



Image of Self

Photographer John Coplans experiments with his own body

MATT MORRIS // JUL 13, 2011

John Coplans: Photographs 1984-2000, on view at the West End's Carl Solway Gallery through Aug. 13, offers viewers the opportunity to revisit photographs that set a new standard for the use of one's body in making art and also allows us to consider Coplans' work in the context of his multifarious careers. The black-and-white photographs on view cover a span of nearly two decades until the artist's death in 2003 at 83. All experiment with images of the artist's nude body as a record of his life as lived. They only ever reveal his changes in fragments.

After emigrating from England to America in 1960, Coplans became one of the founders of the influential *Artforum* magazine. He taught for a number of years at University of California — Berkeley, was a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum and eventually became the director of the Akron Art Museum at the end of the 1970s. Writing from my own experience, one's art-making changes when it's done along with other art-related endeavors like curating and writing. There's less pressure to embed clear, direct messages into the artwork, because other platforms are available for that kind of communication when it's warranted.

Rather than building these photographs out of the successes of his other careers in the arts, Coplans embraces the democratizing power that photography presented to the 20th century and became an everyman in his own works. He shows only a vulnerable male body in the images, without the formidable roles he occupied in the art world attached to it. The folds, flaps, creases and cracks on the body are not so much a sign of aging as signals of that process being "*historied*." Paths across the forms of this figure are readable as evidence of living.

The body shifts scale in Coplans' images, so that sometimes a finger or hand is as tall as a man, and in other small Polaroids a full figure is only about a hand's width tall. The unreality in this range of sizes further emphasizes the body (and its politics) as a social construction, making figurative images into abstract, conceptual problems.

In a short film that accompanies the exhibition produced by Coplans' widow, Amanda Means, Coplans identifies himself as an anarchist and adds, "This is political, though I don't intend it to be." He says so while aware that there is no singular force directing the interpretation of these works toward one absolute meaning.

Many of the large works are comprised of multiple silver gelatin prints mounted onto white board with space running between the images, so that they are broken into fragmentary views of the posed figure. The body on view is opened up and additional information may be inserted into the blank spaces.

"Frieze, No. 4, 3 Panels" is a monumental display of nine photographs arranged in three columns of three images each, white gaps breaking apart the depicted figures. It is the only title in the exhibition that alludes to anything other than a straightforward description of the body parts shown. The reference to architectural decoration emphasizes the body as a structure or container for its own history.

“Upside Down No. II” totally upends the privileges of male status in society. In all of Coplans’ images he is participating in art history both as maker and as his own model, a role historically assigned to women. By posing for this work upside down, he is modeling an overturn of machismo, almost like a monument toppled over in political protest.

The small “Three Quarter View, Straight” shows a sagging, heavily shadowed male torso. Like all of Coplans’ images, the head is cropped out, along with it the particulars of an easily recognizable personality. While the hairy backs, large hands and broad thighs shown elsewhere allude to masculinity, this piece includes the only penis in the exhibition.

As so much of Coplans’ project seems to redefine maleness within a social space, it’s a significant inclusion. All the parts are male, but they’ve been reassembled into a set of views that relinquish the patriarchal history of control that precedes them. The old man being photographed is actually a new man still waiting to be mainstreamed in a post-feminist world.

JOHN COPLANS: PHOTOGRAPHS: 1984-2000 is on view at Carl Solway Gallery (424 Findlay St., West End) through Aug. 13. Buy tickets, check out performance times and get venue details [here](#).

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13011487/image-of-self>