

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Where to Next?

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John Ashbery, *The Checkered Game of Life - for Joe Brainard*  
2016, collage on paper, 17 3/4 x 17 1/2 inches

For a poet who is notorious for writing opaque poems, a number of collages celebrate the youthful male body with an innocence that is touching, tender, and, frankly, poignant, and sweet.

A page turned; we were

Just now floundering in the wind of its colossal death.  
And whether it is Thursday, or the day is stormy,  
With thunder and rain, or the birds attack each other,  
We have rolled into another dream.

These lines come near the end of John Ashbery's "Spring Day," which is the second poem in his book, *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). They unexpectedly buzzed in my brain when I went to see the exhibition *John Ashbery: New Collages* at Tibor de Nagy (December 15, 2016 – January 28, 2017). Made in the past couple of years, the collages offer yet another view (actually, more like two or three) of someone who has delighted and confounded his readers

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and, more recently, viewers, since the publication of *Some Trees* (1956), which was chosen by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets.

The journey or the dream, the unavoidable movement from one domain to another, is one of the themes running through a number of the recent collages. In others, which use a game board as the ground upon which Ashbery has affixed various images, a terrain is re-imagined. We seem to encounter the most unlikely and ordinary things, all of which are mysterious portents of what lies ahead. The other thing that struck me about these works is how gay some of them are. For a poet who is notorious for writing opaque poems in which autobiography and transparency are dispensed with, a number of collages celebrate the youthful male body with an innocence that is touching, tender, and, frankly, poignant and sweet.



John Ashbery, *To the City* 2016, mixed media collage, 11 x 8 1/2 inches

In “To the City” (2016), two young men in shorts are trying to hitch a ride, presumably to the crammed, teeming medieval city that looms up behind them. One of the young men, who is sitting down, holds a bouquet of flowers in his left hand while waving his right thumb in the air. Standing beside him, his pal looks off in the distance, hoping that someone will stop and take them wherever they want to go.

Next to the young men, two characters out of George Herriman’s comic strip *Krazy Kat* reenact another version of a journey, with Offisa Pup trying to halt Krazy Kat, who is lugging a big box down the road toward the young men. Krazy Kat, of indeterminate gender and referred to as “he” and “she” in the comic strip, was in love with a grumpy mouse, Ignatz, who was given to throwing bricks at poor Krazy. Was *Krazy Kat* the first comic strip to explore the subject of unrequited love between different species? Is it important to know, in light of the big strawberry pasted near the two men, that “strawberry” is slang for “someone who exchanges sex for drugs?” What about the big hand rising up behind them?

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For all the implied danger (the city and large hand behind the youthful hitchhikers), possible sexual transactions (the strawberry), and recognition of incommensurability (Offisa Pup and Krazy Kat), a feeling of innocence and hope is predominant. And yet, as viewers, we know that wherever things go, and however they get there, they are not going to turn out well. This is what makes “To the City” so heartbreaking.



John Ashbery, *Departure Mode*, 2016, collage on paper, 4 3/4 x 6 inches

Ashbery begins the story, usually on a note of sweetness and virtue, but lets the viewers finish it. In “Departure Mode” (2016), two young children with their backs to us are about to step through a doorway. Above the doorway is the sign, “True Love Transportation Co.” On the other side of the doorway is a gloomy landscape with three older women (the three graces or Macbeth’s witches?) at the crest of a road, about to descend to whatever awaits them below.

What about all the partial views of men in “A Dream of Heroes” (2016), which has at its center Gustave Courbet’s famous “The Desperate Man (Self-Portrait)” (1843-45). On the left side, extending down from the top edge, is the lower torso of a standing young man in jeans, one leg crossed over the other, thumbs hooked in pockets. I was reminded of the fifth photograph in Robert Rauschenberg’s sequence of “Cy + Roman Steps (I – V)” (1952), which focuses on Cy Twombly’s groin. The erotic charge in both Ashbery’s and Rauschenberg’s images is unmistakable. And, as we might expect from Ashbery, there are counter-images: the monocle-wearing ventriloquist’s dummy Charlie McCarthy in the foreground, and the heads of three older men in bowler hats in the right-hand corner. Two seem to be taking the whole scene in with a smirk, while the third, who is partially cropped by the right edge, looks out at us, smiling. Humor, desperation, and pain rolled into one inextricable ball. Whoever claimed that Ashbery was aloof and cool got it all wrong.



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John Ashbery, *Salle d'Attente*, 2016, collage on paper, 14 1/2 x 18 3/4 inches

In “Salle d’ Attente” (2016) – the waiting room – a 19th-century glass-roofed train station extends into the distance. A young woman’s head from a Renaissance portrait partially blocks the view. We can never quite see where we are going: we just know that we are, and there is nothing we can do about it.

There are a number of collages dedicated to Ashbery’s friend Joe Brainard, most likely because Brainard sent him some of the collage elements in the work. There is a letter from Brainard – written in large, clear letters, like a fifth grader – to Ashbery in the vitrine in the center of the gallery’s small back space, along with a manila envelope addressed to John and some of the elements it contained. Another item in the vitrine is a chatty letter Ashbery sent in 1952 to Robert Fizdale, who was one half of a piano duo with Arthur Gold. In the letter, Ashbery mentions making collages after he and James Schuyler (“Jimmy” in the letter) had seen a Kurt Schwitters show.

In 1974, I moved to New York. Shortly after I got here, I heard Ashbery give a poetry reading at Columbia to a packed room. He had not yet won the trifecta of literary prizes (Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award). At one point during the reading, he mentioned that he was teaching creative writing at Brooklyn College. I applied and got in. The rest, as they say, is history.



John Ashbery, *Storm at Castelfranco*, 2016, collage on paper, 12 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches