Body Parts—A Self-Portrait by John Coplans

October 7–December 31, 2004

Organized in collaboration with the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery

It was around this time that my sight deteriorated so much that I had difficulty seeing. I could not see the features of anyone, even when near to me, nor could I read. My eyesight became out-of-focus and the day became dark, somewhat like dusk, but darker. For some time, the sight in my left eye had seriously deteriorated because of macular degeneration, an affliction which attacks the center of the retina, destroying the ability of the eye to see. Then the same thing happened to my right eye, and I seemed to be in serious trouble; it looked as if I couldn’t continue to work. Only with the aid of a magnifying machine could I see fairly distinctly flat images the size of a postcard.

I decided to continue the series I had been working on.

I use Polaroid positive/negative 4x5-inch black-and-white film. It develops in less than a minute and delivers a finished print, as well as a fine negative. Since I could not see, the question arises as to how I could have taken these photographs. In fact, I have not taken any of my images since I began making the various "Self-Portrait" photographs in 1984. I have always used an assistant who does the actual shooting. Normally, I preview my pose with a video camera connected to a television set. But once my eyesight had severely diminished, this system became useless and I had to find another method.

The solution was to recognize the fact that we don’t actually see an image with our eyes; instead we perceive it with our minds. If you look, for example, at a rectilinear tabletop, you do not see the actual rectangle; the four ninety-degree corners are not apparent to the eye. What you see is a trapezoid. Thus, the mind must deduce that the tabletop is rectilinear. It was necessary for me to go through a similar process to make these new photographs, but reversed. I had to imagine the image in advance and then find the pose. In the past when I could see, my assistant would have to take many photographs to match the image on the video, but when I realized that it was more a matter of perception than of sight, I could easily previsualize an image and make a drawing that my assistant could match on film.

Public Programs

Lecture by Peter Plagens, Bartos Theatre, MIT, E15
Tuesday, October 26 at 6:30PM
Peter Plagens, Newsweek art critic and painter

Special Gallery Tours, LVAC Galleries
Friday, October 29 at 6PM
Deborah Martin Kao, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography at the Harvard University Art Museums
Friday, November 12 at 6PM
Howard Yezerski, Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston

Gallery Talks, LVAC Galleries
Wednesday, November 10 at 12PM and Friday, December 17 at 6PM
Bill Arning, Curator

Gallery Hours:
Tuesdays–Thursdays: 12–6PM; Fridays: 12–8PM; Saturdays and Sundays: 12–6PM
Closed Mondays; November 25; December 24 and 25; Closing at 4PM on December 31

Directions:
The List Visual Arts Center is located in the Wiesner Building, 20 Ames St., at the eastern edge of the MIT campus. It is in close proximity to Kendall Square, Memorial Drive, and the Longfellow Bridge.

By T, take the red line to the Kendall/MIT stop, follow Main St. west to Ames St., turn left, and walk one block to the crosswalk. The List Visual Arts Center, housed in a building identifiable by its white gridded exterior, will be on your left. Signage is on the building.

By car, coming across the Longfellow Bridge or from Memorial Drive, follow signs for Kendall Square. Limited metered parking is available on Ames Street. A parking garage is located at the Cambridge Center complex. Visitors can park in the garage at the Cambridge Center complex and walk across the street to the List Visual Arts Center. The garage is open during business hours and on campus after business hours and on weekends.

Information:
617.253.4680 or http://web.mit.edu/lvac/

All exhibitions at the List Visual Arts Center are free and open to the public. Wheelchair accessible. Accommodations are provided by request. Please call Hiroko Kikuchi at 617.452.3586 for inquiries.
After the War, Coplans attended art schools in London, but he soon quit, generalizing that he was being trained as an art teacher not an artist. He became a building contractor, and made abstract pastel drawings and watercolors. He also began to attend the discussions that Lawrence Alloway organized as London's Institute of Contemporary Art, where he was exhibiting at the ICA and other London galleries on a regular basis.

Impressed by The New American Painting, an exhibition at The Tate Gallery, Coplans decided to move to the United States in 1960. He sailed on a large ship to Boston, where he traded some paintings for a second-hand car. After visiting New York, he headed to the University of California at Berkeley, where he attended a teaching job.

In 1962, Coplans and John Lewis, a print salesman, decided to start a new magazine, which they called Aperture (which is today one of the most influential art journals in publication). The idea was that it would cover California art, which was being ignored by the New York art world. A year later, after a solo show at the M.F. Young Museum in San Francisco, Coplans moved to Los Angeles. He organized a survey exhibition of American Pop Art for the Oakland Museum, and soon became the West Coast reviewer for Aperture, Art International, Art in America, and Studio International. At that point, he decided to stop painting in concentrate on his writing and curatorial efforts.

In 1967, he became curator, then director, at the Pasadena Art Museum. There he organized numerous important exhibitions including Serious Humor and the first museum exhibitions of such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg, Judy Chicago, and James Rosenquist. He also organized a major traveling exhibition of works by Andy Warhol, and an important Donald Judd sculpture exhibition. In 1979, Coplans moved to New York to replace Phil Leider as editor of Aperture. There he renewed his interest in photography and began to collect the photographs of Carleton Watkins.

Coplans' keen intelligence, articulate command of the English language, and demanding standards all contributed to make him a forceful personality who cared more about art and truth than art world politics. In his obituary in The New York Times, Roberta Smith called John Coplans "a competitive man who worked to be natural, if at times charmingly tendentious.") In 1977, Coplans and Aperture published a companion volume: the following year, he organized an exhibition of the works of street photographer Weegee (Arthur Fellig) for the International Center for Photography in New York. In 1978, he became director of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where he founded another new magazine called Dialogue. He also began to experiment with making photographs of his own body during this Ohio period.

By 1989, he had returned to New York, where he exhibited a series of portraits of couples. By 1994, he had returned to the idea of the self-portrait, utilizing an assistant and a transfer process that developed as a positive and negative image, and allowed him to see his images immediately. About the source for the self-portraits, the artist has written: