

## Coplans + Means: Distilled

By Amanda Means



A young artist new to New York, I became involved with the spirit of Abstract Expressionism in the mid 1970s. I felt Jackson Pollock's presence everywhere – in the light, the action and energy of the city. I had never seen a Pollock firsthand before arriving there. When I first saw the real paintings, I was bowled over by their powerful energy, innovative space and rich palette. Standing in front of *One: Number 31*, (1950) was like walking into a three-dimensional environment, a dense woods on a very windy day, a hustling city street, a meadow teeming with the swirling buzz of insects and the energy of photosynthesis.

In addition to Pollock, I was particularly struck by the bold simplifications of Franz Kline and Aaron

Siskind, and photographed the constantly changing shadows of traffic and people in the street below my West 29th Street loft. As time went on, the imagery became more and more abstract and I began a series of brush drawings that were closely related to my street photographs. Intrigued by these explorations, I started a new series of abstract photographs that were based on machinery, signs, and stone monuments. I wondered how far I could push the representation of an object toward pure form, line and space, yet still recognize it as that same object.

I first met John Coplans in his Cedar Street loft in lower Manhattan in 1986. I was an ambitious photographer with an avid interest in the landscape, and when a friend suggested that I contact John and show him my photographs, I called him up. He responded quickly and spontaneously, saying, "Sure, come on over. How about tonight for supper?" Our meeting that evening would eventually lead to our marriage and marked the beginning of a life-long dialogue about art.

As it happened, I'd spent the afternoon poring over a large Carleton Watkins album in the Rare Book Room of the New York Public Library. When I walked into John's loft with my portfolio that evening, he handed me a glass of wine and asked me to show him my work, several 20 x 24 inch gelatin silver landscape photographs greatly influenced by Jackson Pollock and Watkins. I had been keen on both artists since my arrival in New York City about ten years earlier. John picked up on these two interests. First he talked about Pollock, and in particular, Pollock's use of edge tension. Moving on to Watkins he handed me a copy of his seminal essay, "C.E. Watkins at Yosemite," published by *Art in America* in 1978. John began describing the large collection of Watkins photographs he had gathered during the 1970s. He talked about going to small libraries in western towns, finding forgotten Watkins albums and prints on bottom shelves that nobody particularly noticed or cared about. He managed to buy quite a number of prints at low cost. Later, John sold these prints for a sum that enabled him to move back to New York and begin his career as a photographer. He called this his Watkins Scholarship.

Before I was born, John had served in the British armed forces during WWII. He was urbane and had traveled the world, while I came from a rural town in upstate New York. John had begun painting seriously in 1946, returning to London after eight years of military service. Between 1946 and 1960, he explored a wide range of artistic styles, materials, and techniques. He painted figuratively, worked in silk screen, explored Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. In 1960 he moved to San Francisco. Three years later, he abandoned painting to devote himself to writing, curating and editing. He would go on to become a prominent advocate of a new generation of artists – from the abstract painter and sculptor Ellsworth Kelly to one of Minimalism’s key theorists, sculptor Donald Judd.

There was a spark between us, and in spite of the difference in our backgrounds and ages – I was 25 years younger – we clicked, and in the ensuing weeks and months became fast friends. He was a gold mine of information, and it became clear that in our art making, we shared an underlying interest in the process of distillation – getting down to the bare bones of things.

John and I both were fascinated by how ordinary, everyday objects -- in this case, interlocking fingers and water glasses -- could be distilled, through attentive observation, into a metaphor for something very different. When familiar objects are photographed, closely cropped, and considerably enlarged, the viewer’s sense of scale is thrown out of kilter. A mysterious transformation occurs. For example, fingers are something we all have and that we all look at every day. Ordinarily when we look at our fingers, we see fingers. But when John looked at his fingers and began interlocking them into different arrangements, he must have begun to see something very different. Perhaps he saw Brancusi’s *Endless Column* rising into the sky, or a cave filled with strange, serpentine creatures lurking inside.

In the same manner, we share the common experience of the water glass and drink from them everyday. The particular water glasses I photographed, with their scratched, chipped, and worn surfaces, were John’s water glasses. Just as John uncovered an elegance and rich character in his own aging, naked body, I discovered a beautiful language hidden in the wear and tear of these glasses. Something unusual happens when I look at them very, very slowly, close-up, for a very long time. In the photographs, the curved glass surface covered in dripping condensation becomes a rich landscape of light and texture resembling the surface of a distant planet. Tiny air bubbles resemble a far away constellation in the dark night sky. Scratches appear to be charcoal markings such as you see in Cy Twombly drawings. The water glass – half-empty, yet half-full – is distilled.

John died in 2003, but the conversation we began on the evening when I made my way to his Cedar Street loft carrying the large portfolio of photographs, continues on. “Coplans + Means: Distilled” is a tribute to that first meeting in 1986, and its legacy.