John Coplans/MATRIX 113
January 13 - March 31, 1991

John Coplans, Self Portrait (Feet, Frontal II) SP 35-84, 1984

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Just when it seemed that modernist photographers, through many decades of diligence and creativity, had thoroughly explored all possibilities of photographing the human nude, John Coplans, artist, art critic, and former museum director, began making black-and-white photographic self portraits of his own nude body. These photographs are forceful and innovative.

Coplans’s vigorous scrutiny of his aging male body—the artist recently turned seventy—have broken new ground in both form and content. Often startling and elegant at the same time, his photographs relentlessly and ingeniously explore the body as a landscape. Trekking across supposedly familiar terrain, Coplans introduces us to new vistas and unparalleled views of a subject which we thought we knew well.

In a society that idolizes youthfulness and generates multi-billion dollar profits for its cosmetics industry and plastic surgeons, displaying a body which openly bears the signs of age is a taboo. It is an image people recoil from in fear. While the nude—most frequently the young, female nude—has been a favorite subject for photographers, rarely has an artist focused so directly and so insistently on the nature of maturity. Coplans’s vision has elevated our regard for what is usually spurned as “ugly,” and his work instills acceptance, respect, and affection for the unconventional beauty of the elderly, a group that in some cultures is revered and honored.

Photographers have frequently found themselves to be intriguing (or at least convenient) subjects. Early examples include Hippolyte Bayard (1801-1887), Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), and Alice Austen (1866-1952). During the last few decades, Andy Warhol, Duane Michals, Adrian Piper, William Wegman, Eleanor Antin, Chuck Close, Cindy Sherman, Judy Dater, and Doug and Mike Starn are just a few of the numerous and diverse contemporary artists who have focused on their own images. Some have produced intentionally dry, straightforward shots, or, in the customary tradition of "portraiture," investigated their own personalities, while others have strategically presented themselves in theatrical guises.

Coplans’s photographs are considerably less introspective than conventional self portraits. Never clothed and always sited against a white background, the image is stripped of
any reference to a distinct time or era. (It is conceivable that decades hence, however, the stark isolation of the figures will identify them stylistically to future viewers as unmistakably late twentieth century.) Despite their clinical detail, these photographs are not intimate. Coplans always omits his head from these images, precluding our access to his persona. Without the specific revelations that accompany a face, Coplans's body assumes an abstracted, totemic presence. Says Coplans, "...my work has always been about the archetypal." ¹ Much like a venerable, gnarled tree seen alone against the sky, Coplans's body—separated from the particular—is emblematic of the universal, the primordial.

These images seem to embody part of our collective unconscious. "My photos recall memories of mankind," says the artist. "They're Jungian in that sense." ² In Coplans's impressive darkroom enlargements, the viewer can fathom the muck of a swamp in the shadowy folds of skin on
the back of his hand or the grandeur of a celestial galaxy in a detail from his palm. One of his earliest, most compelling, and mysterious images, *Self Portrait (Back with Arms Above)* (1984), metaphorically suggests the awkward, prehistoric evolution of humankind.

Coplan's has arrived at these highly expressive images in an interesting way. He is keenly aware of the "discrepancy between seeing and naming . . . between the visual and the linguistic. We live and operate in a mostly linguistic world. We communicate mostly with words, language and symbols . . ." 3 This helps explain why the history of photography has been primarily the history of narrative endeavors. Coplan, however, finds the camera a useful way to explore perception rather than intellect.

He speaks of working inside the photographic process. "For me outside the process is a narrative idea, inside the process is inside photography and inside perception itself . . . My work is basically not linguistic, I am not interested in language, I am interested in seeing with the camera and my photographs are about seeing . . ." 4 For Coplan, perception gives us access to the pre-linguistic and our collective unconscious.

Although Coplan's recent work ardently espouses the perceptual in preference to the linguistic, his sophistication and erudition are often evident. This is not surprising for an artist conversant with the languages of art on several continents. *Self Portrait (Feet Crossed)* (1985) is eloquently evocative of the drama of the crucifixion, speaking expressively in the language of Western painting. Similarly, *Self Portrait (Lying Figure, Holding Leg, Four Panels)* (1990) seems less about the artist than the history of familiar, somber images of the recumbent Jesus. He fondly refers to *Self Portrait (Back Torso from Below)* (1985) as his "Brancusi."

Why do these images touch us so deeply? The unique strength of Coplan's work is the way in which it successfully combines the instinctual and the perceptual with the analytical and the intellectual. The results are rich at several levels. With buoyant proficiency he delivers impressive images of beauty, wit, defiance and curiosity. These images also conjugate memories of history and pre-history, drawing together contrary aspects of our unresolved selves.

John Coplan was born in London, England in 1920. He grew up in South Africa and attended English boarding schools. He served in the King's African Rifles (the colonial forces of the five British colonies in East Africa) during

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Curator of Contemporary Art

*John Coplans, Self Portrait (Back with Arms Above) SP13-84, 1984*


3 Chevrier, "Interview," p. 183.

4 Chevrier, "Interview," p. 186.

PLEASE NOTE: John Coplans will give an informal MATRIX lecture at 2 p.m. on Sunday, March 10, in the Hartford Courant Room. A reception in his honor will follow the talk. This event, part of the Contemporary Artists Lecture Series, is free with museum admission.

Works in MATRIX:

Self Portrait (Back with Arms Above) 23-84, 1984, 24" x 20".
Self Portrait (Feet Frontal) 35-84, 1984, 57" x 37".
Self Portrait (Feet Crossed) 3-85, 1985, 16" x 20".
Self Portrait (Back View Upright) 39-85, 1985, 16" x 20".
Self Portrait (Back Torso from Below) 46-85, 1985, 16" x 20".
Self Portrait (Hands Spread on Knees) 63-85, 1985, 37 1/2" x 47".
Self Portrait (Standing Hand) 1-87, 1987, 41" x 43".
Self Portrait (Hand, Spread Fingers) 5-87, 1987, 43" x 40".
Self Portrait (Hand, Three Panels, Horizontal I) 26-88, 1988, 51" x 123".
Self Portrait (Hand, Two Panels, Vertical) 29-88, 1988, 80" x 48".
Self Portrait (Lying Figure, Holding Leg, Four Panels) 17-90, 1990, 42" x 114".

All works are silver prints on paper, lent courtesy of the artist.
Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Daniel Wolf, Inc., NYC '81, '82; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL '81; Pace/MacGill Gallery, NYC '84, '86; The Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, CA '85; Maison de la Culture, La Rochelle, France '86; Blum/Helman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA '87, '89; *A Body of Work: Photographs by John Coplans* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA '88 (also to Museum of Modern Art, NYC; University of Missouri Art Gallery, Kansas City, MO; Art Institute of Chicago); *John Coplans: A Body of Work Sala d’Exposiciones de la Fundació Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, Spain ‘88; Galerie LeLong, NYC ‘89, ‘90; John Coplans: Mains Salon d’Angle de la Régionale des Affaires Culturelles, Nantes, France ‘89; John Coplans: *Autoportrait 1984-1989 Musee de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, France ‘89; John Coplans: Self Portraits Hand and Foot* Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands ‘90.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

John Coplans, *Self Portrait (Lying Figure, Holding Leg, Four Panels)*
SP 17-90, 1990


**Selected Bibliography about John Coplans:**


Selected Bibliography by John Coplans:


Interview with Christopher Lyon. "Seeing from Inside: John Coplans on A Body of Work," Members Quarterly, Museum of Modern Art (Spring '88), New York City, p. 3.


Chevrier, Jean François and James Lingwood. "Interview with Jean-François Chevrier," Un autre objectivité/Another objectivity Centre National des Arts Plastiques (Paris), 1989, p. 93+.