

burning debris. Without consciously connecting the disaster to what I was photographing, I had started making images of my arms and legs and then collaging a pair of them together to make one image. After I had made four such images, I realized the connection when it was announced in the news that workmen were digging up debris and constantly finding human body parts.

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.

Body Parts—A Self-Portrait by John Coplans is made possible by the generous support of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Council for Arts at MIT, and the Hotel@MIT.

Media Sponsor: The Phoenix Media/Communications Group



Public Programs

Lecture by Peter Plagens, Bartos Theatre, MIT E15
Tuesday, October 26 at 6PM
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

Wednesday, November 17 at 12PM
Jane Farver, Director

Sundays: October 17 and 31, November 14, and December 12 at 2PM
Hiroko Kikuchi, Education/Outreach Coordinator

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 cross walk. 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 (entrance on Ames between Main and Broadway) during business hours and on campus after business hours and on weekends.

Gallery Hours:

Tuesday–Thursday: 12–6PM; Friday: 12–8PM; Saturday and Sunday: 12–6PM
Closed Mondays; Nov. 25; Dec. 24 and 25. Closing at 4PM on Dec. 31

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.



MIT List Visual Arts
Center 20 Ames Street,
E15 Cambridge, MA
02139 617.253.4680

Body Parts—A Self-Portrait by John Coplans

October 7-December 31, 2004

Organized in collaboration with
the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery

Curators:

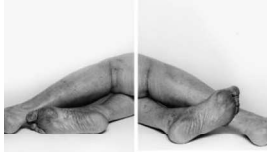
Jane Farver

Director of the LVAC

Charles Stainback

Director, Site Santa Fe, formerly Director,
Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College

Jane Farver
Director of the List Visual Arts Center



Although he was largely self-educated, St. John Rivers (John) Coplans was arguably one of the most influential art critics of his day. He was, as well, one of the most important artists working with the photographic medium in the second half of the 20th-Century. *Body Parts—A Self Portrait* by John Coplans showcases a final series of 26 large photographs that was completed before the artist's death in August 2003.

John Coplans was born in London in 1920. His father was a doctor of medicine whose peripatetic practice ranged from London to Capetown and Johannesburg, South Africa. As a result, Coplans' education was often disrupted. At age 16, he left school and signed on as a baker's assistant on a ship bound from South Africa to England. Commissioned as an Acting Pilot Officer in the RAF in 1938, he was grounded by a head injury in 1940. He joined the army instead, and went with the Kings African Rifles to East Africa, where he took part in the capture of Somaliland and Ethiopia. It was in Ethiopia that he first began to take photographs with a Leica camera that he "liberated" from an Italian officer. His next assignments were in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and in Imphal in North East India on the Burmese front. At Imphal, Coplans experienced intense combat in a major battle between the British and Indian troops and the Japanese in 1944.

After the War, Coplans attended art schools in London, but he soon quit, demoralized that he was being trained as an art teacher not an artist. He became a building contractor, and made abstract paintings nights and weekends. He also began to attend the discussions that Lawrence Alloway organized at London's Institute of Contemporary Art; soon he was exhibiting at the ICA and other London venues 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 cargo 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 obtained a teaching job.

In 1962, Coplans and John Irwin, a print salesman, decided to start a new magazine, which they called *Artforum* (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 magazines. A year later, after a solo show at the M.F. de 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 *ArtNews*, *Arts International*, *Art in America*, and *Studio International*. At that point, he decided to stop painting to 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 *Serial Imagery* and the first museum exhibitions of such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, Judy Chicago, and James Turrell. He also organized a major traveling exhibition of works by Andy Warhol, and an important Donald Judd sculpture exhibition. In 1971, Coplans moved to New York to replace Phil Leider as editor of *Artforum*. 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 "an inquisitive man who seemed to be naturally, if at times charmingly, tendentious.") In 1977, Coplans and *Artforum* parted company. The following year, he organized an exhibition of the works of street photographer Wegee (Arthur Fellig) for the International Center for Photography in New York. In 1978, he became director of the Akron Art Museum in Ohio, where he founded another new magazine called *Dialogue*. He also began to experiment with making photographs of his own body during his Ohio sojourn.

By 1980, he had returned to New York, where he exhibited a series of portraits of couples. By 1984, he had returned to the idea of the self-portrait, utilizing an assistant and a Polaroid 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:

I daydream again. In this dream I travel down my genes and visit remote ancestors, both male and female. Inspired by these journeys to the past and remembering the earlier photographs I had made of my body in Akron, I begin directing my assistant to take photographs of my body. To remove all reference to my current identity, I leave my head out. I don't know how it happens, but when I pose for one of these photographs, I become immersed in the past. It is akin to Alice falling down a looking glass. I use no props. I am somewhere else, another person in another life. At times, I'm in my youth. Sometimes, (but very rarely), it seems that a contemporary event triggers the image, but when I think about it, I realize I have merely relived an episode that happened long before. The process is a strange one. I never know from one moment to the next if this power to time-travel will dry up or what the next set of photos will be. I make very few images, no more than about nine a year on the average.

Using only his body, replete with varicose veins and wrinkled and sagging flesh, Coplans created a body of works that called up a universe of images—ranging from ancient warriors to religious and art historical icons and monumental landscapes. Although he struggled with various illnesses—including the loss of his eyesight—during the latter part of his life, he never stopped working. Coplans' work may have recorded the changes in his aging body over a two-decade period, but he said was not making work about old age: that it was only a condition he was in, and he had to make the best use of it that he could.

John Coplans continued to make series of self-portraits for the remainder of his life, garnering critical much acclaim along with two Guggenheim Fellowships, and three National Endowment for the Arts awards. His work was included in several Biennials at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and he had solo shows at the Art Institute of Chicago; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Musee de la Vieille Charite, Marseille; Frankfurter Kunstverein; Museum Boymens-van Beunigen in Rotterdam; the Centro de Arte Moderna, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; The Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Ludwig Forum, Aachen; The Tate Gallery, London; and P.S.1 in New York, among others. He also had numerous solo shows at Pace-McGill Gallery, Daniel Wolf Gallery, Galerie Lelong, Andre Rosen Gallery in New York, Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston, and numerous galleries around the world.

The works in this exhibition date from late 2001 through 2002 and are among the last the artist made. They speak more than any other of his series about the weight of mortality and the fragility of life. About this series, Coplans said:

I live in downtown Manhattan, not far from the site of the World Trade Center Towers....

For weeks afterward, when the wind blew in my direction, I could smell the fumes in my studio and in my bedroom. The fumes constantly seeped in; the smell reminded me of the burning of a body at a Hindu funeral pyre. A vast number of bodies were being roasted in the heat of the