



*JOHN ASHBERY COLLECTS:*  
poet among things





# JOHN ASHBERRY COLLECTS: poet among things

Co-curated by Adam Fitzgerald, Emily Skillings and Loretta Howard Gallery

With installation drawings by Matthew Thurber

September 12 - November 2, 2013

LORETTA HOWARD  
GALLERY

525 West 26th Street  
New York NY 10001  
212.695.0164  
[www.lorettahoward.com](http://www.lorettahoward.com)



But meanwhile I am to include everything: the furniture of this room, everyday expressions, as well as my rarest thoughts and dreams, so that you may never become aware of the scattered nature of it, and meanwhile you *are* it all, and my efforts are really directed toward keeping myself attached, however dimly, to it as it rolls from view, like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace.

*from* The New Spirit [Three Poems, 1972]





Rendition of "Music Room" with works by Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, and two works by Jean Héllion.



left:  
Willem de Kooning, *Woman With Hat*, 1962  
Charcoal on vellum mounted on board, 40 x 28 inches.



above:  
Elaine de Kooning, *Untitled (Abstraction)*, C.1957-60  
Watercolor on paper, 17½ x 23½ inches.



## Right at Home: On John Ashbery's Hudson House and Its Collections

But why *the* object? Why are objects any more or less important than anything else? The answer is that they are not, and that, I think, is the secret of their popularity... They are a common ground, a neutral language understood by everybody, and therefore the ideal material with which to create experiences which transcend the objects... What these artists are doing is calling attention with singular effectiveness to the ambiguity of the artistic experience; to the crucial confusion about the nature of art, which, let us remember, has never been properly defined.

—John Ashbery, "The New Realists," *Reported Sightings*

In the mid-1970s, John Ashbery was in search of a house to buy, one to retreat to on weekends as certain overworked New Yorkers fantasize they must, a place to keep his books. Then, in 1978, approaching the exterior of a sleepily distinguished Victorian-era house plunked down near the center of Hudson, New York—Ashbery turned to the real estate agent (before even entering the house) and exclaimed, "I'll take it!" For the next thirty odd years, Ashbery has continued to tease out and queer the stereotypical rules of Victoriana, stuffing his house with the cluttered eclecticism of Japanese prints, American art pottery, period furniture, mementoes and bric-a-brac—yet puzzling his interiors with

bewildering incongruities as only this poet could (artworks by Joe Brainard and Jane Freilicher, Jean Hélion and Alex Katz, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Fairfield Porter and Trevor Winkfield). Eclectic, campy, ornate, the Hudson house evolved into more than just a restoration project. It has blossomed into an immersive, living collage, one capable at such a scale of synthesizing the poet's inimitable handiwork as antiquarian, collagist, art critic and lifelong poet. "John Ashbery Collects: Poet Among Things" is an invitation to look closer inside at, as it were, that Hudson space through the evocative line drawings of Matthew Thurber, the work of two dozen visual artists he has personally collected and written about, and a selection of actual objects transported from the house's dramatic rooms.



Published a year before Ashbery's purchase in Hudson, *Houseboat Days* contained his most ambitious literary blueprint to date of such a sublimely jumbled aesthetic, an intersection of contemporary American vernacular with 19<sup>th</sup> century French aesthetics, Baudelairean decadence and Rimbaudian surrealism. That volume of poems also boasted a most intricate syntax that noshed on such supple Modern prose stylists as Henry James and Marcel Proust, among others, including Gertrude Stein's slippery grammar, the highly mannered Auden of *The Sea and the Mirror*, Henry Green's colloquial stream-of-consciousness and most furtively perhaps, Giorgio de Chirico's masterpiece surrealist novel *Hebdomeros*. These ghosts presided while yet another kind of cultural catch-all music, a bizarre compendium of obscure diction and populist reference, broke through in jubilant mania. Here's the famed opening of one of the great poems in the English language, "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" (from the very same collection):

Something strange is creeping across me.  
La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars  
Of "I Thought about You" or something mellow from



Rendition of "Parlor" with installation of four works by Joseph Cornell.

*Amadigi di Gaula* for everything—a mint-condition can  
Of Rumford’s Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy  
Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller’s fertile  
Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged  
Stock—to come clattering through the rainbow trellis  
Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland  
Fling Terrace.

How the hell can any mental vision span this kind of immensity? From Warner Brothers and Italian opera to American kitchen goods and their waspy wholesomeness, from cinematic and painterly terminologies to those archly preposterous proper nouns: Helen Topping Miller, Pistachio Avenue, Highland Fling Terrace. Come again, Ronald Firbank? And yet, seen another way, this mountain of language mashes up image, sound and phrase in ways that recall the New York School (of painting) more quickly than it does Milton’s Wall-of-China prosody and Chuck Jones’ meta-cartoons (cf. *Duck Amuck*), two items the poet has admitted to being mindful of during the poem’s composition. To many early readers of Ashbery’s work, a production like “Daffy Duck In Hollywood” very well might have meant nothing at all. Today, surely, the tide has turned among academics and general readers as Ashbery is recognized as our great mainstream avant-gardist. What may have seemed so overwhelmingly nonsensical then is reread now in our Google Era as intriguingly jam-packed with an unending litany of possible meanings, references, intentions and analogues.



The way Ashbery’s career has dealt with the tension of ever-widening, at times decentering and dizzying accumulation is a decidedly American pragmatic approach: keep doing it. By 2013, there’s quite



above:  
Jane Freilicher, *Mixed Flowers*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches.



right:  
Edwin Dickinson, *Cove House*, 1941  
Oil on canvas, 10½ x 21 inches.

Rendition of "Reading Room" with Sleepy Hollow Chairs and works by Jane Freilicher, Edwin Dickinson and Joan Mitchell.





right:  
Joan Mitchell, Untitled, 1958 - 60  
Chalk pastel on paper, 13½ x 16 inches.

above:  
Joseph Cornell, How to Make a Rainbow, 1956  
Mixed media collage, 12½ x 9½ inches.

Rendition of "Study" with typewriter, selected curios  
and works by Joan Mitchell and Joseph Cornell.

## Purists Will Object

We have the looks you want:

The gonzo (musculature seemingly wired to the stars);

Colors like lead, khaki and pomegranate; things you

Put in your hair, with the whole panoply of the past:

Landscape embroidery, complete sets of this and that.

It's bankruptcy, the human haul,

The shining, bulging nets lifted out of the sea, and always a few refugees

Dropping back into the no-longer-mirthful kingdom

On the day someone sells an old house

And someone else begins to add on to his: all

In the interests of this pornographic masterpiece,

Variegated, polluted skyscraper to which all gazes are drawn,

Pleasure we cannot and will not escape.

It seems we were going home.

The smell of blossoming privet blanketed the narrow avenue.

The traffic lights were green and aqueous.

So this is the subterranean life.

If it can't be conjugated onto us, what good is it?

What need for purists when the demotic is built to last,

To outlast us, and no dialect hears us?

[A Wave, 1984]

a lot of product to tally. Twenty books of poetry. Three plays, a co-written novel (with James Schuyler), even the collaborative *The Vermont Notebook* (drawings by Joe Brainard). Prose collections of essays, lectures and art criticism. Two gallery shows of original collages. Countless uncollected translations from the French (next spring Farrar, Strauss and Giroux will publish two volumes of selected prose and poetry translations edited by Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie). Indeed, Ashbery has continued on for over seven decades so that what seemed so splintered and unfocused in the early years now seems so unified and coherent. Though he will be counted as a poet foremost, his poetic sensibility and imagination no longer seem easily distinguishable from or tangential to his life as professional art critic, collagist and collector. Like Proust, the delightful excesses of Ashbery's life and art have coalesced into a continuous, radiating whole. While most readers will be familiar with the extent of that literary corpus through the ongoing project of Library of America's "collected" Ashbery, viewers have a chance to browse publicly, for the first time, what is arguably Ashbery's most fully-realized artwork—an array of representative objects and artists showcased within the Hudson house.

The privilege and problems of being an iconoclast have followed Ashbery since the publication of his first book, *Some Trees*, which was selected by W.H. Auden in 1955 for the Yale Younger Poets Series. His second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, solicited by the late John Hollander for Wesleyan University Press and published in 1962, only exacerbated matters, offering a bewildering aesthetic radicalism no one had seen in American poetry since Gertrude Stein (though Williams Burroughs' fiction, John Cage's music and Jean-Luc Godard's cinema were concurrently happening across the arts). But time has been favorable to *The Tennis Court Oath*. Once the pariah championed solely by second-generation New York School poets and later by the Language movement, more recently its first foreign translation (into Spanish) has been a best-selling volume; it also served as the inspiration for the title, and themes therein, of Ben Lerner's acclaimed debut novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Fifty years later, it's still in print by its original publisher, with a new e-book edition available.



Readers have had years to catch up with Ashbery's originality as poet, whereas the Hudson house has only recently entered into the awareness of a small group of scholars, critics, fellow poets and artists, who are beginning to develop a vocabulary and methodology to assess its significance. To be sure, home-making, as a subject of critical interest for Ashbery, can be perceived throughout his writings. In a 1985 *Newsweek* review of the Kurt Schwitters exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art ("Fragments of Celestial Trash"), Ashbery notes how the artist had:

lived in the family home until forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1937... Meanwhile he had transformed the house's solemn Teutonic interior into a mad, dreamlike environment that he termed Merzbau... this constantly evolving project was to be the summit of his life's work... collages, junk assemblages, garbled poetic texts. Merzbau was a sort of Tower of Babel, meant never to be completed, and fragments were what it was all about.

Two years earlier, Ashbery had also written about David Ireland's San Francisco home, an article called "Artist's Daring Dream House" for *House and Garden*: "Ireland is a conceptual artist and his house is a work of art that can be lived in—must be, in fact, to be experienced whole. It is a combination often attempted but seldom realized." This concern with the artist's living space, with the idea of turning living space into art, echoes onwards, from an essay on the "purposeful hodgepodge" of Sarah Winchester's eccentric mystery mansion to an extensive *Architectural Digest* article about another Hudson property, the painter Frederic Edwin Church's 19<sup>th</sup> century estate known as Olana.



No gallery, catalogue or other document can contain nor hope to replicate the experience of seeing Ashbery's collections in the careful, canny composure of their home environment. What "John

Ashbery Collects” does hope to do, however, is frame some of the basic elements of Ashbery’s sensibility. Note a few of the wonky juxtapositions of one poet’s regal whimsy in action: a bottle of “Pee Cola” (a gift from Joe Brainard) across from drinking glasses featuring Daffy Duck in the butler’s pantry. A vintage advertising sign that hangs in the kitchen proclaiming “Take a – WHIZ Drink / ‘A Better Beverage.’” A figurine of Swee’Pea leaning against a bust of Lord Byron in his TV room. Staffordshire figures of maids and dogs. A toy-soldier toothbrush-holder. VHS tapes of Jacques Rivette’s classic *Céline and Julie Go Boating* next to *Daffy!* and Fritz Lang’s *Spiders* and the six-hour silent film French classic *Les Vampires*. This echo chamber of Ashbery’s ephemera doesn’t just represent a cheat-sheet of the artists and iconography he has championed most—it enacts a sublime leveling of culture, a daredevil democratizing of taste, obscure and populist at once, reminding the viewer that creative life has always been more numinous and varied than our narrow human focus tends to allow, let alone report. Instead, in the Ashberian dream-house we’re allowed to wander through, detour around, dream large and small, we no longer feel uneasy about the ironies and earnest loving that material culture has instilled so rigidly, so divisively inside us. The zaniness, learning and prodigality of Ashbery’s poetry—which the Hudson house instantiates in unrivaled creative fashion—might make for a daunting sensation of almost everything joining hands, assembling together. And yet that’s precisely what’s so genius about Ashbery, his way of making everything, what might otherwise be lost, overlooked or all-over-the-place, an entire horizon of possibilities between various art-forms and the objects of daily life, appear as if it’s all right here. Like we’re right at home.

Adam Fitzgerald  
New York City  
September 2013

## This Room

The room I entered was a dream of this room.  
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.  
The oval portrait  
of a dog was me at an early age.  
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day  
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced  
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?  
You are not even here.

[Your Name Here, 2000]



Alex Katz, *Edwin and Ada*, 1966  
Oil on aluminum cut out, 14<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

Larry Rivers, *Popeye*, 1999  
Pastel and pencil on paper, 33 x 24 inches

Rendition of "TV Room" with portrait of John Ashbery by Alex Katz and work by Larry Rivers



**from *A Magically Alive Aesthetic: [on John Ashbery's] Reported Sightings (1989)***

**by Jed Perl**

What you find in Ashbery's writing is a very personal view of "*ut pictura poesis*," a view that while never denying the particular powers of the literary and visual arts tends to see those powers as fluid, as changeable, as infinitely paradoxical. Ashbery's view of these matters has much to do with the great variety of art in which he took an interest in the 1950s and 1960s, a variety that included the surrealism and Dadaism of a previous generation, the abstract expressionism of the older artists whom he knew, and the painterly realism to which some of his closest painter friends were drawn. While Ashbery believes in the traditional powers of words and images, he does not believe in the immutability of their functions. A phrase or a sentence in a poem can convey narrative information, or it can be experienced less literally, for its quotidian charm or its musical sound. By the same token, a shape in a painting can represent an object in the known world, but it doesn't have to. What Ashbery is saying—to echo Horace's equation—is that "Just as in a painting, line, shape, and color can function in many different ways, so the same is true of words, phrases, and sentences, whether in poetry or in prose."

...

Ashbery always insists that we respond to art in many different ways, that art is *pictura* and *poesis* and philosophy as well, that we can discover the literary within the pictorial, the pictorial within the literary, and discover all of this to all sorts of varying degrees, in one part of a work of art, in a particular work of art at a particular time. The result is not anarchic, not in any way, but rather suggests that art is the disciplined exercise of a range of possibilities, with the work provoking branchings of thought and experience and feeling, all sorts of openings, analogies, echoings, doublings. Ashbery shows us that seeing, which provokes thinking, makes us see other things, which in turn enables us to think other things. This is an aesthetic that rejects fixed aesthetic distinctions, that is hybrid, impure, always evolving, for the artwork, as long as we are looking at it or thinking about it, is never fixed, is always becoming.



Courtesy

Joan Mitchell, *Untitled* 1960 collection of John Cheim, courtesy Cheim and Read, New York.

Joan Mitchell, *Untitled* 1958-60 courtesy Garvey Simon Art Access, New York.

Joseph Cornell, courtesy the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.

Alex Katz, *John Ashbery*, courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

Fairfield Porter, *John Ashbery*, courtesy of The Flow Chart Foundation and Hirsch & Adler

Larry Rivers, *Popeye*, courtesy The Estate of Larry Rivers and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Jane Freilicher, *Mixed Flowers*, courtesy of the artist and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

John Ashbery, *The Mail in Norway*, courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman With Hat*, Courtesy private collection, Washington D.C.

Elaine de Kooning, *Untitled (Abstraction)*, Courtesy the Estate of Elaine de Kooning.

above: John Ashbery, *The Mail in Norway*, 2009, 16¼ x 16¼ inch

right: John Ashbery and David Kermani at home in Hudson, NY, 2003. Photo: Maria Rand.

cover: Rendition of "Entrance" to John Ashbery's Hudson home

With special thanks to the following people for helping make this exhibition possible:

John Ashbery, David Kermani, Adam Fitzgerald, Eric Brown, Andrew Arnot and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Olivia Mann, Emily Skillings, Jed Perl, *Conjunctions*, Matthew Thurber, Beth Fiore, Carl Fudge, Timothy O'Connor and Flow Chart Foundation

Photography by Thomas Müller

"Right at Home: On John Ashbery's Hudson House and Its Collections," copyright © 2013 by Adam Fitzgerald. All rights reserved.

"Purists Will Object," from *A Wave*. Copyright © 1984, 1985, 2008 by John Ashbery. "This Room," from *Your Name Here*. Copyright © 2000, 2007 by John Ashbery. Excerpt from "The New Spirit," from *Three Poems*. Copyright © 1972, 1997, 2008 by John Ashbery. All rights reserved. Poems used by arrangement with Georges Borchardt, Inc.

Excerpt from *A Magically Alive Aesthetic: Reported Sightings* (1989). Copyright © 2007 by Jed Perl. Originally published in *Conjunctions:49, A Writer's Aviary* (Fall 2007), "John Ashbery Tribute" portfolio, co-edited by Peter Gizzi and Bradford Morrow.

