

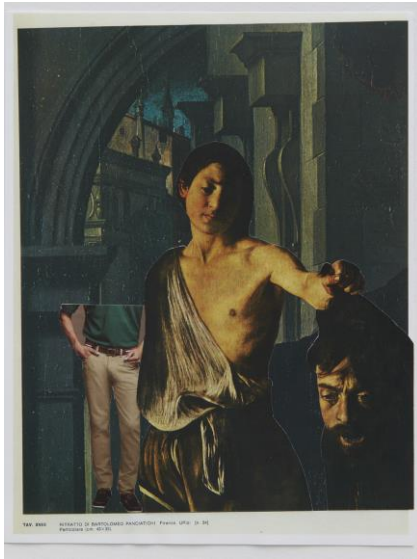
TIBOR DE NAGY

15 Rivington St New York NY 10002
212 262 5050 info@tibordenagy.com
tibordenagy.com

Art in America

Whispers out of Time: John Ashbery's Collages

By Josh Schneiderman



On December 31, 2017, the *New York Times Magazine* released its annual “The Lives They Lived” issue dedicated to the “artists, innovators, and thinkers” who had died that year. It featured a photo of John Ashbery’s collage-making desk, complete with paste can, scissors, and piles of ephemera. It might have seemed like an odd homage to the late poet. While there have been numerous critical studies of his poetry, there has been no sustained critical work on Ashbery’s collages. But two concurrent New York exhibitions—“Oh, What Fun! Collages 2015–2017” at Tibor de Nagy Gallery through October 14 and “The Construction of Fiction” at Pratt Manhattan Gallery through November 14—make it clear that Ashbery’s collages were in fact an integral part of his writing practice, shedding light on the nature of his idiosyncratic poetic technique.

One might describe Ashbery's collage art as "a weird ether of forgotten dismemberments," to borrow a line from his 1977 poem "Collective Dawns." He marshaled cultural detritus into zany, bustling compositions. In *Buster and Friends* (2015), on view at Pratt, a neon sign from the bygone Buster Brown Shoes chain depicting the eponymous comic-strip character and his dog, Tige, invades a blown-up background detail from Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). The dopey glowing rictuses look voyeuristically at the figures whose backs are reflected in the convex mirror. I thought about Ashbery's career-defining long poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975) and its meditations on the vagaries of representation in Western art. And then a couple of defunct cartoon characters showed up to deflate the moment of seriousness. This is what it must feel like to live inside an Ashbery poem.

The Pratt Manhattan show features more than one hundred twenty of these pieces, dating from 1948 until Ashbery's death in 2017. Neatly arranged in chronological order, the exhibition charts a series of returns to the medium over his lifetime. Inspired by an article in *Life* magazine about a Max Ernst show at the Museum of Modern Art, Ashbery started making collages as an undergraduate at Harvard, but only a few of these early efforts survive. In the 1970s, he made a large number of postcard collages while visiting Joe Brainard and Kenward Elmslie—fellow members of the New York School of poets—in Vermont. Ashbery began creating new collages in 2008 for a show at Tibor de Nagy, and the bulk of his output came in that last decade of his life, when he moved almost exclusively to large-format works.

Postcards provided Ashbery with little readymade worlds into which disparate elements could be introduced and defamiliarized. In either their catalogue essay or press release, both shows connect Ashbery's visual collages with collage techniques in his poetry. The recent Rizzoli book edited by Mark Polizzotti, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages* (2018), takes a similar approach, pairing Ashbery's collages with poems that use some aspect of collage, very broadly conceived. It's an understandable impulse, but with the exception of his book *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), pure collage in the mode of Tristan Tzara's strings of randomly selected words or William S. Burroughs's cutups was never really a poetic technique for Ashbery. In a 2005 *New Yorker* profile by Larissa MacFarquhar, Ashbery described his method of writing as "managed chance." It's a subtle but crucial distinction. While Ashbery frequently used "found" language, he rarely wrote poems consisting entirely of collaged materials. And so his lines almost always make sense at the grammatical and semantic levels. Rather than deferring to the chance procedure of drawing words and phrases from a hat, Ashbery filtered found language through his lyric prism, "changing everything / Slightly and profoundly," as he put it in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." In an Ashbery poem or collage, the valence of found material changes; it becomes funny, poignant, or disturbing when introduced into a new setting.

The deeper relationship between Ashbery's collages and poems, then, is not in a shared method but in the way they play with context. What new meanings emerge when you unmoor a sentence from its contextual anchors? What happens when you put a familiar thing in an unfamiliar context, or an unfamiliar thing in a familiar context? This play of de- and recontextualization is a facet of many collages, but it was a central concern for Ashbery because of his fine appreciation of the poetic qualities inherent in everyday words and images. A brief passage from *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), a work of prose poetry that Ashbery wrote while traveling through New England by bus, perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. Published with ink drawings by Brainard on each verso page, the book is a bricolage of sights you'd see from a bus window ("blacktop, service roads, parking lots, drive in deposits, libraries, roller rinks"), lists ("fish, old maid, progressive euchre, bezique, backgammon, mah jongg"), fictitious diary entries, and other items that are harder to categorize ("Little nuts, big nuts"). Much of the fun of reading *The Vermont Notebook* derives from trying to imagine a context in which these discrete entries make sense. One page features this stand-alone entry: "This is where

we are spending our vacation. A nice restful spot. Real camp life. Hope you are feeling fine.” When I visited Ashbery’s archive at Harvard’s Houghton Library several years ago, I discovered that this message was lifted from an old postcard with a cancellation mark dated August 23, 1949. The front of the postcard—which Ashbery presumably plucked from an antique shop in another instance of managed chance—features a photo of stockade cabins at the Crooning Pines vacation resort on Echo Lake in Warrensburg, New York. The note on the back is from two girls named Erin and Edythe, who were writing to their father, Walter. Situated among Brainard’s art and the suggestive language that appears throughout the book, the seemingly innocuous phrase “camp life” takes on a queer resonance.

In *Reservoir Cat* (1972), a collage from a few years earlier, a postcard of the Highland Park Reservoir in Rochester, New York (where Ashbery was born and spent time with his grandparents as a child), provides the most boring backdrop imaginable, but an outsize cat clutching a spool of thread in its mouth rises up from the water like the Loch Ness Monster. The cat itself is decidedly campy, so the whole scene takes on a feeling of faux menace; however, it’s also possible to interpret *Reservoir Cat* as a commentary on the artist’s queer adolescence in Upstate New York. As Karin Roffman details in her recent biography, Ashbery kept his sexuality hidden from his family into adulthood, but here Rochester becomes the setting of a monstrously silly return of the repressed.

In later years, Ashbery moved away from the constraints of the postcard collage and used a wider range of materials. The Tibor de Nagy show gathers collages from the last few years of his life, offering a slight temporal overlap with the Pratt show. The later collages are looser, more erotically charged. *Dark Decollation* (2015), on view at Tibor de Nagy, places the subjects of Caravaggio’s *David with the Head of Goliath* (circa 1610) next to a waist-down cutout from a menswear catalogue, both of which have been transported into the background of Bronzino’s *Portrait of Bartolomeo Panciatichi* (1540). Mouth agape, Goliath’s severed head now ogles the startling bulge nestled inside the model’s flat-front chinos. It’s a funny juxtaposition that amplifies the latent eroticism of both Caravaggio’s Baroque masterpiece and the quotidian clothing catalogue, allowing us to see them anew.

The move to larger formats also meant that Ashbery could use vintage game paraphernalia—Chutes and Ladders, Chinese checkers, bingo cards, BB gun shooting galleries, and so forth—as the basis for his compositions. In *Chutes and Ladders I (for Joe Brainard)*, 2008, one of Ashbery’s best collages, a man dressed in a sailor outfit stands at the center of the Chutes and Ladders game board grid. His head has been replaced with a pansy, one of Brainard’s signature images, and kitschy ephemera radiates out from him. It feels like a secret language, an encrypted message to Brainard perhaps, or an esoteric map for which the legend has been lost, but it’s also oddly familiar, like a bunch of weird stuff you’d find in your grandparents’ attic.

It would be hard for anyone to walk through either show and not feel the pinch of recognition. Buster Brown, Mr. Peanut, Rich Uncle Pennybags, and Olive Oyl all appear as what Ashbery elsewhere calls “whispers out of time.” Because of their strange familiarity and because the contextual play I’ve described here is more readily apparent in a visual medium, these collages may be the best possible introduction to Ashbery’s life and work.