

WILLIAM N. COPLEY

Milan, 19 October 2016 – **Fondazione Prada** is presenting the exhibition **“William N. Copley”**, open to the public **from 20 October 2016 to 8 January 2017** in Milan. Organized in collaboration with The Menil Collection, Houston, the Italian counterpart of this retrospective is curated by Germano Celant, and retraces the entire career of the American artist – started in Los Angeles in the 1940s, developed in Paris and subsequently spanned across Europe and the United States.

Expanded considerably compared to the partner show in Houston, at Fondazione Prada “William N. Copley” stands out for its richness and the presence of never-before-seen materials. The exhibition includes over **150 works** realized by Copley from 1948 to 1995, from international museums and collections all over the world (Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Sammlung Goetz, Munich; Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden), and constitutes the **largest retrospective** ever dedicated to the American painter. For the first time ever, Italian audiences will also be given the opportunity to admire a corpus of **masterpieces by Max Ernst, René Magritte, Man Ray and Jean Tinguely**, once part of Copley’s personal collection, today part of **The Menil Collection**.

The Exhibition

In Milan, the exhibition **“William N. Copley”** will develop on the two levels of the Podium. The first floor features a selection of significant works by the artist in dialogue with surrealist works from Copley’s private collection, retracing the artist’s long, complex **biographical and intellectual journey**; a path he shared with Marcel Duchamp, Ernst, Magritte and Man Ray, among others. This selection of works is completed by an impressive collection – in part presented to visitors for the first time ever – of **publications, photographs, catalogues and archive materials** that were made available by the William N. Copley Estate in New York.

On the ground floor, visitors enter a structure constituted by **8 different environments**, each dedicated to a specific subject or aspect of Copley’s production. One room reunites cloth and painted flags the artist realized between 1961 and 1975 on the theme of geographical and cultural membership. In several of these, for example *Cold War* (1962) and *1776 and All That* (1976), the female figures and stylized, unsettling representations of everyday objects overlap the motifs and colors typical of British, Japanese, Spanish or Russian flags. Other artworks, like *Imaginary Flag for USSR* (1972) and *Imaginary Flag for Great Britain* (1972) are **“invented” banners** which, through a practice recalling surrealist collages, deal with sensitive themes such as the Cold War, political ideologies and national identity in a playful manner. Another environment is dedicated to the **“unknown whore”** (in ironic contraposition to the military monument of the “unknown soldier”), the figure of which,

like an obsession, populated the artist's imaginative repertoire right from the beginning of his career. This room also displays large-scale paintings created between 1965 and 1986 and connected with the installation *Tomb of the Unknown Whore*, presented in 1986 at the New Museum in Columbus Circle, New York. These praise sexual liberty and pay homage to the prostitute, a social category that Copley believed was victim of injustice. A series of **screens** dating from 1958 to 1982 are set alongside **trptychs** created between 1951 and 1995. These demonstrate Copley's compositional mastery in realizing intricate spatial combinations of human figures or everyday subjects. The *X-rated* series – exhibited as a picture gallery – presents erotic subjects and rituals taken from adult magazines in an attempt to, in the artist's own words, "break through the barrier of pornography into the area of joy." The *Nouns* series stands at the center of another room hosting the "ridiculous images" of everyday objects set against abstract backgrounds with geometrical compositions. In another section visitors will find seven **mirrors, contoured to form images**, first shown in New York in 1978 as part of the exhibition "The Temptation of St. Antony": a wallpaper hand-painted by Copley himself recreates the atmosphere of a traditional American brothel. These are followed by five paintings in which Copley reinterprets the motifs and figures of *La nuit espagnole* (1922) by **Francis Picabia**, once part of his private collection. The last environment features a selection of **acrylics and oils on canvas** produced **between 1984 and 1989**, testify to the numerous variants with which Copley, interweaving silhouettes or figures, reappropriates his own iconographic motifs: from female nudes to imagery from Mexican folklore; from nocturnal Parisian scenes to mythological visions populated by fauns, satyrs and nymphs.

The Artist

William N. Copley (1919–1996) embodied the figure of the eclectic, self-taught artist, as well as tireless cultural promoter through his work as a journalist, publisher, gallery owner and art collector. Influenced by **Surrealism, American folk culture** and **cartoons**, Copley employed humor and intelligence to explore themes that became recurrent in his production, including **pornography, patriotism** and the unexpected potential of **everyday objects**.

In over **five decades of activity**, Copley created a corpus of artworks animated with ferocious satire, cunning and an open challenge to conventions. His interpretation of reality derived from an ambiguous condition of belonging and foreignness to a privileged, conservative world: that of his adopted family, led by politician Ira C. Copley, a Californian media tycoon. After childhood, Copley became a discontinuous student, with a particular interest in **poetry** and **journalism**. He would later get involved in politics and be active on the progressivist front, and only began painting in 1946, initially conceiving art as an expression of his inspiration to become a poet. Thanks to his brother-in-law John Ployard, a sketch artist working for Walt Disney, Copley came into contact with several surrealist artists, and was dazzled by the creative dialogue between repression and eroticism typical of their artworks. In 1948, Copley and Ployard founded **Copley Galleries** together in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, where over two years of activity they presented exhibitions dedicated to

artists who were almost unknown in the United States at that time, including **René Magritte**, **Yves Tanguy**, **Man Ray**, **Joseph Cornell**, **Roberto Matta** and **Max Ernst**. Copley became a friend, supporter and collector of these artists, creating one of the most important collections of surrealist art in America. In 1951, the year Copley held his first solo show in Los Angeles – titled “CPLY,” a moniker he would use throughout his career – the artist moved to Paris, where he dedicated all his energy to art, also stimulated by the continuous interaction with **Marcel Duchamp**. Drawing on an attention for games, sexuality and psychology inherent to **Dadaism** and Surrealism, Copley honed his style adopting flat backgrounds of bright colors, delimited by clear black lines. At the same time, the artist sought out new solutions that would lend greater dynamism to his compositions, deriving diverse methods of superimposition and the editing of imagery from collage. In 1962 Copley returned to the United States, where he was recognized as a connecting figure between European Surrealism and American Pop Art. During the 1960s he continued along his autonomous path, in which the theme of the **female nude** played a primary role, becoming a catalyst for hidden and repressed drives, obsessions and fantasies. In parallel with his artistic activities, Copley continued to collect works by contemporary artists such as Walter De Maria, Richard Hamilton, Yves Klein, Claes Oldenburg, Edward Ruscha and Andy Warhol, and also helped **supporting artists**, as well as **editorial and cultural projects**, first through the William and Noma Copley Foundation (created in 1954 and later renamed the Cassandra Foundation), and later, from 1967 to 1968, with his **experimental magazine S.M.S.** (an acronym for “Shit Must Stop”).

In the mature phase of his career Copley continued to cultivate his own biting irony and, with respect to his style, achieved an increasing narrative complexity, inserting realistic scenes into silhouettes of human figures, creating a vertiginous stratification of perspectives and visual layers. In 1978 curator Marcia Trucker included his works in the seminal exhibition “**Bad Painting**,” organized by the New Museum in Broadway, New York. Within this disruptive and unusual context, the creative and intellectual freedom of the artist who, far from the paradigms of Modernism, was celebrated as the precursor to a parody-infused vision of the **banal**, **kitsch** and **popular**. In 1979 Copley gave part of his personal collection up for auction, earning what was then a record sale price of a private art collection. Seven works by Magritte, Ernst and Tinguely belonging to the artist were purchased by Dominique De Menil who, together with her husband John, had already purchased two works from Copley’s gallery. The Menil Collection currently owns eleven historical works that once belonged to Copley, as well as an important nucleus of artworks realized by the artist himself.

The talk with the curators

On **20 October 2016, at 6 pm**, Fondazione Prada will host at the Cinema a talk between **Germano Celant** and **Toby Kamps**. The conversation between the two curators will highlight new historical and critical perspectives to interpret Copley’s multifaceted artistic

figure. His cultural path, halfway between American and European traditions, the rediscovery of art history and an original take on irony and provocation, will be analyzed, as well as his peculiar condition of artist, collector and gallery owner.

The Publication

The publication *William N. Copley*, edited by Germano Celant and published by Fondazione Prada in collaboration with The Menil Collection, covers the full array of his research with an exhaustive iconographic survey, and is the first scientific monograph dedicated to Copley's work. Including over **390 pages** and **600 illustrations**, the volume features all exhibited materials and was designed by Irma Boom. In addition to introductions by the presidents of Fondazione Prada and the former director of The Menil Collection, Josef Helfenstein, the book also includes critical texts by the curators of the two exhibitions, **Germano Celant** and **Toby Kamps**, as well as four essays by scholars and art historians **Jonathan Griffin**, **Paul B. Franklin**, **Gwen L. Allen** and **Alison M. Gingeras**. The volume is completed by an extensive, in-depth chronology that retraces Copley's career and biography within the artistic and cultural contexts of his times.

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