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

The Childhood Innocence of John Ashbery's Art

Ashbery's primary subject matter concerns an alternate world where nothing goes permanently wrong, and where disasters are nothing more than pranks

By John Yau

John Ashbery, "Promenade", 2011, collage

"Gleeful mischief" is how Gregory Cowles described John Ashbery's collages in *The New York Times* review of the book, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems & Collages* (Rizzoli Electa, 2018), edited by Mark Polizzotti. Cowles goes on to say, "The result is an entire oeuvre of fantasy landscapes […]." Included in the book, as Cowles notes in his review, is an interview that I did with Ashbery, itself a collage of excerpts from recorded conversations that we had over a 10-year period.

I mention Cowles's review because two exhibitions, featuring nearly every collage that Ashbery made in his lifetime, are on view in New York right now. If you prefer your exhibitions in chronological order, you might first visit *John Ashbery: The Construction of*

Fiction at Pratt Manhattan Gallery, curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa. Bessa's revelatory installation presents 120 of Ashbery's collages in groups, which largely coincide with the intermittent periods in which he worked on them. Fully illustrated, and with an illuminating essay by Bessa, the accompanying catalog is a must.

Ashbery's collages are complemented by ephemera, such as copies of his books and the sources from which he took images. In a vitrine is a chatty letter from Ashbery to the pianist Robert Fizdale, dated 1952, in which he mentions making collages with James Schuyler ("Jimmy" in the letter) after they had seen a Kurt Schwitters exhibition. A large Victorian collage he bought and kept by his desk is also in the exhibition, just above the vitrine. If you don't know Ashbery collages, it is best to start with this exhibition, to begin at the beginning.

Soon after, you should see *John Ashbery: Oh, What Fun!* at Tibor de Nagy. This exhibition includes 18 collages made between 2015 and 2017, the year before his death. Together, the shows present nearly 140 works dating from 1948 to 2017 — a comprehensive record of his collages, as he probably made no more than 150 in his life. It will be a long time before this many of his works will be exhibited together again.

John Ashbery, "Dark Decollation" 2015, collage

As I knew Ashbery for more than 40 years, studied with him at Brooklyn College in the mid-1970s, conducted the interview in *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems & Collages*, and reviewed each of his collage shows, starting with his first in 2008, I am either qualified

or disqualified to write about them. I will let readers decide if they wish to continue or to stop here.

Knowing his works so well, I started with the Tibor de Nagy show. I wanted to see what I hadn't seen. Made when Ashbery was in his late 80s, many of the works evoke that moment of childhood innocence before it all comes crashing down, which it does for everyone. This state of innocence — also a state of grace — can be found in nearly all of the collages on display.

One exception is "Dark Decollation" (2015), in which a young man holds up a decapitated head by its thick black hair. Behind him is part of an archway of a medieval city at night. Next to the young man is a cropped image, derived from a mail order catalogue, of a man wearing a green pullover shirt and beige chinos. The green in the shirt is echoed by the city's terre verte hues, a detail that likely caught Ashbery's attention. Also noticeable is the prominent bulge in the crotch area of the man's chinos.

Along the bottom of the collage, we read: "RITRATTO DI BARTOLOMEO PANCIATTI." Ashbery has mischievously covered over a portrait of Bartolomeo Panciatichi (1507-1582) by Agnolo Bronzino (1503 – 1572) with the figures of Caravaggio's painting, "David with the Head of Goliath" (c. 1607). There are so many ways to read this collage, starting with the fact that David is the name of Ashbery's longtime partner and husband and that Goliath is thought to be a self portrait by Caravaggio. At the same time, a frank eroticism spreads throughout the work, from the bulging pants to David's mostly bare chest and exposed nipple. He came to the subject of the erotic male body late in his life, and it is most prominent in his collages, where we see the lower bodies of young men dressed in casual wear, seemingly glimpsed in a crowd.

Ashbery's primary subject matter concerns an alternate world, what Cowles calls his "fantasy landscapes," where nothing goes permanently wrong, and where disasters are nothing more than pranks. In "Wind Up Doll" (2017), a mechanical doll with long tresses and a metal crank protruding from her open back towers over the multi-level landscape of a fortress populated by men preparing for a siege. She has just let go of a singe propeller airplane. I think of many of the figures in the collages as Ashbery's alter ego — especially his images of young girls, infants, and Victorian women.

In many collages, we see figures about to begin a journey. Often, there are two of them. They can be seated in a plane, as in "Vol de Nuit" (2016) or be standing beside a rural road

full of cars as in the two children in “Oh, What Fun!” (2016). Nothing bad has befallen them yet.

John Ashbery, “Wind Up Doll,” 2017, collage

In Ashbery’s hands, the most saccharine and sentimental imagery could transform into an innocent world in which disaster looms invisibly, its presence not yet known. This tension enlivens the work as well as gives the collages a heart-rending edge. His figures are about to undertake a journey that is drenched in hope, but, in all likelihood, will end in pain. The works are paeans to innocence.

The two pairs of male legs we see in “Strawberry Stairs” (2015) evokes the furtiveness of gay life before the AIDs epidemic, which Ashbery witnessed, with many of his friends dying. In the right hand corner is a black-and-white image of a two-story wooden house with a family gathered on the porch. Both the men, whose upper bodies are obscured by leaved branches and three large strawberries, and the house are affixed to a background image taken from a Piranesi etching of a fictional “prison.” “Strawberry” is slang for “someone who exchanges sex for drugs” — something Ashbery claimed not to know in our interview — perhaps because he had to maintain his innocence in order to protect this alternate world from our incursions.

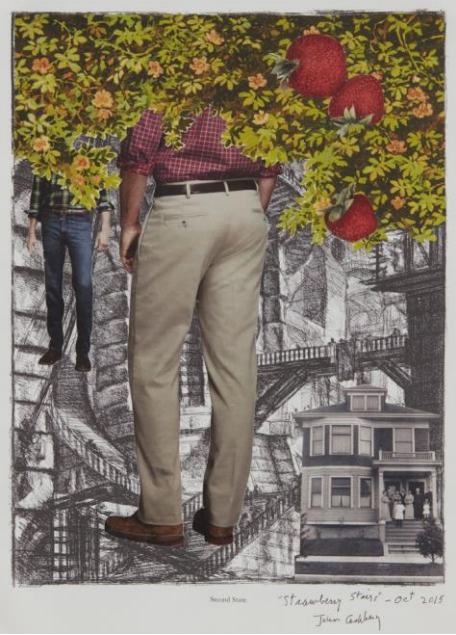
This state of innocence, which recurs throughout Ashbery’s collages, is there from the beginning. One of his earliest surviving collages, “Late for School” (1948), in *John*

Ashbery: The Construction of Fiction, includes images of two children standing in a doorway, with an older boy outside, about to go to school. He has the head of a bird in one panel of this illustrated page, most likely inspired by Max Ernst's collages.

Ashbery, who was focused on the rarified world of childhood innocence, seemed capable of entering this world easily and at will, like walking through a door to greet the morning sun. It is only when you see all the works that curator Bessa has brought together that you realize that he was able to assemble different visions of innocence tinged with a sweetness over and over, without repeating himself or devolving into kitsch. Portraying individuals at the beginning of a journey, he used the inherent dislocation of collage to hint at what awaited them.

The Pratt exhibition includes 35 collages, all done on postcards and dated 1972. They were made in Vermont at the house where the poet and librettist Kenward Elmslie and the artist and writer Joe Brainard lived during the summer. After dinner, they would sit around the dinner table making collages. I suspect that Brainard provided all the materials. While some of these collages have been previously exhibited, this is the first time that all the work from this year — which is really when Ashbery became a visual artist — has been exhibited together.

Aside from the fun of making them, Ashbery evidently thought of using the collages to generate a novel, partly inspired by his years of researching the idiosyncratic genius writer, Raymond Roussel (1877 – 1933). In 1910, Roussel self-published an extravagant and carnivalesque novel, *Impressions of Africa* (*Impressions d'Afrique)*, which includes, among its characters, a worm that can play a zither.



John Ashbery, “Strawberry Stairs,” 2015, collage

Roussel was obsessed with the metagram, and how the switching of one letter in a word could change the meaning of the sentence in which it was used. The other likely inspiration was Elmslie, who was working on a collection of preposterous fictions that would be published under the title *The Orchid Stories* (1973).

It is in these collages from 1972 that Ashbery starts bringing together all of his interests. He took material from comic strips, movies, early advertisements, high and low culture. The juxtapositions are funny, odd, and — dare I say it? — Ashberyean. And yet, aside from two collages from 1977, he stopped making them until 2008, when he was 80 years old. It is remarkable to think of someone beginning a new body of work, sourced from new material, as he entered his ninth decade. In his 2008 works he began incorporating different types of imagery and objects, such as game boards, pages from old magazines, and reproductions of well-known and little-known works from art books and auction catalogues, which serve as starting points. Formally speaking, he transitioned from postcards to larger formats, as well as adding more than one image to the composition.

The master of juxtaposition in poetry, Ashbery knew how to pair images, for example, in “Salle d’Attente” (2016), where he superimposes Bronzino’s 1545 portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi in front of the interior of a railway station, like those he would have gone to when he lived in Paris.

The combination of the woman's head and a receding space (underscored by the railroad tracks), enclosed within an architectural structure, reminded me of that moment in 1953 when Cinemascope and other formats were used in film to compress close-up and panoramic views into the same scene.

The collages that use game boards are like looking at a rebus that we will never be able to decipher. In "Promenade" (2011), Ashbery used a digitized print-out of a game-board, Rocket Dart-Words, which was sold in the mid-1950s. He superimposed images (including one with the words "Mend All" on it) onto a grid of letters, five to a row. None of the rows of letters seem to spell a word. Since some of the letters are partially obscured by the collage elements, it is impossible to tell if any of the rows add up to a word. Another visual element is a ring encircled by a cluster of bands with numbers on them. Are the numbers like those on a safe? What are we to unlock with our looking?

John Ashbery, "Three Victorian Women," 2017, collage

While it would be easy to conclude that Ashbery's game board collages are deliberately indecipherable and abstract, I want to suggest that this is not the case, even if we can do no more than puzzle over them. In the lower left-hand corner of "Promenade" is an illustrated card divided horizontally into two images. The upper half shows the legs of a man wearing red breeches, while partially obscured in the lower half we see the upper body of a woman clasping her hands. Overlaying her image is a puzzle ring.

The man in red breeches is similar to other images in the collages of men in casual wear. The juxtaposition of his lower torso and a woman's upper body, partially covered by a puzzle ring, seems neither arbitrary nor whimsical. And yet, as I entertain various readings of this combination, I must also consider that its coming together is random — even as the placement of an open archway over the letter D (an archway on its side) suggests otherwise.

This, I think, is Ashbery's genius, and what infuriates his detractors. He finds connections without making a big deal about it. He never claimed to have a message or say something that his audience needed to hear or see. He didn't mind wearing his enthusiasms on his sleeve, no matter how whimsical or silly they might be. He enjoyed himself when he wrote and that pleasure comes through. And through all of this a lamentation, sometimes just a few hints of it, is heard or seen — barely perhaps, but it is still there.

John Ashbery: The Contruction of Fiction, *curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa, continues at Pratt Manhattan Gallery (144 West 14th Street, 2nd Floor, Manhattan) through November 14.*

John Ashbery: Oh, What Fun! *continues at Tibor de Nagy (15 Rivington Street, Manhattan) through October 14.*