

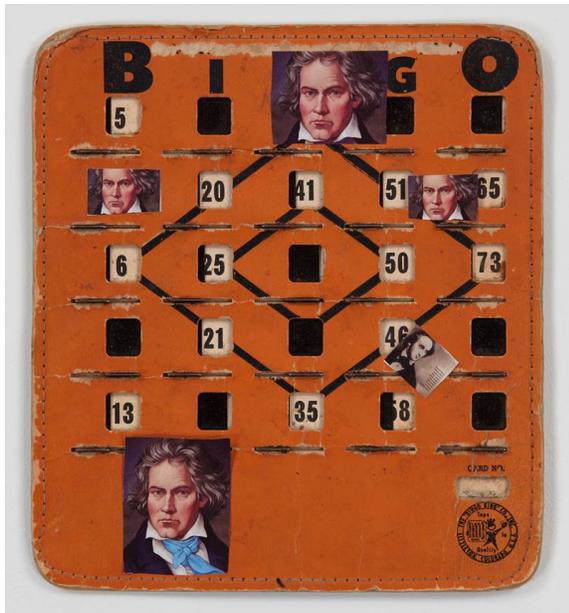
TIBOR DE NAGY

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL

John Ashbery: *The Construction of Fiction*
by Phillip Griffith

PRATT MANHATTAN GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 21 – NOVEMBER 14, 2018

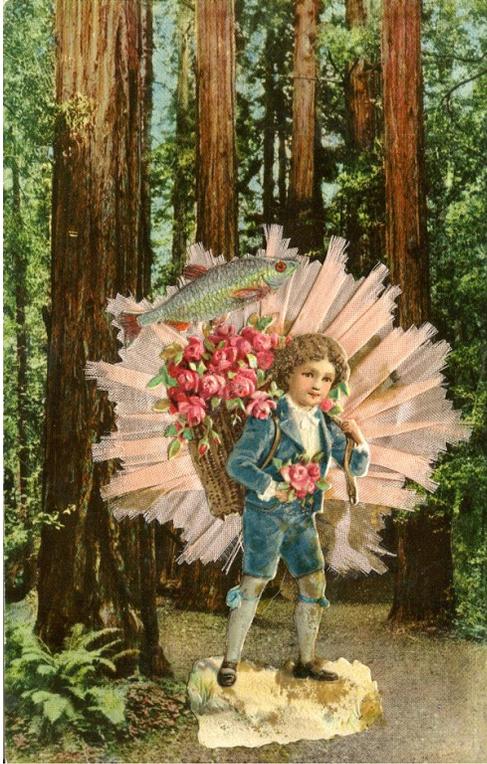


John Ashbery, *Bingo Beethoven*, 2014. Collage on vintage Bingo board, 8 1/4 × 7 1/2 inches. © Estate of John Ashbery. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

After the death of the artist and poet Joe Brainard in 1994, his friend, the poet John Ashbery, recovered an envelope of paper cuttings Brainard had collected for use in collages. The envelope was a posthumous message for Ashbery and reminded him of the collages he had made while spending time with Brainard and the poet James Schuyler in the 1970s. For Ashbery, who died in September 2017, the envelope was a fond reminder of his friend and signaled a return to his work as a collagist.

Curator Antonio Sergio Bessa implicitly places this story at the center of his exhibition of Ashbery's collages at Pratt's Manhattan Gallery, *John Ashbery: The Construction of Fiction*. The exhibition, which begins with a large framed Victorian-era collage that hung over Ashbery's writing desk in his Chelsea apartment, includes a suite of small collage works from the 1970s and a collection of larger-format collages from 2000 and after, hung by Bessa in small groupings according to thematic or formal similarities. The documentation also includes "controls" (1952) an early cut-up/collage poem by Ashbery in its original handmade draft along with a letter to his friend Robert Fizdale reporting that he had been inspired to create it by the Dada artist Kurt Schwitters. These collages illustrate processes of composition that Ashbery applied equally to his writing and emphasize the breadth of the poet's creative vision.

The influence of surrealism on Ashbery's work—in the figures of Max Ernst and the surrealist predecessor French novelist and poet Raymond Roussel, as well as more homegrown American exponents like Joseph Cornell and the outsider artist Henry Darger—is as important as Schwitters's influence. Ashbery was suspicious of surrealism for its hypocritical stance on freedom given its policing of homosexuality while acknowledging in his art criticism surrealism's generative power as a "renewing force." He preferred the collages and assemblages of Cornell to the officially surrealist ones of Max Ernst and felt immune to the accumulation of violent shocks in Ernst's collage novels *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) and *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929). Cornell's collage, on the other hand, "surreal as it is," Ashbery writes, "also has extraordinary plastic qualities which compete for our attention with its 'poetic' meaning." Looking at an untitled collage from 1931 by Cornell, Ashbery was drawn in by the fictional enigma of the scene as much as by the material presence of seams on a ship's sails and the strands of a spider web included in the collaged image.



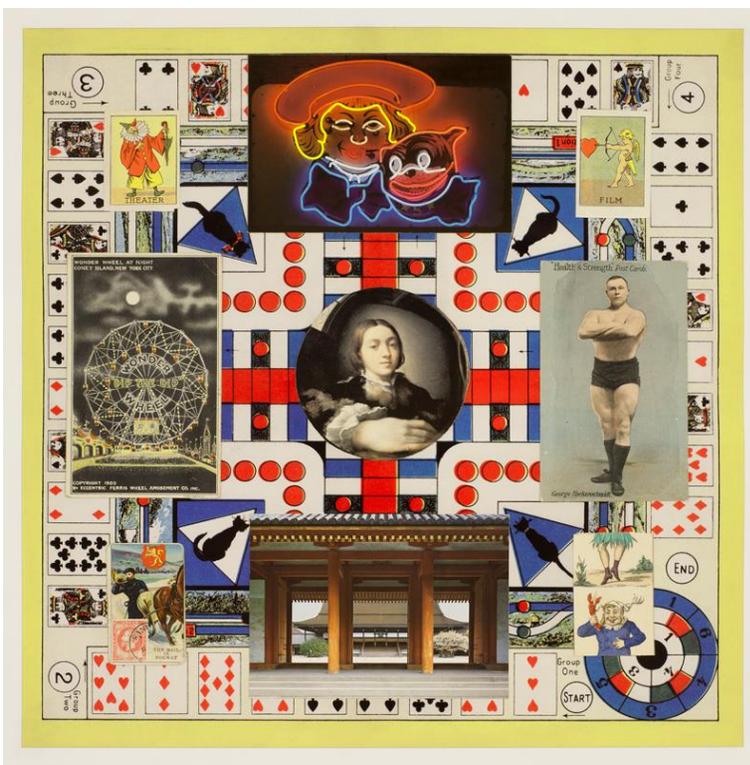
John Ashbery, *Poisson d'avril*, 1972. Collage, 5 1/2 × 3 1/2 inches. Copyright Estate of John Ashbery. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Ashbery's collages from the 1970s capture the kind of material presence that he found superior in Cornell's work. The thirty six collages made between 1972 and 1977 are all based on the format of postcards, and many show the edges and seams where Ashbery cut each element. Windows recur in several of the pieces, with a square or other shape cut out of the top layer image to reveal another image behind it. In *Muzzle* (1972), a large muzzled cartoon dog peers over through the crescent moon-shaped window hanging over the Statue of Liberty into a wintery pastoral scene; a cherubic boy in shorts holds a picture frame in his lap in *Après un Rêve* (1977) with an inset image that at first seems like a benign, black-and-white silent film still of an actor and actress until you notice the woman's bare breast.

Ashbery makes use of this manipulation of space in the flat dimensions of the collage with another manipulation of perspective and scale, too: in *Norge* (1972), a classical bust peers out from behind a mountain cliff overlooking a lake. The composition, like much of Ashbery's work, evokes a dreamified Americana, in this case a campy play on Mount Rushmore, perhaps. These collages, like the one by Cornell that Ashbery describes, contain a strong poetic mystery but also attract us to their seams and edges where windows and tricks of perspective have been cut and spliced into the imaginary

space of the images. In *Poisson d'Avril* (1972), the most enticing of the set (whose title colloquially means April Fools' in French), a spray of real pink tulle radiates out from behind a young boy selling roses from a basket he carries on his back as he walks through a forest. The tulle is crowned, in a deadpan pun borrowed from French, with a paper fish.

Ashbery's later collages from the 2000s have smoother surfaces. Full-color scans of vintage board game boards serve as the boisterous base layer for a number of these collages. They feel manic in comparison to the atmosphere of poetic (if often humorous) mystery of the 1970s collages. Working with assistants to help cull materials for these larger-format works, Ashbery combines source material from game boards, catalog ads, art historical reproductions, vintage valentines, and food photography (a minor obsession with the macaron develops). These are collages by the same artist, but now of the digital age. A cat meme even sneaks into Ashbery's collage vocabulary with *Morris* (2014), in which a tabby cat named Dr. Morris wears a stethoscope and white lab coat and presides over an ad for a formal living room by the Bremen-based early 20th-century building contractors Runge & Scotland.



John Ashbery, *The Mail in Norway*, 2009. Collage, digitized print, 16 1/4 × 16 1/4 inches. © Estate of John Ashbery. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

The post-2000 collages also reveal a mischievous, roving sexuality at work: male models appear apparently clipped from men's clothing catalogs, from the waist down; a shirtless man with handsome shoulders seen from behind frames a lower corner of a collage whose elements feature Courbet's well-known self-portrait, one pair of the disembodied legs, and the pocket of a pair of jeans in the upper corner. Though not indulging the violent shocks for which he criticized Ernst's collages, the accumulative glut of pop, consumer, and art historical citation in some of these collages does make looking at them more difficult. And since the printouts of digital scans give the paper a more uniform texture and quality, the eye runs over them at moments as if suddenly falling down shoots and ladders. In a room full of these collages, it's easy to move on to the next without processing what has been seen. However, as an exception to the digital process of most of these collages, *Bingo Beethoven* (2014) hangs high on the wall. As a collage it is closer in three-dimensional form than the rest of Ashbery's flat paper collages to Cornell's assemblage boxes, with images of the composer pasted into inset squares on a vintage Bingo board. Its material presence gives it the aura of an ironic pop icon.

And yet these two approaches—the careful cultivation of poetic mystery and the boisterous laundry list of images—are also both present in Ashbery's poetry throughout his career. His use of collaged language goes back to an early cut-up poem inspired by Kurt Schwitters whose original, handmade draft opens the exhibition in a display case beneath the Victorian-era collage. Throughout his career, his books—in particular his second collection, the experimental *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), written while he lived in France, named after the oath (the *Serment du jeu de paume*) that separated the French National Assembly from royal power during the French Revolution—are full of poems that use found language and quotation as the equivalent of visual collage in poetry. The titular opening poem of the *Tennis Court Oath* includes this disjointed, collaged passage: “I go on loving you like water but / there is a terrible breath in the wall all of this / You were not elected president, yet won the race.” The lines are snipped at their ends; incomplete, their phrases draw attention to the cutting and the line breaks that suture them together. As in the 1970s collages, attention is focused on the detail of the seam, even if interpretation is thwarted.

Ashbery's collaboration with Brainard in *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), a book written at the same time he was composing his 1970s postcard collages, tacks toward the more capacious strategy of the later collages. A compilation of all manner of lists, found

language, quotation, and passages that seem to mimic a travelogue, Ashbery composed the book mostly on a bus tour of the northeast. Unlike Ashbery's collages or poems, *The Vermont Notebook* includes both text and images, supplied in drawings by Brainard to whom Ashbery would mail sections of the text after it was written so that the accompanying drawings could be made. Like the early collage poem "controls" that Ashbery felt compelled to share in a letter with his friend, the all-encompassing collage strategy in *The Vermont Notebook* serves a relational purpose as a collaborative work that ties John to his friend Joe.

Ashbery had flirted with the idea of turning his 1970s collages into a book, perhaps not unlike his quasi-ekphrastic transformation of Henry Darger's paintings into the book-length poem *Girls on the Run* (1999). A concurrent exhibition at Tibor de Nagy (*Oh, What Fun!*, September 5 – October 14, 2018) displayed additional late collages from 2015 – 17, and a 2018 book edition of the collages called *They Knew What They Wanted: Collages and Poems* (Rizzoli Electa) pairs them with facing-text poems. Even without the book that would have been based on the 1970s series of collages, Ashbery has left us material evidence of the depth of his experimentation with visual and poetic forms in the year after his death. Ashbery's collages are poems, are fictions, are books, are missives sent to us as reminders of the poetic, narrative, material, and communal pleasures he found in all these art forms.

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