled by fighting elephants." This oversized image that cannot help but be seen at close range, the crags of wrinkling skin and the hair sweeping sparingly across it seemed to compress elephant skin and waving grassland into a single experience.



John Coplans, Hand, Two Panels, Vertical, 1988. Gelatin Silver Print. © The John Coplans Trust

It is also reminiscent of his *Art In America* feature on the work of Carleton Watkins, the nineteenth century landscape photographer. In this essay, Coplans describes one of Watkins's photographs as a "dreamscape of total possibility." Written in 1978, he seemed to find a specifically neutral visuality in certain photographic skills and attitudes that opened the picture space continuously, as he had previously discovered in some of the work of James Turrell and Larry Bell, and earlier in the hard-edged paintings of John McLaughlin, where mystery displaces a geometric certainty. He was not immune to a kind of mystic appreciation. In light of this, it should also be noted—as the Chevrier essay does not—that Coplans took a lot of drugs. He developed an attachment to Ecstasy as a vehicle for a conscious exploration of past memories, his family, and also an idea about being able to time travel through his DNA to the beginnings of the human species.

The same photograph's looming, shadowy vertical mass also reprised my reading of Coplans's fascination with Andy Warhol's film, *Empire*. Coplans once described its effect as "the world was no longer rotating, had no past and no future, only a never-ending present taken to a hypnotizing extreme." In the catalog essay Chevrier comments on Coplans's recognition of the Campbell Soup series that "he realized that Warhol had paradoxically invented a form by eliminating all traces of invention." Many years later, Coplans discovered something similarly simple in framing the appearance of his aging hairy body, in one shot or in a shaky continuum.

There were also a number of the upside down series, such as *Upside Down No. 1* (1992), three vertically stacked slightly horizontal rectangles, his chest taking up the lower, his knee, thigh and belly the middle, and his hand knee and calf the upper, where some of the light background appears. The body moves through it but the frames slightly disrupt the continuity of its lines. I have thought of this group as being influenced by Robert Smithson's nonsites, those metal bins where the sculptor deposited rocks or sand that he collected from New Jersey landscapes or elsewhere, that he saw his body in these later works as entropic material dumped into the bins of the photographs framing function.

Chevrier, who joined me, along with Pijollet, to look at the exhibition, differentiated between artists that came to photography to make art, such as Cindy Sherman, and artists who came to photography to make photographs, like Coplans. To overgeneralize, the difference between a photograph and an image is that a photograph is a picture you can keep returning to, like a traditional painting, it reveals itself over time, while an image relies on the novelty of its impact. Though there was and is a provocative element in the works. Coplans, according to Chevrier, "was clear on the opposition of picture and image," and again writing about Watkins, Coplans observed the "details that are articulate in themselves."

An incredible aggrandizement of the self, but oddly humble and not a little dark. Coplans was a caustic flaneur of his own body. One quote panel, high on a wall, stated, "So I ramble over myself." And ramble he did.

Contributor

Joe Fyfe

Joe Fyfe is a painter and a writer who lives and works in New York. He was recently awarded the Rabkin Prize. He has shown internationally since 1980. Recent solo exhibitions include Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York, White Columns, New York; Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne; and Ceysson and Benetiere, Luxembourg, Paris, Lyon, Ste. Etienne. Fyfe was awarded a Fulbright in journalism in 2006, spending six months in Vietnam and Cambodia. In 2010, he curated the widely recognized "Le Tableau" at Cheim & Read, New York. Fyfe has written reviews, interviews and essays for Artforum, Art in America, Arts AsiaPacific, Artnet.com, Hyperallergic, Modern Matter, Kilimanjaro and BOMB as well as numerous catalog essays. He is currently working on a biography of the artist John Coplans.