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William N. Copley

Autoeroticism, 1984

6 – 20 June 2020

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William N. Copley
Autoeroticism, 1984
acrylic on canvas
122.2 x 182.9 cm.; 48 1/8 x 72 in.

Provenance
The Estate of William N. Copley

WILLIAM N. COPLEY

born 1919 in New York, USA

lived and worked in Los Angeles, USA;

Paris, France; and New York, USA

*“When I was growing up [...] you could get arrested at motels and hotels.
The only place you couldn’t get arrested was in a car.”¹*

– William N. Copley

William N. Copley, known as CPLY, is celebrated today for his unique contribution to post-war painting, providing a singular connection between European Surrealism and American Pop Art. With subjects ranging from everyday objects such as umbrellas, flags and cars, to universal morality tales, exploring themes of love, adultery and death, Copley gave form to his fantasies and fetishes through strong black outlines and a self-taught, figurative style. Rife with satire and scandal, the artist depicts scenes which challenge social norms whether pertaining to race, eroticism, gender or politics. Not only a painter, but a writer, gallerist, collector and publisher, his colourful, animated works abound with playful, baroque patterns, visual puns, and bawdy ballads.

Autoeroticism (1984), marks a return to Copley’s automobile works first explored between 1955 and 1957, examples of which are held in the collections of the Tate, LACMA and the Fondazione Prada amongst others. Revisiting this theme in the 1980s, the artist harks back to a bygone era through the depiction of classic cars, whilst pointing to the enduring legacy of the car in American popular culture. This work brings together the canonical faceless figures that appear in Copley’s early work—the enduring female nude, tiny figures (fig. 1) and the man in a bowler hat evoking his friend Magritte and the bourgeoisie they rejected—while also introducing new compositional techniques.

In the 1980s, Copley began creating works with a central Renaissance tondo, surrounded by raw canvas—serving as a window into the artist’s world. The characteristic bold dark lines and luminous flat colour planes recall stained glass windows, conveying stories to the masses. *Autoeroticism* presents not a static image, but a series of stories happening simultaneously: that of the couple, the policeman, the bystanders, the driver, and especially the voyeur in its many guises, a recurring theme in the artist’s oeuvre (fig. 2).



Figure 1
William N. Copley
Capella Sextina, 1961
oil on canvas
162 x 130 cm.; 63 3/4 x 51 1/8 in.



Figure 2
William N. Copley
The Voyeur, 1964
oil on canvas
99.1 x 55.9 cm.; 39 x 22 in.
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, gift of Joseph and Jory Shapiro

*"We are made for the car, and the world moves around us. I find I could say more with that image than almost anything I've tried."*²

Autoeroticism plays a game of optical illusions, multiplying the voyeurism of the depicted scene. A voluptuous nude woman and fully suited man embrace in the back of the car, their bodies trifurcate across the three sections of the work. Stripped down to an essential, fluid line and reduced to almost abstract shapes, the expressions of the faceless figures are conveyed through their intensely evocative body language. The car's peach coloured rounded forms and curved hood resemble that of the female body. Adding an additional layer of mischief and intrigue, the car is being chased by a policeman. We can assume that the two central figures are being driven and that the scene is depicted through the rear and sideview mirrors, recalling the physical mirrors which appear in Copley's work (fig. 3). Through these, we catch glimpses of other couples outside. All of the views are partial and mediated, frustrating the viewer. Placing us in the seat of the driver, the only figure absent from the work, Copley invites us to look into the rear-view mirror and participate in the voyeurism of the scene at play—echoing Manet's trick in *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882) (fig. 4).

In rebellion against his upbringing, Copley takes a humanist and populist approach to painting. As explained by Germano Celant, "his painting was a creation, deriving from his experiences, but also a surface in which everyone was reflected: looking in the mirror we know ourselves. And so the reflecting ensemble was presented as a discourse on the whole of humanity, obsessed by the same desires and the same drives"—be they for rebellion, fast cars or especially carnal pleasures.

A major touring retrospective of Copley's work, "William N. Copley: The World According to Copley" was held at The Menil Collection, Houston (2016) and Fondazione Prada, Milan (2016–2017). More recently, an exhibition of early painting "William N. Copley: The Coffin They Carry You Off In" was held at ICA Miami (2018–2019). William N. Copley's paintings are in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Tate, London; Whitney Museum of Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; mumok, Vienna; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum Ludwig, Cologne and Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia amongst others.



Figure 3
William N. Copley
Feel Like A Hundred Bucks, 1986
acrylic, charcoal and mirror on canvas
127.3 x 254.3 cm.; 50 1/8 x 100 1/8 in.



Figure 4
Edouard Manet
Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère, 1881–82
oil on canvas
96 x 130 cm.; 37 3/4 x 51 1/5 in.
The Courtauld Gallery, London





William N. Copley
Untitled, ca. 1950–55
 oil on canvas
 19 x 24 cm.; 7 1/2 x 9 2/5 in.
 Musée D'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Saint-Etienne



William N. Copley
Place de l'Opéra, 1956
 oil on canvas
 115.9 x 81 cm.; 45 5/8 x 31 7/8 in.
 Tate, London



William N. Copley
Temptation of Saint Ouen (Gaité Bienvenue), 1956
 oil on canvas
 129.54 x 161.93 cm.; 51 x 63 13/16 in.
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

Letter from William Copley to artist Anne Doran

March 2nd, 1984

Annie:

[...]

Going back to old conversations: yes we are a monogamous animal, but safely so only as long as it involves open-ended and mutual choice. Nature insists that we mate and that we have mates. But in the civilized world we must explore loneliness till we know ourselves like the back of our hand before we consider taking a mate. Marriage kills monogamy because it purports to be a life sentence. Proper mates must choose each other and renew the choice every morning. This has nothing to do with love. What's good for General Motors is good for America, if you remember this quotation. We must love and forgive ourselves.

This is brought on by way of congratulations.

Thinking in images is another sign of advancement toward freedom. It's already beyond thinking in words and morals. It's also what surrealism is all about. The metaphor soars above the simile. A successful metaphor provokes catharsis. Only our dreams are the truth.

[...]

As for me: Have confined myself to solitary. Somehow most necessary. Never done it properly before. Mostly thinking about my work and losing weight. I'm hoping that my parole will come out of my work. I'm tempted to call it the Egg and I. Oval formats, the automobile as an egg with its interior exposed. I don't understand the compulsion to speak through the car. The sexual implications are enormous. "Footprints on the dash- board upside down." "The Blue Chrysler."* The important thing is it has me fascinated.

Thus is the world according to CPLY.

Trying to overhaul my brain.

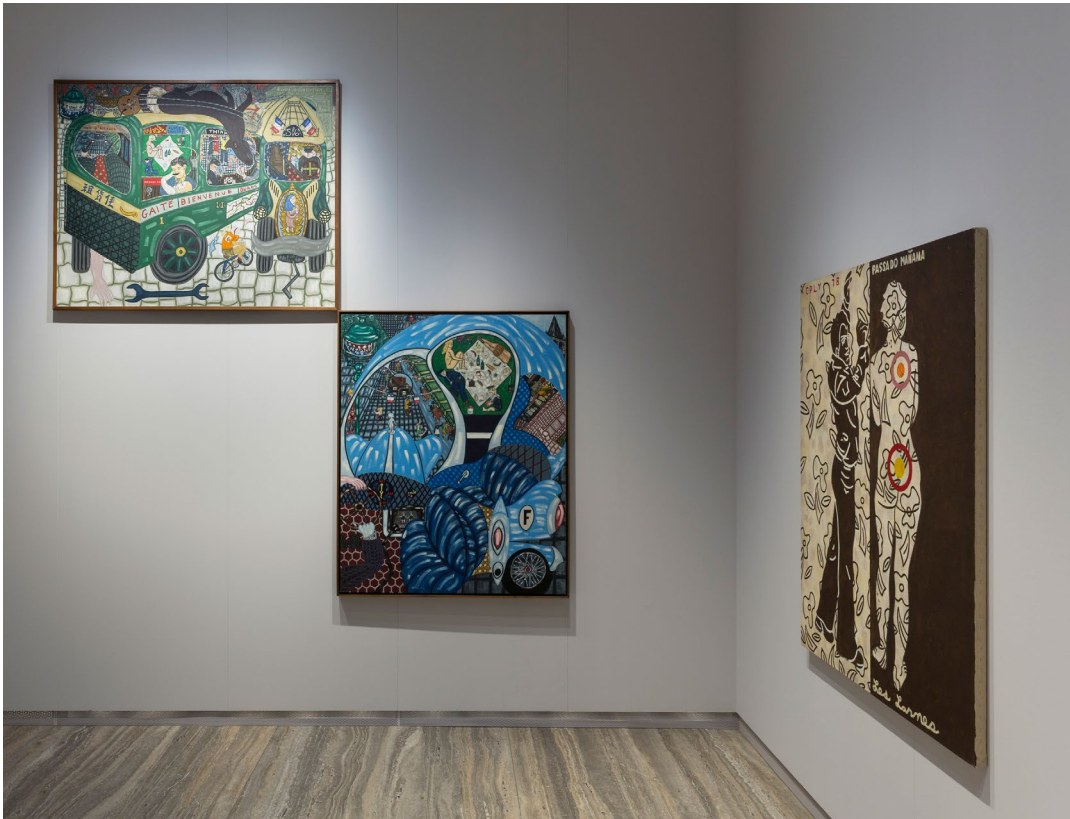
Miss you too.

* Ed Kienholz

Love,

CPLY



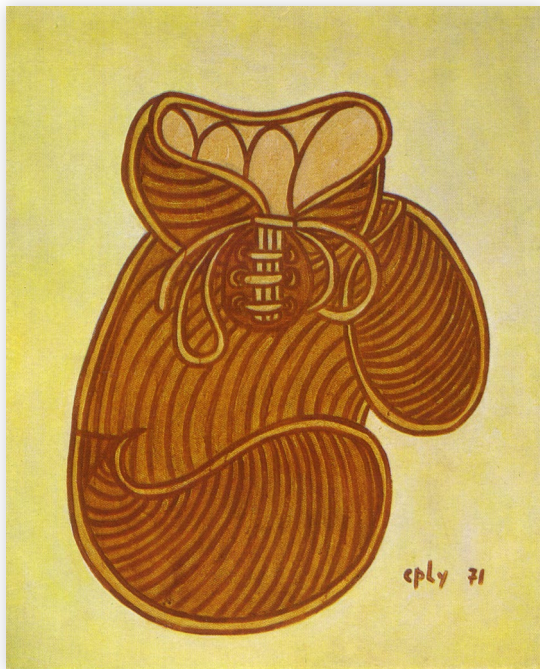


Installation view, *William N. Copley*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2016/2017



William N. Copley, Peggy Guggenheim, Renato Cardozo at the opening of William N. Copley's exhibition at Galleria del Cavallino, Venice, June 27, 1960

LOOK



WATCH



DISCOVER





Installation view: *William N. Copley*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2016/2017

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William N. Copley (1919–1996), known by the name CPLY, lived and worked in Los Angeles, USA; Paris, France; and New York, USA. Solo exhibitions of Copley's work were held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2018); Fondazione Prada, Milan and Menil Collection, Houston (2016/2017); Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden (2012); Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (2001); Forum of Contemporary Art, St. Louis; Herning Kunstmuseum, Herning; and Lieu d'Art Contemporain, Sigean (1999); Ulmer Museum, Ulm (1997); Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (1995); The New Museum, New York (1986); Künstlerwerkstatt Lothringerstrasse, Munich (1981); Kunsthalle Bern; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe (1980); New York Cultural Centre, New York (1974); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1966); and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1961), among others.

Copley's work is held in major public collections worldwide including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; mumok, Vienna; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Fondazione Prada, Milan; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Städel Museum, Frankfurt; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; Tate, London, among others.

Autoeroticism (detail), 1984

INQUIRE

Footnote 1, p. 5 and footnote 2, p. 6: Copley, William N. Interview by Phyllis Kind. *Andy Warhol's TV*. Madison Square Garden Network, NY: Episode 8, 1983. Television.

p. 8: Excerpt from: A. Atlas, ed., *William N. Copley*: Selected Writings, Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2020. Reproduced with permission from William N. Copley Estate.

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Installation view (p. 9 and 11): *William N. Copley*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2016/2017,
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William N. Copley,

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Place de l'Opéra, 1956, Photo © Tate

Temptation of Saint Ouen (Gaité Bienvenue), 1956, © Digital Image Museum Associates/LACMA/Art Resource NY/Scala, Florence, 2020

The Voyeur, 1964, © MCA Chicago, Photo: Nathan Keay

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