

William N. Copley is co-organized by the Menil Collection and Fondazione Prada, Milan.

The Terra Foundation for American Art is the international tour sponsor.

In Houston, the exhibition is curated by Toby Kamps, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Menil Collection, and Germano Celant, Artistic Director of Fondazione Prada, and is generously supported by Skadden, Arps; The Brown Foundation, Inc. / Nancy and Mark Abendshein; Eddie and Chinhui Allen; Suzanne Deal Booth; Adelaide de Menil Carpenter; John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Marilyn Oshman; Susanne and William E. Pritchard III; and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Panel Discussion

The World According to CPLY

Friday, February 19, 7:00 p.m.

Curators Toby Kamps and Germano Celant are joined by exhibition catalogue contributors Alison M. Gingeras and Jonathan Griffin in a discussion of Copley's life and work.

Conversation

Copley, Comics, and Alternative Figures in American Art

Monday, February 29, 7:00 p.m.

Curator Toby Kamps, Houston-based artist Trenton Doyle Hancock, and Dan Nadel, founder of the books and objects publishing company PictureBox, explore a variety of eccentric figures in American art.

All public programs are free and open to the public. Menil Members enjoy additional events, including a noontime gallery talk with exhibition curator Toby Kamps on Friday, March 11. Visit the museum or menil.org for more information.

RELATED PUBLICATION

William N. Copley

Edited by Germano Celant, with contributions by Gwen L. Allen, Paul B. Franklin, Alison M. Gingeras, Jonathan Griffin, and Toby Kamps

384 pages, 590 illus.

Available at the Menil Collection Bookstore

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Front: *American Girdle*, 1965. Oil and girdle on canvas, 32 x 26 inches (81.3 x 66 cm).

Rosalind and Melvin Jacobs Collection, New York. Photo: Josh Lefsky

THE MENIL COLLECTION

1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 menil.org

William N. COPLEY

The World According to CPLY

THE MENIL COLLECTION February 19 – July 24, 2016



The Bride and the Groom Stripped Bare by Each Other, Even, 1963. Oil on three canvases, overall 30% x 59% inches (78.5 x 151.5 cm). Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau, Switzerland/The Andreas Züst Collection. Photo: David Aebi, Bern

[Copley] is absolutely sincere in his pursuit of joy and of liberty, in his love of life and his refusal of cliché. He is the wisest of us all, carefully hiding his sophistication under the guise of a simple man.

—Man Ray

Imagine if everybody knew what they were doing. That would be terrible.

—William N. Copley

American artist William Nelson Copley (1919–1996) was both an outsider and an insider. Known by his nom de plume CPLY, he was a self-taught satirist and storyteller whose madcap, ribald narrative paintings and drawings bucked prevailing art trends. He also was a collector and patron of some of the most important artists of the twentieth century, in particular European Surrealists and American Pop artists.

Adopted in 1921 by wealthy Chicago and San Diego newspaper magnates Ira C. and Edith Copley, the left-leaning artist was the black sheep of his politically conservative family. He left Yale to fight in North Africa and Italy during World War II and returned to a job writing for his family's newspapers. Introduced to Surrealism and painting by his brother-in-law John Ployardt, an artist working at Walt Disney Studios, Copley made art his means for living life to the fullest. "I needed something to set me on fire—the war was a shock," he recounted. "I had just finished reading James Joyce

and to my mind he was the most revolutionary writer in terms of image and expression. I started to paint in the hopes that sharpening my visual perception might sharpen my literary perception."¹

Together Copley and Ployardt sought out the most important international Surrealist artists then living in the United States, including Man Ray and Max Ernst, as well as Marcel Duchamp. These meetings led to many other introductions and to deep friendships that changed Copley's life. "Surrealism," he wrote, "made everything understandable: my genteel family, the war, and why I attended the Yale Prom without my shoes. It looked like something I might succeed at."² The movement's interest in the workings of the unconscious sparked his investigations of what would become his ongoing themes: humor, the battle of the sexes, and moral hypocrisy.

In 1948, Copley and Ployardt opened the Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills, the first gallery dedicated to Surrealism on the West Coast. During its six months of operation, it showed works by René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Matta, and Joseph Cornell as well as Ernst and Man Ray. Although it was a commercial failure, the gallery became the primary source of Copley's personal collection. Using his family fortune to make good on his promises to artists of guaranteed ten-percent sales from each exhibition, he quickly amassed one of the most important holdings of Surrealist art in the world. Early on, dealer Alexander Iolas introduced Copley to John and Dominique de Menil, who shared his passion for Surrealism and eventually purchased



Lost Innocence, 1964. Acrylic on canvas, 37 x 45 inches (94 x 114.3 cm). Collection of Ann Snider, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White, © Joshua White/JWpictures.com

eleven important works from his collection, many of which are on display in the Menil Collection's nearby Surrealism galleries. The couple quickly became friends with, and patrons of, the artist as well, buying a number of his own paintings and drawings. Museum founding director Walter Hopps, who visited Copley's gallery as a teenager, also became a lifelong friend.

In 1951, as the first of his six marriages was failing, Copley left his wife and two small children and moved to Paris in order to paint full-time. During his eleven-year residence there, he honed his craft and hosted artists and friends at Longpont, his stately house. Drawing on Surrealism, Mexican folk art, and American cartoon imagery for inspiration, his early work reflects his relentless experiments with line, color, and pattern as well as with modernist ideas concerning simultaneity of time and action. Full of political and Freudian symbolism and images of nudes, cars, and characters from the doggerel poetry of writers like Robert W. Service, Copley's paintings express his playful skepticism toward all cultural shibboleths and his irreverent desire to expose civilization's primal drives. In France, inspired by the pictorial word-and-image games and bowler-hatted persona of Magritte, he invented a recurring, vaguely autobiographical painted character described by artist and writer Anne Doran as a "nattily dressed and deeply ridiculous Everyman in mad pursuit of liberty, poetry, and sex." Magritte's "visual puns" were models for Copley, who said, "My life is a quest for the ridiculous image."³

Copley returned to the United States in 1962, and settled in New York. Although his work's loose, hand-painted style and autobiographical themes made it distinct from American Pop, he was viewed as a bridge figure between that movement and European Surrealism. His works from the 1960s

range from intricate, horror-vacui compositions crowded with multiple plot-lines and unconventional materials; to simplified images, patterns, and text elements riffing on the innovations of the Pop, Minimalist, and Conceptual artists with whom Copley mingled; to singular innovations in line and form that reduce the human body to open and closed linear shapes.

In addition to his own art activities, Copley and his second wife, Noma Rathner, established a foundation that awarded grants to artists and musicians, published scholarly monographs on visual artists, and purchased his friend and mentor Marcel Duchamp's famous last work *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...* (*Étant donnés: 1° La chute d'eau, 2° Le gaz d'éclairage...*), 1946–66, for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1968, with artist Dimitri Petrov, Copley established the Letter Edged in Black Press, which published the groundbreaking S.M.S. (Shit Must Stop) portfolios of multiples and editioned artworks by many of the most famous artists of the time. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were also a means to subvert the traditional gallery system and make art more accessible.

In the early 1970s Copley began the Nouns series: images of everyday objects set against brightly colored, patterned backgrounds. Although one work from this series, *Electric Chair*, 1970, acknowledges his friend Andy Warhol's famous silkscreens of the execution chamber at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (as well as Vincent van Gogh's 1888 painting of an empty chair), Copley's subject matter in general, much of which is drawn from old Sears Roebuck catalogues, explores Americana—in particular a vanishing vaudevillian sensibility. The Nouns series was followed by the



Rain, 1973. Acrylic on linen, 38¼ x 51½ inches (97.2 x 130.8 cm). Olbricht Collection. Image courtesy of the William N. Copley Estate, New York



Electric Chair, 1970. Also known as *Do It Yourself (Electric Chair—Hommage to Andy Warhol)*. Acrylic on canvas, 51¼ x 38¼ inches (130 x 97 cm). Birgit and Ulf Bischoff Collection, Berlin, on long-term loan to MAMCO, Geneva

X-Rated paintings, which were based on pages from pornographic magazines. Despite the strong sexual content of these works, Copley insisted that the Nouns were more arousing. The X-Rated images, he stated, "are essentially still-lives: they are flowers."⁴ In the same decade, Copley also made a series of schematic, figurative canvases (such as *Nuit Puerto Ricain*, 1978) based on *The Spanish Night (La nuit espagnole)*, a 1922 work by Francis Picabia in his collection. Showcasing a wide range of Copley's styles, the paintings pay homage to his Surrealist idol, whom he regarded as a source of inexhaustible energy and fearless creativity.

Copley worked continuously until his death in 1996. He developed new story cycles and painting styles, poked fun at ideas of patriotism, and realized a major installation and body of work dedicated to the "unknown whore," a figure that he believed society both needs and vilifies. Manifesting a baroque sensibility during a period dominated by smoothly reductive aesthetic modes and employing shamelessly puerile sexual imagery during an era marked by the rise of feminism, Copley's works use his trademark homespun realism to celebrate his lifelong preoccupations. "What other subjects are there besides sex?" he once said. "Painting is just the next best thing."⁵ In one of many kind, advice-filled letters he sent to artist Anne Doran, which he concluded with the phrase "Thus is the World According to CPLY," Copley wrote that "the worst crime was to be humorless, and not living fully was a close runner-up."

This exhibition, the first comprehensive look at Copley's career in the United States, aims to introduce international audiences to the carnivalesque, colorful vision of this singular "artist's artist." It will travel in expanded form to the new Fondazione Prada in Milan in the fall of 2016.

—Toby Kamps

NOTES

1. Sam Hunter, "CPLY an interview by Sam Hunter," in *X-Rated* (New York: New York Cultural Center, 1974), n.p.
2. William N. Copley, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dealer," in *CPLY: Reflections on a Past Life* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1979), 5. Copley wrote this essay for the catalogue of the 1977 exhibition *Paris–New York* at the Centre Georges Pompidou, where it was published in French translation.
3. Alan Jones, "A Conversation with William Copley," in *CPLY: William N. Copley* (New York: David Nolan Gallery, 1991), 9.
4. Hunter, "CPLY an interview," n.p.
5. Jones, "A Conversation with William Copley," 10.



Nuit Puerto Ricain, 1978. Acrylic and leather on canvas, 66¼ x 55½ inches (168 x 140 cm). Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Germany