

Courtesy powerHouse Books, New York, NY



**John Coplans, 1985.** *Hands Squeezing Knees.* Polaroid Type 55 Positive/Negative film, 26" × 34".

with these elements to create the depth and expression of a disapproving face. This is the face of Everyman, which in this faceless self-portrait acts to give the subject a presence, identity and value in a society that discounts people on the basis of age.

A transcript from an interview with John Coplans in 1994 by Jean-François Chevrier follows the images in the book. Coplans, having long been an influential commentator on art, is unable to create a work without also expressing his views on it. "I'm seventy years old," he says, "and generally bodies of seventy-year-old men look somewhat like my body. It's a neglected subject matter ... . So, I'm using my body and saying, even though it's a seventy-year-old body, I can make it extremely interesting. That keeps me alive and gives me vitality. It's a kind of process of energizing myself."

Throughout his photographic career, Coplans has consistently proved that he is able to make his body curious and compelling. This book spans his photographic development with images that examine his body in its general form and in its details. These are pictures that seek out the rules of anatomy and then attempt to transform them with a fresh perspective. The close-up views of body parts such as hands, feet

and back provide us with a renewed perspective. A series of photos titled *Interlocking Fingers* show woven appendages in minute detail. Even when reduced to a smaller scale in this book, the cascade of bands of flesh are larger than life. They form beautiful and complex forms, like patterns of frost crystals on a winter window, highlighted by deep creases and errant hairs.

In other series, each consisting of two, three or four images, Coplans

breaks down his body into torso, mid-section and legs. The individual images are placed in sequence to re-form the body and convey a cohesive pose. These disjointed views flow into one another and express strength with clenched fists, confidence with the focus on the genitals, and even femininity. One of these images presents a side view of Coplans lying flat on his back with hands crossed peacefully over his chest. This is the image of a corpse. Its reminder of death shatters the quest for eternal youth, and warns that no matter how much make-up, hair dye and cosmetic surgery we turn to, decay comes to us all.

Coplans' images offer a repeated confrontation with our culture. They present an unseen and frank reality that contradicts what our society reveres: beauty, glamour and sexiness. In the mass-produced world of corporate-driven publicity, everyone is tall, toned and youthful. Coplans' work defies the cult of uniformity and allows the presence of maps of wrinkles, the unruliness of unwanted hair, and the flabby sprawl of things that were once constrained by the shape of youth.

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## Brother

At a time when you knew, you alone, that death was soon, sharing a second joint over the draughts, our game became progressively ludicrous and the music progressively profound. You smiled suddenly and said with unexpected intensity, "All knowledge is predictive."

When you were young and I even younger you showed me the way through the wood to the hidden pool. Five yews pinned it round, then other smaller trees, and box. With its banked lips it was shielded from the wind, so that on a dry day it was to the bright sky a white reply, broken by branches, sun comprehending glass.

The yews were easy to climb. One had a wayward bough hanging over the pond like a muscular arm. You showed me how to sit quietly in the groove between the muscles and wait for animals. I preferred, however, to drop stones, bigger and bigger, and watch the ripples move outward and inward until the image was calm again. Friction existed even there.

Given my first watch, I recorded again and again the time between splash and second calm.

Now in church, as I write in the back of my hymn book, decades fall away with the turn of a page. Would you smile at this gathering to speed you on with music? Is there any sound on the other shore for men of destiny? You will send no sign. Would you laugh at the sentimentality — tomorrow I retrace the path to the pool — of this fool who thinks you and identity aloft and laughing?

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