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Sterngast, Tal: William N. Copley's Battle of the Sexes

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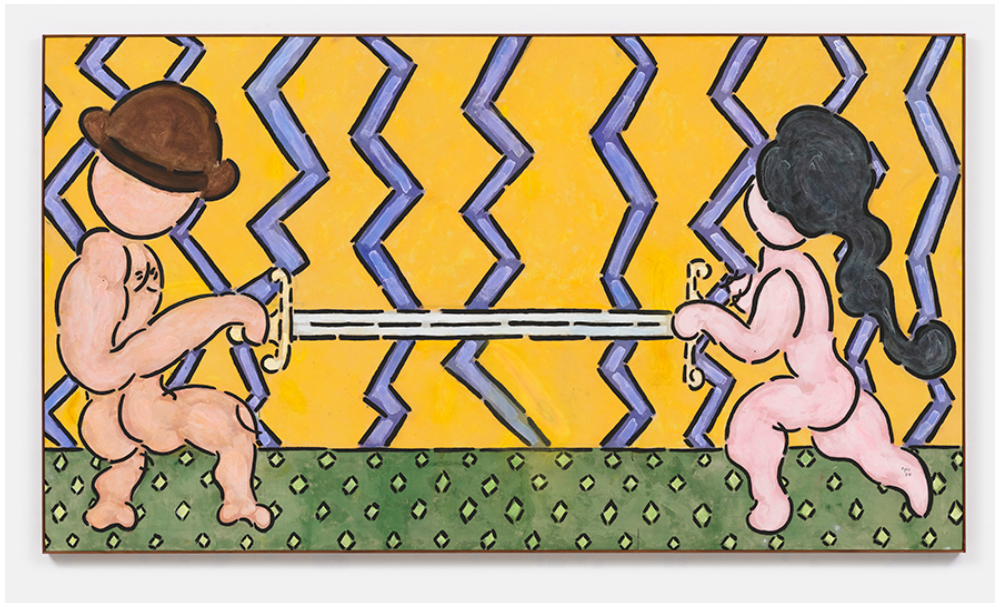
William N. Copley's Battle of the Sexes

An exhibition by the late American painter at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, explores the struggle between men and women's desires



'There is no relation between the sexes,' Jacques Lacan declared in a 1970 seminar, referring to the inherent structural incompatibility that separates men and women's sexual desires, condemning them to be out of sync with each other – and with themselves. The work by the late American painter William N. Copley, currently on view at Galerie Max Hetzler, is known for exploring this voluptuous chasm. Consequently, his *Battle of the Sexes No. 2* (1974) is the heart of the exhibition 'The Ballad of William N. Copley'. The large painting features a man and woman pulling at opposite ends of a double-headed sword across the width of the painting. Drawn in dashed, cartoonish outlines – the man in a bowler hat, the woman with long dark curls – their flesh shimmers through thick washes of acrylic paint, activating the surfaces of the painting. The sword divides the canvas while keeping the couple at a steady distance in their dance of a shared struggle.

Copley, the adopted son of a conservative wealthy family, was a soldier and a journalist before becoming a painter. Initially taking up painting to improve his writing, he quickly fell in love with the medium's subversive powers. The solid outlines and faceless bodies of bowler-hatted men and often naked women – recurrent themes in Copley's work – draw on a visual vocabulary fed by advertisements, cartoons, movies and the dazzling colours of Mexican decorative art. In 1948, he launched a pioneering gallery in Los Angeles – which showed surrealists such as Max Ernst, René Magritte and Man Ray – but it closed after two years. He never sold an artwork but went on to develop one of the most significant collections of avant-garde art in the US, remaining a patron until his death in 1996 at the age of 77.



William N. Copley, *Battle of the Sexes No. 2*, 1974, acrylic on cotton, 160 × 287 cm.
Courtesy: the artist, the Estate of William N. Copley and Kasmin, New York © William N. Copley Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

From the group of works based on pornographic images, which Copley painted between 1972 and 1974, only *La Paloma* (The Dove, 1972) is displayed here. It shows a naked woman dancing beside a window. A Pablo Picasso-esque white dove, hovering in front of her left breast, engages in the voyeuristic ritual of looking through the picture's multiple frames – the gridded windowpanes, the billowing skin-pink curtains, the edges of the canvas – giving form to the artist's (or the viewer's) obsessive gaze.

Even when depicted in the most explicit postures, women are portrayed by Copley as powerful energetic sources and his depictions of them are not as misogynistic as they might first appear. The curved lines and luminous colours rather speak to innocence and pleasure than to pure pornography. Taking his lead from the surrealists – who had made Eros an instrument of revolution – Copley imposed his own desires on painting's potential to exorcise a truth, introducing what had hitherto been repressed in American art: sex as a psychologically and socially liberating tool. (In so doing, he anticipated the Chicago imagists, Jeff Koons and Mike Kelly.)

The eight paintings crowded into the exhibition's fourth and final room are from the series 'Ballads', (1967). These works pay homage to the poems of Robert W. Service, who Copley described in an interview with the Smithsonian Institute in 1968 as 'a man with a remarkable sense of imagery and very little intellect [...] a perfect combination for me as I'm not interested in intellectualism in either painting or writing'. Saloon scenes of prostitutes and men shooting pistols, playing cards, dancing, pouring beer or getting married are depicted with cheerful details.

Engaged in comic and repetitive movements of desire, the faceless protagonists inhabiting Copley's paintings, however, never appear to experience any satisfaction and, instead wander down a path that is inevitably blocked as their individual sexual longings never overlap.

'The Ballad of William N. Copley'

<<https://www.maxhetzler.com/exhibitions/william-n-copley-ballad-william-n-copley-2020>> is on view at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, until 7 March 2020.

Main Image: 'The Ballad of William N. Copley', 2020, installation view, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist, the Estate of William N. Copley, Kasmin, New York and Galerie Max Hetzler Berlin/Paris/London © William N. Copley Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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