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**Ronald Jones**

September 11 — November 9, 2024

Empire is pleased to present a two part exhibition of Ronald Jones opening September 11, 2024. The first presentation, *16 Isarstrasse*, will be followed by *multiples: Good Vibrations*, in October.

*Good Vibrations: Ronald Jones' "Petrarch's Air" and Multiples* was the feature article of the March-April 1994 Print Collector's Newsletter by Nancy Princethal. In the text she details works spinning off from Jones' then yet realized opera including a computer rendered photogravure of the set

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# The Print Collector's Newsletter

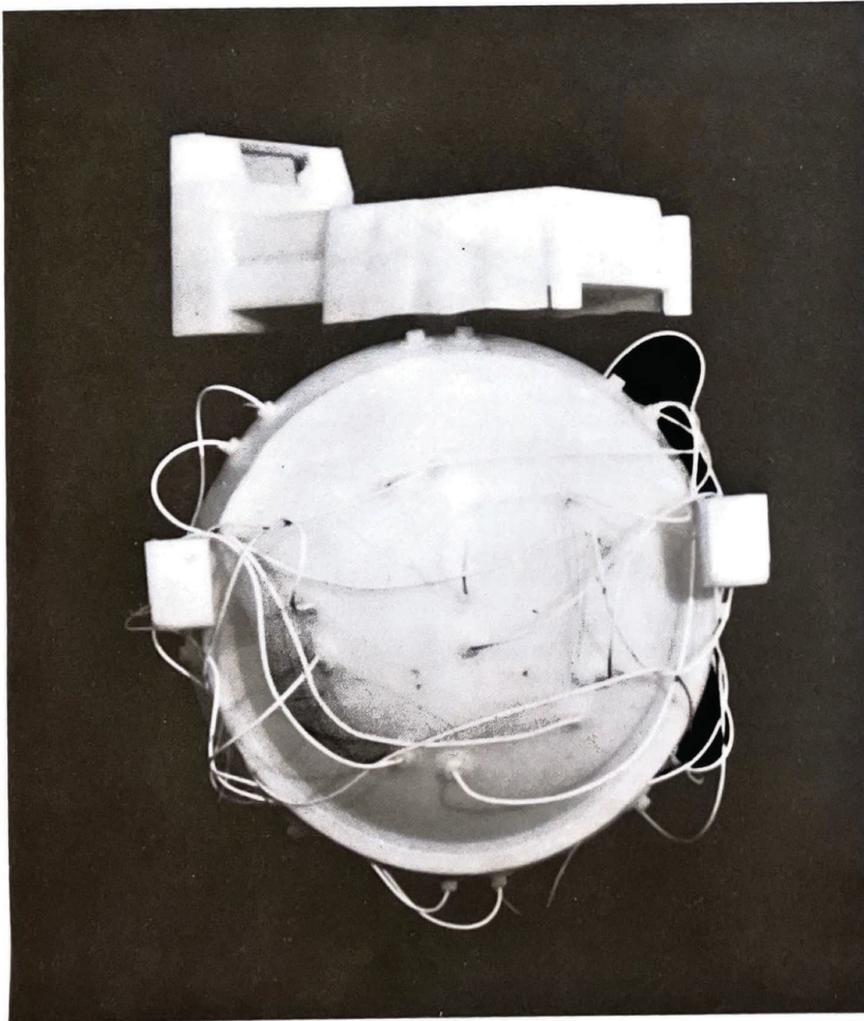
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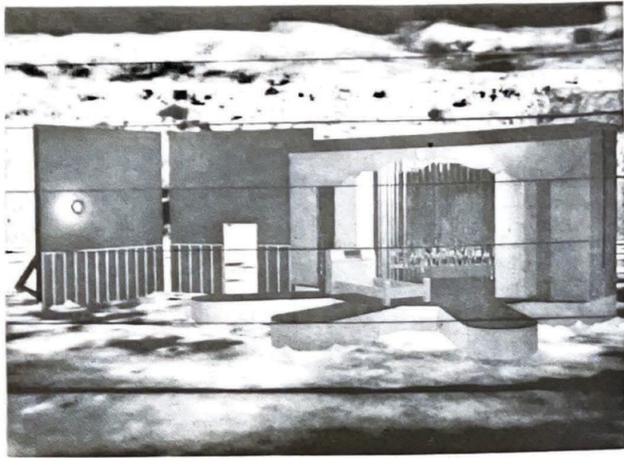
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## GOOD VIBRATIONS: RONALD JONES' "PETRARCH'S AIR" & MULTIPLES by Nancy Princenthal



Ronald Jones is making an opera. As yet, *Petrarch's Air* exists only in fragments: a narrative synopsis; a libretto and score for the first act, its music composed by Todd Levin; a photogravure whose imagery was composed on computer; and four small-scale models for sets made of laser-fused particles of nylon dust, also designed and editioned on computers. Last fall, viewers at the Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne heard a recorded performance of the first act while seated amid the models, hung on the walls in juxtaposition with large-scale black and white photographs. Jones' next planned project related to the opera will be on CD ROM, allowing viewers interactive involvement with each of the four performers. It may be several years before the opera tours as a live production, but Jones is confident that it will ultimately have a full-dress run. Assembling refractory components into multivocal wholes is, after all, his stock in trade; he makes his sculptures that way.

*Petrarch's Air*, however, introduces a new order of complexity. The narrative of the opera, which takes place in space above the surface of the moon, involves increasingly hallucinatory exchanges between a quartet of partly historical, partly invented characters: Jack Ruby, the Carousel Club owner and Oswald assassin, is made a would-be nuclear warrior not smart enough to build the explosive of his dreams; Dian Parkinson, in real life a product hostess for "The Price Is Right" and a Playboy bunny, is here an academician diverted from her career and temporarily devoted to Ruby; Werner Heisenberg, the German nuclear physicist, finds his knowledge gradually spirited into Ruby's mind; and Guy Burgess, the British double agent, is made to nurture a love for Heisenberg as fickle as Dian's for Ruby. Though some



variety of psychedelic soap opera seems one narrative option, Jones' subject gradually reveals itself to be nothing less than the queasy instability of the human mind. But ripe as the characterizations are, Jones is not mainly concerned with psychic pathologies; his real interest is in category disturbances, as when thinking gets magical and begins to look like wishing. Or when technology serves as a cognitive prosthetic—or organic disease, perhaps technologically abetted, alters emotional character. Starting with historical figures of towering ambiguity, Jones spins a lively tale of vagrant intelligence, as spymaster Burgess dithers over his new trove of information, while Heisenberg begins to show symptoms of dementia, as his scientific understanding is supernaturally transferred to Ruby, whose growing acuity first attracts and then repels Dian, herself finally freed to pursue her own intellectual dream.

*Petrarch's Air* is partly an ode to the '60s, so it's no surprise that powerful vibes abound. Indeed, the title itself refers to a belief, attributed to Petrarch, that information could be acquired by osmosis, as for instance that multilingualism could result from carrying around books written in foreign languages. Osmosis is a central motif of the opera, appearing in Ruby's conviction that sleeping in the bed once owned by astronaut Neil Armstrong will endow him with scientific knowledge; later in the opera Heisenberg, having inadvertently acquired Ruby's bed, finds his own intelligence transferred to the nightclub owner. More than a narrative device, this motif also governs the opera's formal relationships. The props speak, sometimes out loud, to the players, just as the opera's program grows, quite literally, out of a dialogue with an electronic mind. A rhesus monkey appears briefly at the opera's conclu-

sion to suggest basic animal ability for thought; there is no explicit mention of the other parameter of Jones' subject, the artificial intelligence of computers, but it is subtext and pretext, *deus* and *machina* both. The computer is also, at present, the only place where the project really exists. If the ambition to make a full-fledged commercial opera has an '80s ring to it, what sets *Petrarch's Air* apart from the kind of spectacle the art world once loved to hate is the way it can be made to emerge from—and disappear back into—the machines on which it is being designed. This will be so even for the completed opera, in which videotaped fly-throughs of Virtual Reality experiences of simulated environments as seen by the four characters will appear on screens overhead as they sing. In fact, Jones says his interest in opera stems from a fascination with Virtual Reality. Since neither the public nor available technology is ready for a VR experience of great nuance and flexibility, Jones says, opera suggested itself as a good approximation of total perceptual field immersion.

While *Petrarch's Air* awaits completion, the objects that exist in its anticipation are more than collateral material. Circulating abstractions of a larger project, they are, like all Jones' multiples, in a sense the currency of his work. Considerations of the politics of production are central to Jones' sculpture, as is his belief that the physical art object is seriously threatened with obsolescence. Jack Burnham said in 1968 that power lies not in objects but information, Jones observes, adding that not just information but the speed with which it can be moved around is art's business today. Each new project takes him on a different excursion from the art world proper, not in terms of audience demography, nor only in terms of the issues the

Ronald Jones, *Petrarch's Air: Act I, Scene I*, photogravure (17x20 in.), 1993. Courtesy Serena+Warren, New York.

work engages, but also of the way it comes into being. Production, from Minimalism on—from Rubens on—has for some artists involved workshop manufacture, a system that implies reproducibility. Jones turns around the well-worn implications of this fact to look at the mechanisms by which information, rather than durable goods, is assigned value and exchanged.

Jones, who was born in 1952, first gained wide attention only seven years ago, with the 1987 Metro Pictures exhibition of sculptures based on the various shapes proposed for a conference table to be used at the Vietnam War's Paris peace talks. He produced his first print the same year, an enlarged facsimile of the international identity card issued under the terms of the 1954 Hague convention to "personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property"; still in use, it is meant to assure safety in the event of armed conflict. A statement Jones wrote on the back of the self-published print condemns the privilege the card grants art and the system of discrimination it speaks for. It is part of this print's grim meaning that the emblem it offers as protection, which is used not only for individuals but to designate cultural institutions and landmarks, has probably served many times as a wartime target; national treasures in Thailand, Cambodia, and, most recently, Bosnia are believed to have been lost as a result.

This first official multiple is something of a position paper for Jones, establishing the basic nexus of culture, bureaucracy, and violence that has defined the field of his work since. The following two prints—like the conference table sculptures, and like a succeeding series of sculptures based on models of various human viruses and malignancies—show this intersection expressed in objects taken from outside the



Ronald Jones, *La Susanna...*, mercury mirror with wax button, carbon rod, and wire (14-1/2 x 12-1/2 x 3-1/2 in.), 1992. Courtesy the artist, New York.

art world that are dead ringers for high modernist forms. The pair of untitled woodblock prints on rice paper published by Landfall Press in 1990 (again, they relate to a unique sculpture) are pulled from two actual "collapse boards," devices used at the Walla Walla prison in Washington state to prevent prisoners about to be executed by hanging from crumpling at the knees or losing "intestinal fortitude." Despite the barbarism of this apparatus, at Jones' request the prison freely delivered the boards—the larger of them for men, the other for women—with an unconditional generosity he has found repeated many times since. In fact, the ready availability of such charged material is key to Jones' work, not only because it adds the conceptual and emotional flourish of authenticity but also because it suggests the ease with which such black market units of social worth can be exchanged in our culture.

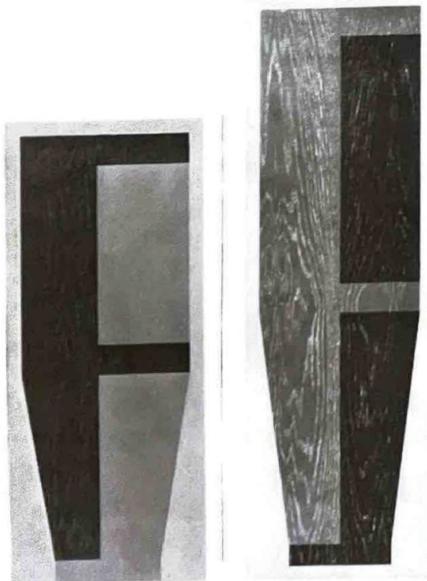
The collapse-board prints are the only multiples in Jones' crypto-reductivist mode. Printed in shades of orange and gray (for women) and blue and brown (for men), and textured by the boards' grain, the coffin-shaped images have some of the visual elegance of a painting by Sean Scully, which Jones sports as if it were Chanel. In subsequent work, both unique and multiple, he turned from this restrictive formula to an ever more inclusive style of composition, and ever more heterodox references. *16 Isarstrasse*, a series of unique photograms Jones considers pivotal, shows negative silhouettes of commercial components used to make the bomb that exploded Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1987. Made in East Berlin just after the wall came down, these ghostly but otherwise benign-looking still lifes were published by Edition Julie Sylvester in 1991. Again, Jones collected the material for the photograms remarkably unopposed, following the bomb-maker's footsteps from his home in Neuss—Jones spoke to the grocer above whose store he

lived—to popular local stores; for one of the series of sculptures to which these photograms relate, he was even able to get hold of a pair of seats from the downed plane, which had been salvaged for resale. As with Gerhard Richter's photobased paintings of Red Army Faction members, this body of work establishes a shockingly intimate relationship to terrorism, expressed with unimpeachable neutrality.

Jones' next multiple consists of a wax imprint of a button attached by a copper rod to an oval mercury mirror, published in 1992 by Edition Artelier in Graz. The button refers to a great-coat belonging to Sir Jeffrey Amherst, a British commander during the French and Indian War who is distinguished for having ordered the first known campaign of biological warfare, with the delivery of smallpox-infested blankets to restive tribespeople. The provenance ascribed to the mirror changes with each example of the multiple, though all are associated with victims of the Spanish Inquisition. One mirror is said to have belonged to Alonso de Hojeda, a Dominican prior who delivered the sermon at the Inquisition's first execution, and was later himself burned at the stake for concealing remote Jewish ancestry. Another mirror is attributed to Elvira de Cespedes, convicted in 1588 of being a "hermaphrodite" for living as a man, in which guise she served as a soldier, gained a surgeon's certificate, and married a woman, though as a slave girl of 16 she had married a man and borne him a son. A third keys to La Susanna, daughter of Diego de Susan who opposed the first Spanish Inquisition, and so on. Chemical warfare and elective identity makeovers—violent and voluntary means for challenging biology—are two favored themes in Jones' subsequent analyses of military barbarity, and of the extremes traveled by individuals to escape it.

For instance, in 1992 Jones also created an untitled vase with a related set of references, published by Edition Artelier. A black and white ceramic vessel slightly too big for conventional domestic use, it is meant to be planted with *Spartiphilum*, *Efeu*, *Bromelia*, *Oncidium*, and *Anthurium*, as it was in Hitler's Chancellery study designed by Albert Speer. In a text accompanying the vase, Jones quotes Speer's self-defense at Nuremberg, in which the architect proclaimed, "Every country in the world today faces the danger of being terrorized by technology." It was Speer's conceit, expressed in vain, that he had planted this warning in the narrative program of the Chancellery's decorative scheme. Jones' appropriation finds it flourishing, with toxic irony, in the vase's overblown neoclassicism and the greenery that sprouts within.

The page-long documents that accompany the vase and mirror multiples, and those that follow, serve as titles or subtitles and provide the work's historical background. Clearly, the meaning of the work rests in large part on these texts. In the unique sculptures, Jones incorporates these narratives as text panels; in the multiples, they are simply part of the documentation. He explains that the sculptures are generally destined for public exhibition and ownership, where they must speak for them-



Ronald Jones, *Untitled*, two woodcuts printed on collapse boards (64x26 in. and 81x26 in.), 1990. Courtesy Landfall Press, Chicago.

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Cover: Ronald Jones, detail from *Petrarch's Air: Act II*, laser-sintered nylon (c. 8x8x15 in.), 1993. See installation view p. 4. Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

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selves. The multiples, on the other hand, more often end up in private hands—or, to use Jones' words, in the hands of a "decision-making class of people." To the multiples' collectors, Jones entrusts the responsibility of telling the work's story, thereby making them "complicitous" with the artist in sustaining the work's meaning. The shift in the work's conceptual support from written to oral narrative does not simply provide for a richly varied cast of line readers, as owners play themselves in the labyrinthine parables Jones scripts. The absence of text panels in the multiples also allows for a fair amount of deviation from original intent; ultimately, it allows for fiction. And it is the gray zone between objective history and outright fabrication that seems increasingly to fix Jones' attention.

It is here that computers enter the story in earnest, negotiating current thresholds of knowledge, wisdom, and legitimacy. The multiples that Jones has designed on computer do not simply tell of execrable political acts; they also operate within the kind of technology that, misapplied, makes such acts possible. The first

computer-composed multiples are a trio of prints published by Serena+Warren, New York, in 1992. All were made by first constructing imagery electronically using a program called Sculp 4D; this software produces representations whose resolution is so high they seem clearer than life, for which Jones compensates by "softening" them in Adobe Photoshop. To this fabricated imagery are added other images scanned into the computer and altered there. The final composites are reproduced as photogravures. *Rapunzel's Syndrome* begins with a landscape fabricated to suggest one outside Ypres in Belgium where the Germans first used a chemical weapon, with devastating results, in World War I. Dropped into this landscape are altered, scanned-in details of two paintings by Goya, one showing part of the courtyard of a lunatic asylum, whose occupants provided entertainment for Enlightenment aristocracy, the second an architectural fragment from an Inquisition scene. On the walls and floors of Goya's buildings Jones projects more borrowed images: a humanoid werewolf by Cranach the Elder, a

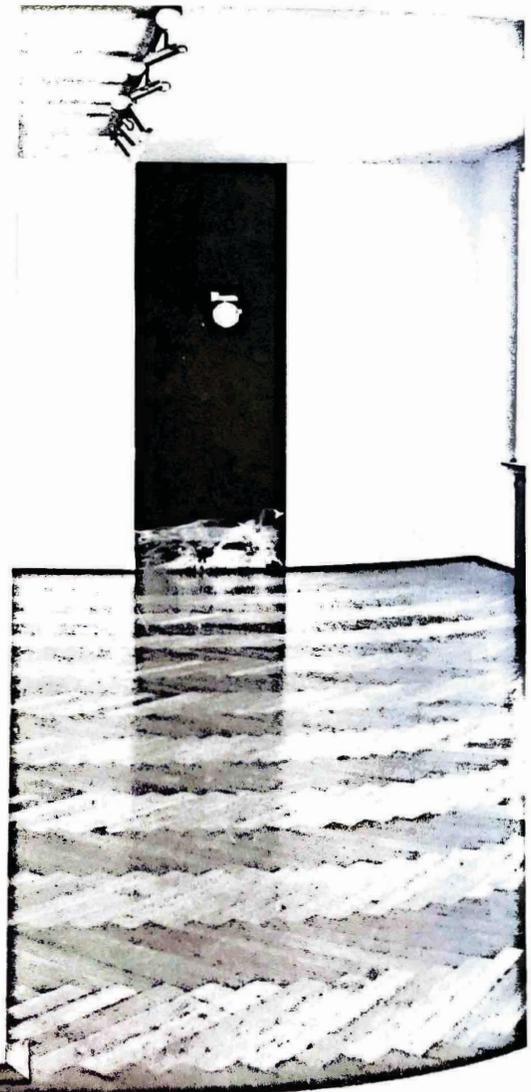
semen-eating medieval Buddhist ghost, and part of the last photograph transmitted by the unmanned lunar probe Ranger 7 before it crashed into the moon's surface. Some of the same material appears in *The Fool and His Mirror*, along with details from Holbein's painting gazing solemnly at a mirror, which returns to him an image of a ghoulish court jester. *Jesus Built My Hot Rod* again begins with the landscape outside Ypres, the lunar photos, and the courtyard walls from Goya, adding this time the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon, positioned above the landscape just as Ranger 7 was with respect to the moon before its crash.

For all the disparity and profusion of Jones' source material in these photogravures, they are seamlessly, and quite serenely, composed. The passage from one print to the next is like a measured stroll through a Spanish courtyard, with shifting orientations revealing new details of its allegory-rich architecture. And over all, Jones wafts the malignant atmosphere of the late 20th century. Like Max Ernst in the 1920s,

## PETRARCH'S AIR

AN OPERA IN FOUR ACTS

RONALD JONES



painstakingly piecing together visual novels from bits of already archaic Victoriana, Jones puts anachronistic imagery and an antiquarian printing process—photogravure—at the service of contemporary modes of signification. It is not an exact analogy: where the Surrealist's collages revamped a dated but integral visual language, Jones begins with images as far apart as possible, as if to see whether the matrix of electronic representation can digest them and still project an image of authoritative fact. But in true surrealist form, Jones revels in the Grand Guignol of his material, in the abysmal ironies it contains, and its gruesome seductiveness. And he works, again true to form, from a position that is basically literary.

Alongside his career as an artist, Jones is both an educator (he is now senior critic in sculpture at Yale) and a longstanding writer, and has made frequent contributions to *Arts* and other magazines that have survived it. His devotion to both pedagogy and prose is clear in the growing place of text in his work. Perhaps it's also safe to say that both practices have helped

Jones develop an appreciation for the fine line between history and fiction. Soliciting and sorting esoteric shards of information, working his phone and fax more than his local library (with the gratefully acknowledged assistance of Paul Myoda), Jones computes, with ruthless dispassion, the narrative value of altogether incommensurate material. He then arranges it in matrices that, against the odds, create formal coherence and credibility. This remains true even when, as in *Petrarch's Air*, he introduces wholly imaginary tales. While it is becoming something of an art-critical dogma to challenge the dominion of academic history with the authority of pure fantasy, Jones' decision to put this struggle to music and stage it with laser-sintered nylon props seems heroically perverse. To be sure, his undertaking has some affinities with Robert Wilson's operas about Einstein and Stalin and Freud, or, for that matter, with history-bending Chinese opera under Mao. But Jones is not interested, as Wilson is, in extending opera's own conventions, and even less in agitprop pageantry. It is as if Jones' material itself forces the choice of opera on him, by the multiplicity of its modes of address, and by its need for an expanded material spectrum between reality and artifice.

With their adamantine contours and dense, opaque off-white surfaces, with the odd way they project from black and white composite photographs shot across the wall, the four sculptures that have thus far been produced as part of *Petrarch's Air* seem both hyperreal and provisional. Published by Serena+Warren, the first shows Ruby's nightclub with its mirrored wall and three-fingered proscenium, Armstrong's bed perched atop it, the lunar surface beyond (this scene also appears in the composite photogravure, *Petrarch's Air: Act I. Scene I*). A second multiple shows an enormous nuclear weapon dangling below Neil Armstrong's bed; in a third, the nuclear weapon that Heisenberg builds for Ruby hangs from a crane, above the fission lab that surrounds his bed. The fourth sculpture shows the two beds deep in space, linked by models of the neurofibrillar tangles seen in Alzheimer's disease, themselves meshed with models of the molecular structure of nuclear fission.

As sculptures merge with photographs, words with images, and knowledge with fantasy—as hyperbole finds a safe haven, right along with some acid truths—Jones fashions his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In live performance, it will become complete, but only in the sense that a video flythrough offers an experience of Virtual Reality. The real *Petrarch's Air* can be said to lie suspended within the electronic network on which it is being produced, somewhere between a technical possibility and a dream.

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic living in New York.

Ronald Jones, *Petrarch's Air, An Opera in Four Acts*, four laser-sintered nylon multiples (c. 8x8x15 in. ea.) mounted on electrostatic prints (variable height x42 in.), 1993. (Far left) Act II, installation view. Details of Act I (top), Act III (center), and Act IV (bottom). Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

## LUCIAN FREUD: “UN CRI DE SPLEEN” by Gerrit Henry

The first half of the 1993–94 art season in Manhattan may well come to be known, in the annals, as “The Year of Lucian”—or, “Freudomania,” as one fed-up gallery dealer put it. There were shows of paintings and prints, big shows, small shows, a spate of new literature, and a revival, in the bookstores, of old, and there was talk, talk, talk—of a sort that may have been slightly akin to that among the shepherds upon hearing the angels' cries. Had we discovered—or rediscovered—our first, new, authentic, postmodern giant? Was our aesthetic redeemer among us?

The big focus was an exhibition of “Recent Work”—mostly superscaled oils, most of them nudes, with a smattering of graphics—at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through March 13, which had been organized and done its first time at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. An ever trend-beset *Art News* shot off the first cannon in September '93 (!) with a front-page feature by William Feaver, “Inside Freud's Mind,” this in clever reference to the fact that Lucian is Sigmund Freud's paternal grandson, who, at the age of 71, has been dubbed “the greatest living realist painter” by no less a critical eminence than Robert Hughes. *Art News* is to be congratulated for having snagged a first-hand interview with the painter; he is notoriously elusive, diffident, indifferent, and sometimes just plain hostile to the press, as if he had a lot to hide—or worse, nothing. The *Art News* piece was accordingly respectful and noncontroversial, sticking more to art matters than Freud's peculiar life-concerns.

*Vanity Fair* in its fall paean to the Dark Prince of Portraiture, unfortunately, had only as much access to Freud as provided by an over-breakfast jaw about his great friend Lord Rothschild, the subject of a *VF* profile, and bided its time, instead, filling us in on some 50 years of Freud and his fabled decadent/dandy, bohemian/aristocrat personas and how they came to be by reviewing *around* Freud. Included were such luminaries as writer Lady Caroline Blackwood, Freud's second wife and classic English beauty when he married her in 1953; Charles Saatchi, ardent (and well-stocked) Freud collector and founder of protean advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi; several well-placed American museum curators, whose responses to this new monster master were somewhat of the “Aw, shucks” variety. When immediate interviewees grew thin, name-dropping took over, often of Freud's titled subject matters: Penelope Cuthbertson, “Mod” star of swinging London in the '60s and the model for Freud's infinitely salacious “come'n'get it!” 1966 *Naked Girl*, with Penelope in considerable, considered disarray on a white-sheeted bed, facing us at a vertical, with nothing left to the imagination but the act itself. Another noblewoman-gone-slumming-as-model was then-Viscountess Jacquetta Eliot,

