

WILLIAM N. COPLEY
X-Rated

09 June – 27 August 2011
69 South Audley Street London W1

“I am attempting to break through the barrier of pornography into the area of joy.”

William N. Copley

Sadie Coles HQ is delighted to present an historic series of works by American painter William N. Copley (1919-96). The exhibition is a near recreation of Copley's 1974 exhibition 'X-Rated' at the New York Cultural Center. Brazenly explicit and sensuously stylised, the works are an unabashed celebration of human sexuality and figurative painting, and were defiantly out of kilter with the prevailing art movements of the 1970s.



A self-taught painter, onetime gallery owner, collector and patron, William N. Copley (who adopted the moniker 'CPLY') occupied a singular place in the post-war American art scene. Having already run a gallery specialising in Surrealist art, he took up painting in the late 1940s and spent a decade in Paris where he mixed in Surrealist circles. After moving to New York in the mid 1960s, he began depicting everyday American scenes and emblems of popular culture, from cowboys to pin-up girls, in a distinctive comic book style.

Painted between 1972 and 1974, the 'X-Rated' canvases present single figures, couples and threesomes in various states of sexual abandon. Copley based his imagery on pornographic magazines he had bought from 42nd Street (as he recalled, at “one of those really crummy joints”), as well as art reproductions and adverts. Sprawling, cavorting figures are conveyed using bold lines and arcs and simple expanses of blotched flesh tone. In a nod to Surrealist disjunctions, many of the paintings are incongruously named after Hollywood films.

Copley's paintings abound with pattern and colour, the erotic vignettes playing out against tilting and flattened planes of check, stripes or gingham. In *Oh What a Tangled Web* (1974), figures writhe on a bed of undulating blue and white stripes; while in *Gathering of the Clan* (1974), a smiling female reclines amid a field of bold tartan, donning a tartan beret, skirt and stockings. Three works from 1975, which postdate the 'X-Rated' exhibition, show Copley working in an increasingly simplified style: *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* and *Wish You Were Here* offer fragmentary glimpses of interlocking limbs, while *Under the Volcano* adopts a more muted, gold-hued palette reminiscent of tapestry.

Pursuing figuration at a time when abstraction and minimalism were in the ascendant, 'X-Rated' was largely overlooked at the time. It is now considered a seminal moment in Copley's career, standing at the crux between European Dada and Surrealism and American Pop Art. Copley's cartoonish aesthetic closely anticipates the works of Warhol, Lichtenstein *et al*, at the same time as echoing the curvaceous and colour-saturated nudes of the School of Paris. As the artist and writer Anne Doran observes: “CPLY's art took Dada's irreverence, Surrealist eroticism and visual punning, and the colors and patterns of Matisse at his most decorative, and combined them with a thoroughly American sense of humour.”

'X-Rated' at Sadie Coles HQ is the first significant exhibition of William N. Copley's works in Britain since his death. Copley's work is held in public and private collections worldwide. His first one-man exhibition took place at Roger's Bookshop, Los Angeles, in 1946 at the encouragement of Man Ray, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. From 1947-8 he ran the short-lived Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills, exhibiting works by prominent European and American Surrealist artists. He subsequently enjoyed numerous solo shows in America and Europe, and in 1981 a travelling retrospective took place at Kunsthalle Bern, Centre Georges Pompidou and the Stedelijk Van Abbesmuseum. Copley participated in seminal group exhibitions including documenta 5 and documenta 7. He was a committed patron and philanthropist, who through his Cassandra Foundation made the gift of Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969. In late 2010, Copley's 'X-Rated' paintings were exhibited at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, and from January – May 2011 the me Collectors Room, Berlin, presented a number of the paintings alongside recent works by German artist Andreas Slominski.

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Opening hours Tuesday – Saturday 10 – 6pm