

ACROBAT OF EXTREMES

A Conversation with John O'Reilly

John O'Reilly was born in New Jersey in 1930. He trained as a painter at the Art Institute of Chicago and has recently retired from a three-decade-long job as an art therapist at the Worcester State Hospital. His studio is two rooms on the second floor of the home he shares with his partner of 30 years, sculptor James Tellin. One room is crowded with scraps of paper, old magazines, wood, glass, and bricks for building tableaux. The shelf-lined walls contain an army of paper dolls (mostly O'Reilly's self-image repeated in different poses), body parts, found photographs, and images cut up from porn magazines and the pages of art history texts. Here he assembles the parts and the perspective. He then uses a Polaroid 100 to photograph the elements into alignment and correct proportion. In the second room he peels, files, cuts up, and pastes the Polaroids down to create a montage. He started exhibiting his photo-montages in 1982 and was included in the Whitney Biennial in 1995. He shows at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York and the Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston, and his work is in the public collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museums of Modern Art in San Francisco and New York. This conversation with John O'Reilly and James Tellin occurred at their home in Worcester, Massachusetts, on August 5.

Did you start cutting up and splicing images from famous paintings as a way to insert yourself into an imaginary community—one that is both internal and very real at the same time?

JO ~ Yes. If I am answering the question right, it is like creating a timeless world. I can go into Vermeer's studio and be there with him then and now. One of the reasons for not using clothes was the idea that there is no time costume. It destroys time. And it does it in a unique place, which is now my place. This is an alien concept to photography, where you are usually capturing someone else's place or the place around you. The cutting out actually started when I was a little kid during World War II. I loved soldiers and things like that—playing with little soldiers. I always

had to have the little English soldiers that looked precise and very real, whereas the ten-cent-store ones were all featureless blobs. When the war occurred they stopped making them, but they did put out great big books with whole army units or something and you had to cut all the soldiers out. I would buy those and make entire regiments of cut-out people. Tiny things, but maybe a lot of the urge to cut out does have a relationship to that. I also had a big toy garage set that you drove your little toy car into—you turned a crank, and it would take the cars up to different floors. I would fill that with the soldiers. It would be a little world and when I got sick of it . . . I would bomb it.

Your work seems engaged with an entire community of artists—all having a conversation that crosses generations and subject matter. For instance, Auden wrote the introduction to Cavafy's collected poems; Benjamin Britten then did an opera with Auden's libretto; and you have taken the figure of Benjamin Britten and created a series.

JO ~ One of the things that attracted me to Britten was his attraction to all sorts of works—"Billy Bud," "Death in Venice," "The Illuminations"—all these different works and artists that I was attracted to. That made me like him, in a sense. When I was doing the series on him, I was cross-referencing. I'd be making my picture, but it would be about Benjamin Britten's presentation of Melville's story. So, yes, there is that conversation. There is also an inner connection. I become each one of these people in my imaginary worlds. In terms of subject, Genet was my first interest. This is before I was using the camera. I couldn't buy his books, so I'd go to the library and take out their editions in French. Then I'd translate as much as I could. Finally a piece of his was published in English somewhere, and I tried illustrating it. This was in 1976. My next interest was Cavafy. I didn't have the money in the beginning to buy Cavafy's books, so I would take them out of the library and read them and copy the poems. I'd seen a book by Joseph Cornell in which he'd taken a French dictionary and pasted little things all through the book. So I found a Greek language lesson book, and I pasted

in these images of ancient Greek statues—cyanotypes that came from an art history course text—along with inserts of my copies of the poems. I would write the poem and place the pictures. The next step in these books was to buy Cavafy’s biography. I left his picture on the first page, but from that point on I substituted images of myself for him. I kind of take over the identity of these poets in my mind. I made Cavafy myself in that sense, too.

When did you first start putting yourself in the photographs?

JO ~ I started using photographs around 1980, I guess. I’d have Jim photograph me from the waist up. We’d rent a camera every weekend, and he’d photograph me. Then later we’d go to these photo-mat machines, and I’d take the photographs and incorporate them into other pictures. There is one of me as Genet, and another with Walt Whitman. My mother gave me my baby book, and a lot of the pictures that are in the Cavafy biography come out of that book. She was furious that I had torn it up.

One of the things that is so beautiful about Cavafy’s work is the frankness of his sensuality. His guiltlessness.

JO ~ Yes. It was natural. He comes off as natural and I probably have always felt the opposite. He not only could talk about himself and affairs he had in reality, but he’d also talk about the ancient Greeks. I think that helped me in this thing we talked about earlier of playing with time. Where someone like Genet would play with ideas, like religious ideas and sexuality, Cavafy would move between two cultures, ancient and contemporary. Also, Cavafy offered a way that was down-to-earth and more consistently poetic than Genet—where you have this sudden shift from reality to fantasy. For me, Cavafy leveled that shift out, and so it became something I could move into and take the shifts I felt but keep them less abrupt.

Another artist whose influence you've spoken of is Joseph Cornell.

JO ~ Yes, as far as visual artists. Cornell is maybe the first American visual artist that I really found an identity with. He is not great like Titian or somebody like that, but he is a visual poet, and if I could put my work anywhere I would want to steer it—if you are going to steer one art into another—toward poetry. As a kid I had no visual “artists,” big letters, that I even knew of. Norman Rockwell was it, and I think that is where wanting to be an illustrator came from, although I've always had to fight that urge to illustrate—I come up to the edge of it and then pull away.

What makes you resist that urge?

JO ~ If you have two things coming head on—a love of illustration and love for art—to take one road you are constantly pushing the other one aside. Illustration is so direct. It doesn't leave you free, as the audience or even as the artist, just to do anything that wants to happen. You are, to a degree, trapped. But then it's comfortable to be trapped. When I do a series, like “To Patrick,” just the idea that it's a series eases the making of it. And you can work much more freely. It is not like everyday you have to go into the studio and start from nothing and dream up a picture because at least you've got a theme going around in your mind.

Your work seems different from Cornell's. Cornell's boxes are very intimate, but he's absent from the whole scene. You seem to have found a way to capture his intimacy—in terms of the small scale of his work—and at the same time foreground your own personal, imaginary world and insert it into that space.

JO ~ I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right. I think of the Cornell *Hotel Room*. The Paris hotel rooms, Andromeda. You have Cornell out here in his loneliness, and then the longing over there in his box. And you are right. I would have that hotel, but then I would stick something personal

between me and it—not necessarily myself, but a contemporary figure or a form from a porn magazine or something. He wouldn't do that; he would keep it all way over there.

JT ~ So even the nude figures from porn magazines are like taking the real world, your real world, and putting it in there, and he would seldom do that kind of thing.

If you would call that your real world. That is an interesting concept: cut-outs from porn magazines are the real world, as opposed to a political statement or a fantasy world.

JO ~ Pornography, in a sense—if I can get this straight, it's not easy—is Genet being frank.[Laughs] It's the sexuality without angels and without frills and without love. The pure reality of it, the ugly people—they've got pockmarks and tattoos on their bodies. It's the "real" that our social life then tries to lay a screen over, a veneer. It's what you don't really want to look at, and yet what happens. Genet, in a sense, gave me the courage to use the nude more freely. I bought Muybridge's book, *The Human Figure in Motion*, which had come out around that time, and I started cutting the people out. Then, for the first time, I went to the Times Square pornography shops. They'd get very furious at me, you know: "Buy or get out of here, don't just look at all our magazines." But I would spend hours looking for leaping figures. [Laughs] Way back then the nudist magazines had people in parks jumping around or playing football or that kind of stuff. I looked for certain people that I could cut out and put into these big things I was doing. Somehow Genet gave me the nerve, say, to face Times Square and do that. He is very lyric and beautiful, writing about angels, etc., then all of a sudden you get this bald reality. And then you go back to angels.

In this context, your work often seems to be both ironic and romantic.

JO ~ A lot of my pictures are very funny, but I don't mean them to be funny. When I do them I'm dead serious, but they'll come out hilarious

sometimes. Some poet on Public Radio the other day said that sex and death were the two themes in art—all my life I've felt the same thing. Sex I take as Life—that's what life is. And I am an artist, I'm trying to portray life. On the one hand I am going to show sexuality as eroticism. But the other half of my pictures do concern death. I cut up the pornography sometimes and I do eliminate some of the sexuality, mainly because you can take only so much reality. I try to break up my whole thing so everything is equal in the picture. All I've got to do is put a sex act going on in there and my equality is gone. [Laughs] It is too illustrative, let's put it that way . . . so desire and eroticism will play through the pictures more than actual sexuality.

Which is also why it's less politically overt.

JO ~ Yes. Have you seen David Wojnarowicz's pictures in which there are little moons around and within each little moon there is a sex act going on? That is explicit, but I think I end up looking at the little moons and miss the big picture. His is a political statement; he is doing that to make a political point.

Many people have seen you as a political artist at the front of the gay movement.

JO ~ Yes, but that is completely unconscious. A lot of the work is trying to find out and define myself. How do I feel about these things I'm showing? I think a lot of my work is really making an identity. If I didn't work would I even have an identity? I work pretty compulsively. If I didn't—oopsie-daisy, where am I? Who am I?

There is that passage in Keats' letters where he talks about walking into a room and becoming everyone in the room. . . .

JO ~ Exactly.

It's also the process of working and creating while at the same time placing yourself, like you were saying, in a kind of identity. Simultaneously, it is an escape from the whole question: you forget, you travel, you disappear, you're suddenly in Valesquez' studio. There is a real freedom to that, and not necessarily an ironic one, such as in your image "Dancing with Picasso" [1985].

JO ~ That is true; that was done seriously. I love his work. I had a dream once: Picasso and my father fused. I vaguely remember it. I was in a skyscraper. And Picasso floated in and out of the window. I think "Dancing with Picasso" or "Action pose before Picasso" [1984] is serious. Or, it's ironic in a daring way—as in, you dare to compare yourself to Picasso. It probably was made because I had a pose of Picasso going like this, so I did a pose going the other way. I put the two together.

So that is really where the action comes in. Freedom. You start dancing.

JO ~ Around 1984 I got a Polaroid camera. All of these pictures depended on the size of my photographs and me hunting for a picture that I could match with it to make a montage that looks like a photograph. Does that make sense? Then I realized, somewhere along the line, that I could take a picture of the other picture as well as a picture of myself. At the same time, we moved into this house. And I couldn't stand it—I had a hard time coming in. I would sit out in the yard all day. We worked one job, each part time. When Jim was at work I'd come in the house, do these photographs, and it was like almost throwing yourself against the walls to make yourself a part of a house. The next change came around the nineties, where instead of creating a series of Polaroids across a picture, I started to build up and down, like I do now. Which led to the War Series and things like that.

In the "Of Benjamin Britten" montage, was it Christ you had in a tutu, or Hitler in a tutu?

JO ~ Hitler, as Christ, in a tutu.

There is some irony in there.

JO ~ And that would be deliberate. That comes from when Benjamin Britten isolated himself. Britten worked best in isolation. In fact, toward the end of his life he made a lot of enemies because he had a whole series of people you had to get through if you wanted to see him. Someone from the music world, I can't recall who it was, was turned away. And he said that the atmosphere around Benjamin Britten is no different than Hitler at Purchase Garden (Berchtesgaden). It was as hard to get to see Britten as to see Hitler. He went on to say that Britten masked a sadist behind his charm. That's the image.

It was an interesting experience for me because I had seen that picture before I saw Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator. And so for me Charlie Chaplin was working from you as a source.

JO ~ And he was, he came and he said John, I need a good idea on how to portray Hitler. I said, Charlie, take this globe. I probably got it from Chaplin. That's funny.

So certainly there is that kind of humor there.

JO ~ Yes, and it is ironic. Probably most people don't see that. How would you see it? My art is very private in that way—probably too private. The only collaboration I have ever done was with Jonathon Hammer, a book-maker living in San Francisco. He contacted me and asked if I would do a book with him on Hugo Ball, the Dada poet. The story in it doesn't make sense, except you get the feeling that this dictator is coming to this village. And so I did this thing of Hitler and me: in one he's my father and I'm his son, and in the next I'm his father and he's my son. It's insane. I did big

collages as well as little pictures through this book. But that's how I got into the Whitney Biennial: the curator saw that book.

You mentioned that maybe your work is too private, and in an earlier interview you talked about how your own work is an effort to insist that your private world, your internal world, is integral to a larger social construct—that one's personal obsessions at some level are everyone's obsessions.

JO ~ Well, when I say things are sometimes too private it's similar to the Hitler/Benjamin Britten thing. I think it must be totally obscure to people. Or like my collage of the little boy holding the trunk of an elephant. To me, the elephant is my father, but nobody is going to know that, right? And in the image there is a little crucifixion down at the bottom where the elephant's trunk and my shadow cross paths. One of the big events in my life was when I went to the Ringling Brothers Circus. My father was too drunk to take us, so an uncle took me to the hotel where my father was—we got the tickets from him and went. And so there is a kind of connection with the elephant. But nobody in the world is going to know that. On the other hand, maybe in the emotions that luckily may come in some of my pictures, people will pick up something of my private emotion. Unexplained. And hopefully it can integrate into their feelings. I differ with a lot of the gay movement in the sense that it wants to isolate itself. A lot of artists photograph beefcake, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual, and that is their audience—an isolated audience. Whereas I would want my audience to be everybody. I want to be integrated into the world with my feelings just as anybody else is. But many times the world makes you feel you can't, and you are isolated.

That is true. Particularly in the art world, which is always looking for a “buzz” or “angle” that helps market work. You are certainly not marketing your work in a specific way.

JO ~ I don't think so. But I think my audience is split. There's a gay audience for it, but there is also very much just a regular audience.

Part of that might tie into the obsessive or painstaking creation of the work—there is a beautiful surface quality that makes your work extremely appealing.

JT ~ It is true. Part of your obsessiveness is a kind of proving. It's interesting to see John work because he has all these pieces, but he is always laying strips of paper around the edges to form them, because the edges are so important in his work.

What is your relationship to “beauty” in your own work? Do you equate beauty with perfection?

JO ~ I guess so. Beauty is probably a wholeness that for me means tying the littlest thing in the picture to the outside boundary of the picture—and meanwhile trying to tie each piece from the outside back to the little piece that is in the middle. So it is the whole. I see myself often as a clumsy stylist. I have felt that ever since I was a kid in school. I was always the person in Art class who had the best ideas but the clumsiest execution. People could come and, like Picasso, draw a head or a dancer with three brush strokes, whereas I would have to needle it out in some clumsy way. Often if I look at my pictures I feel that they are kind of clumsy. Take an Ellsworth Kelly, for example: it just looks so precisely beautifully done, and I always feel klutzy compared to that.

In your later images you seem to have purposely broken through that veneer of perfection by highlighting the artifice of what's going on: putting a brick or broken glass in the image, or including the tacks that hold up some of the images. That seems to me a more contemporary way of approaching the whole notion of “beauty.”

JO ~ Including the viewer, showing them how it's done. Part of that is necessity. I used to do pictures that were a horizontal band of a series of photos, but when I broke that band and went vertical with my small camera, I was limited to what I could take an image of, so I had to pile images. And

in piling images it became much more obvious what I was doing. The artifice became a part of the show, and so then actually putting in the pins and what held the images up became a way of saying I see it too. In fact I couldn't even build some of them without having the supports show. I think they became closer to art in general as they stopped trying to imitate photographs per se.

There is also a playful intelligence in these images: for instance, what seems like a seam often isn't, and there are always only two tacks, and so tacks start to mean something else.

JO ~ A lot of the time the tacks do connote pain. They're meant to do that. The glass, especially in the small things, is often broken—which probably just means exactly that, broken glass. But it's also used to pick up reflections. When you see a pile of it, or a sharp piece of glass, I usually have a meaning for that, and it usually is tied into the notion of pain—the tacks in the photographs may become the nails from the crucifixion.

What is your feeling about Cindy Sherman's work, or Lucas Samaras? Is there a relation there?

JO ~ I feel closer to Samaras. I remember being impressed by his very early polaroids. First of all, they were black and white. In fact, he has a book in which he experiments posing his body. It probably is an influence on me. I also like very much his little color polaroids, where he took the real and made a fantasy out of them. Cindy Sherman's work—I just don't see a relationship, except in the idea of self-portraiture. I think she's on a completely different track than I am. She is making herself look like the history, whereas I'm trying to walk into the history as myself.

One of my favorite images of yours is "With A Satyr" [1985], in which you are sitting at a table, practically naked, with a camera draped around your neck, and this mythological beast is sitting down with you. Both of you are holding different portraits of yourself, and the satyr is looking at one of you with his head back a bit, grinning. It's amazing because both worlds

are traveling back and forth: you've traveled back through time into this mythic space, and the satyr in turn has joined you and is traveling forward through time into your space, having a conversation through your photographs.

JO ~ Through art.

JT ~ The funny thing is that the satyr and John look alike a little bit. Don't they? Something about the nose I think.

JO ~ Oh come on.

Does your willingness to explore these different worlds relate, in some way, to your occupation as an art therapist for the mentally ill? Could you tell us about the job you both shared?

JO ~ Jim and I were art therapists. Which means we were almost like psychotherapists using art with patients. Patients would come in and draw pictures and then hopefully discuss the picture with you. We would ask questions and so forth. It actually worked in the hospital faster than most psychotherapy. The advantage of it was that it was non-confrontational. The picture became like a third person at the table. You would draw the picture. The picture would be out there. I'd ask you about something in the picture and you'd answer me about that in the picture. And, in the end, I haven't asked you a thing about you, but you've told me a lot about you through the picture, which is what the artist does anyway. So we would be ahead of the others who were asking direct questions, and we would give the pictures to the doctors to help them in their work with the patients. That's basically what we did. We split up the job. Jim worked two and half days, and I worked the other two and half days.

JT ~ I worked Monday-Tuesday and half day Wednesday, and John worked half day Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. He's never forgiven me because I was smart enough to realize that all of the holidays came on Monday.

JO ~ Neither one of us had any training in art therapy. We'd known somebody who was an occupational therapist who had patients draw. So we asked Worcester State Hospital if they would be interested in trying a similar program. They sent us to school to become art therapists in Boston: we studied privately and then went to Boston University.

JT ~ It was a well run training hospital, and it was huge: 2,500 patients. John and I became Distinguished Fellows in the International Society of Psychopathology of Expression.

JO ~ I think I've mentioned before that the patients were in a way like Genet and Cavafy. Or Nijinsky and his diaries. They would draw anything. And so you work with this day in and day out, and finally you say why the hell am I worrying about what I put down on a piece of paper. This is all legit. To take the question further, and going back to your comment on Keats—you walk into a room and you're suddenly everyone in the room—I have very thin boundaries, so I entered easily into patients' worlds. It's too easy. And I suppose that ability is the same thing that happens in the pictures: I can go to a Vermeer, and I'm easily in Vermeer's world. Maybe the patients made this kind of thing easier to portray, knowing, as an artist, you could always come back out.

JT ~ We were pretty successful as therapists, both of us. People who are good at it usually have some reason to be good. We never met anyone in the field that didn't have a personal reason to be there, a kind of entrée: inevitably their brother was unstable or their family had some problems historically. If you're an artist you already have a slippery border or ego-boundary.

JO ~ And maybe some artists freeze. This is where the patients may have helped us. You can't help but feel with a lot of artists that they could go further and don't—there's a block or something. I don't mean just a writer's

block, but something stops them. I go to exhibits and the person doesn't do this thing. You see it's headed there and it won't go there. I get furious. [Laughs] Maybe knowing that we could go into these worlds and really get enmeshed in them was useful. Any kind of a situation you want to imagine—you're there.

You mean with a patient.

JO ~ Right. But you also are sane enough that you're able to, at the end of the day, come back into yourself. Not that you don't take problems home, which we certainly did. Patients would call all night—it never stopped.

JT ~ That's why we have an unlisted telephone number.

JO ~ For a long time I wouldn't have a telephone. And finally a patient found out where I lived—

And brought you a telephone. [Laughs]

JO ~ Well, the only way to keep the person away was to buy a telephone.

JT ~ This patient was very smart—went to the voter registry and found out where John lived and came over and made such a commotion to be let in that the neighbors complained.

Wasn't Joseph Cornell's brother disabled? Wasn't a lot of his work made for his brother?

JO ~ Yes, he actually made things for him. That famous collage of the train coming through the fireplace is a memorial to his brother. Cornell more or less gave up a life. It's probably an excuse, but he gave up his life, in a sense, to help care for his brother and to be the voice of both of them.

JT ~ The hospital where we worked was only for very seriously ill people. You were either schizophrenic—that’s what they called them at the time—or in a major depression. When I was child my mother became very ill with diabetes, an incurable kind of diabetes, and she became very depressed and lost her eyesight and so forth. So I was very good at working with depressed women.

JO ~ I was good with schizophrenics.

JT ~ Which is what gives you the sensitivity that allows you to be a good therapist. When we started at Worcester State Hospital, we thought we were going to see lots of artists, because everyone we knew in the art world was slightly crazy, right? We thought it would be easy: artists would come through the place like water. Well, the whole time we were there—27 years—there were only three or four artists.

Did any of your patients discover art and stick with it?

JO ~ What happens in art therapy is that they become very good, and then as they get well they lose the urge.

You mentioned transference. Is that part of your art-making process?

JO ~ My favorite painting is Rembrandt’s “The Syndics of the Clothmaker’s Guild”—when I was in Amsterdam I spent three hours sitting in front of it. And it came to life. The figures in the painting actually were there. I’ve always taken them to be judges, commenting on your life. At that time, I had a case that was so up and down it was easy to make mistakes. And I’d come home feeling I’d made a mistake. The patient was suicidal. You never knew when they were going to act out. In a picture, I put myself as a crucified figure reflected in glass, and the Syndics are looking at me and making a judgment on the error, whatever it was, that I felt I had done. That’s my

counter-transference: feeling that I really could make a major mistake with this person that would affect their life, or they could commit suicide. All these thoughts go through your mind. And in transference and counter-transference, when you put it down on the most basic level possible, it's like you eat one another.

You eat one another?

JO ~ Yes. You devour each other, emotionally. It's as if you are absorbed into the other person, psychologically. They are absorbed into you.

There is a story that you were drafted during the Korean War, and rather than come out you took your chances with the war. You were choosing, in essence, to face the possibility of death rather than declare yourself homosexual in American society. Is this the beginning of your various war series?

JO ~ The Gulf War triggered the series but, yes, that is the background. Back then they gave you a physical but they also gave you an IQ test. At the end of the test it said: Are you a homosexual? Yes or no. All you had to do is put that little mark there and you are out of the draft. But there I was, practically the day after I graduated in the room with all the kids I had gone to school with and who had also gone to college and come back. My family had no idea about my feelings. I had never acted them out, but I knew what the feelings were. I could not put the X there, I just absolutely couldn't, which meant that in all probability I would be in Korea on the front lines and maybe get shot but that was better than acknowledging it.

How was it that you didn't go to Korea in the end?

JO ~ First I went to leadership school and then to officer's candidate school. I knew I could never get through, but that killed about three quarter's of a year and I had a year and a quarter to go. I lucked out and got assigned to

a place where they made manuals for the army. I would draw pictures. The whole experience was pretty horrible. That was a dramatic moment. You wanted so much to check that box. But then I probably couldn't have gone home. It would have been just too devastating.

So all of the war imagery comes from your imagination. Could you talk about this? Your focus has been primarily World War II.

JO ~ It would have been World War II because that was probably the high point of our lives, right?

JT ~ [Laughs] Speak for yourself. How old were you at that point?

JO ~ Nine years old. Nine years old to fourteen years old. Everything you do, you go to school and all day you draw Hitler and Tojo. And buy bonds. I was in the scouts—wouldn't be now. [Laughs] You went out every week and collected newspapers and tin cans. I was an air raid messenger: you had your bicycle and wore a band around your arm and you were to carry the messages from warden to warden. We lived on the ocean, and there were soldiers two houses away patrolling the beaches, watching for submarines and spies to land. Everything was blacked out in the house, all the windows. It was exciting.

JT ~ Also your father was away in the war.

JO ~ And my scoutmaster was a soldier. There was an older boy who used to always walk by the house, a very handsome teenager who was my idol. He was the first person killed from the town.

JT ~ John did the War Series (1991-2) as an installation. It was based on the little monuments to World War II soldiers on Worcester street corners. In fact, there's one right down here on the corner. It's a granite monument

erected on the street where the person lived—they have sloped tops with brass plaques on them. They are all over the city, particularly in the poorer sections.

JO ~ I'd read the monuments—pull all that history together, which came from this important part of my life—and then, like you do in therapy or anything, become the soldier that died. I think that's why they have emotional value, if they do. The montages in the installation were hung over wall areas painted gray to suggest the monuments.

JT ~ And underneath it in white type—

JO ~ On the gray in white . . .

JT ~ —was the name of the thing. The titles would be Corporal . . .

JO ~ So and So, Killed in Action,

JT ~ Twenty five years old, or whatever.

The homoeroticism, the war, and religious factors come together in this series. And as complicated as the pictures are, they also seem like a visual and emotional attack. There is a kind of multi-layered critique going on.

JO ~ It's saying in a sense that both sides had the religious figures. Germans went to their chapels. Hitler allowed this to happen, I know that. Americans went to their chapels. The Japanese went to their Buddhist priests. That is part of it, and part of it is the let down, in my own life, of the faith I had which was at its height when all that was going on. As a kid I couldn't see it—that there was a contradiction. And I suppose I am also tying religion and sexuality together in a sense. Francis in Ecstasy and somebody else in sexual ecstasy, physiologically, probably are not that different. Both are a

loss of self. The acrobat going to the extreme. You talked about irony—there is irony in those. This is the only public thing I ever did where I really thought in terms of people looking at it—where I painted a stigmata in a real hand, where I equated thorns with rifles. It is meant to be bitter and hard. Also, for a soldier (I've read this and experienced this to the extent that you can in training) it is very exciting: there is both the negation and an exhilaration. Have you read *The Thin Red Line*? About the soldiers and how charged they get when combat is going to happen. Sexual thoughts come into their minds. That I think is really true.

There is another more recent war series, Occupied Territories [1995], which works from found photographs. Could you talk about these?

JO ~ That series became the most controversial work I've done. A curator wanted to buy one for a museum collection. The work was presented for committee approval but was rejected since a board member reportedly said, as long as I am here he won't ever have any work in this museum. In a way I understand the reaction, but in a deeper way they didn't understand what I was saying, so I obviously wasn't clear enough.

What was the objection to it?

JO ~ The objection is because of the feeling about German soldiers.

JT ~ They found the series idolizing of the German soldier?

JO ~ Yes. I gave him a positive/negative. In other words, he's sexually attractive but a German, and he is in an occupier's position. I discovered an actual album of a German soldier who was stationed in Normandy from before the Allied invasion. In it they're just like us: playing ball, horsing around in the barracks, talking to the children. I mean, change the helmets and you wouldn't know the difference. It is a kind of comment on that

situation. But I can also understand the position, which had never even entered my mind when I was doing it, which says, OK, the images are anti-Semitic because there is idolization in them.

JT ~ What they are supposed to impart is the conflict of French idealism with German reality.

JO ~ And again pornography and art. But it may fail in the sense that I failed to make it ironic enough. If Heartfield had done it . . . but then it would have been something else. I also feel like Benjamin Britten in the War Requiem, where the German is allowed to come in and sing his piece. It also relates as I said to an experience about being drafted—nobody would know this. I'm imagining my experience happened to a lot of Germans, too. What were they going to do? It's probably not true, but in my mind it was true. And what would their families have said if they didn't go in the army; how would they get out of the army? Those kind of questions are behind that. Who knows what that person felt. There is a montage of a German soldier's head taken from a photograph and attached to a cut-out naked body. He is posed in a Corot, where there had been a female nude, the very opposite of what he is. And it is like occupied territory—he has taken over French art.

How did the To Patrick series come about, just after that?

JO ~ We had a mutual friend in Worcester who was a big brother to needy kids. He is a wealthy man. He took them out of public schools and put them through private schools, then sent them to college. Usually, if they got married he would buy them a home and help them start their lives. Patrick was one of these kids. He had a family but they were poor. Patrick was bright: and so, this man semi-adopted him and he lived most of the year with him. He liked movies. Occasionally all of us would go to a movie. We'd have coffee afterward and talk about the film. Patrick would talk about wanting to be an actor. Eventually he went to college in New York to study

acting and directing. And he discovered he was gay. He worked in a gay bar or restaurant to help pay expenses and to become more independent. He got his degree but meanwhile he got involved in drugs. About six months after graduation he was found dead in his apartment from a drug overdose. Our friend still has difficulty talking about, understanding or forgiving him.

JT ~ It was a real shock. He was a person who had so much. He was charismatic, obviously a person who was going to really make it in life.

JO ~ Well, Patrick was shy, but he was innocence. Patrick was innocence. I mean he was like me—and this is probably why I went for it—he was like me when I was young. But he was changed much earlier—or his true self came out earlier. So the series is really about Patrick and it's also about me as a young man and me as an old man—the two parts of me confronting each other.

What is so confrontational in that series are the eyes of famous portraits breaking through, tearing apart the body as they come through. Whereas before you had been placing yourself in various studios and paintings, suddenly in To Patrick they are pushing back through the images.

JO ~ Partially they are death. They are dead. Normally I'm going after them to be alive with them. In the Patrick series a lot of them are used as a stand-in for death: they're the thing overpowering my youth. And, frankly, they're also the greater art.

In the early 90's, before the war series, you played with gender a lot more—the Madonna or a mother figure, for example, in "Recliner with the Spanish Dog," or "Wounded Child" [1991].

JO ~ Yes. I just think it's about feeling freer and being able to imagine all kinds of contexts. It would be true of the war things, of the German soldiers. Of Corot, who you associate with a more feminine feeling. It might also go

back to therapy, because in therapy you have to play all these different roles. I can remember giving a patient a glass of milk but they couldn't hold it, so I had to feed them. Somehow becoming the mother and feeding the patient broke a barrier. They ate, and life resumed again. But they had to regress to the point where someone had to feed them first. And I was able to do it. Another patient used to curl up like an embryo around the legs of my chair. This used to drive staff crazy—that I allowed this to happen. But it worked. Somehow I instinctively knew—I just had to sit there and do my papers or whatever I was doing, and this person would be all coiled around the chair. In all those things I was acting a feminine role, which would probably be that feminine part of myself, a more instinctive part.

For two decades you worked on your art without a gallery, without that type of market pressure or that sense of audience. I wondered if the freedom in your earlier images—the willingness to play and to place yourself into them—is connected to your freedom from that type of scene?

JO ~ People have taken to those pictures more than to other things. Many would rather see me do images with myself in them. That's part of the problem. On the other hand, when I first started those, there was no sense of a gallery; if I had been in a gallery would I have done them? I don't know. When we first came to Worcester neither one of us even thought of showing work. And it created a conflict. I was trying to figure it out—all your friends expected you to go on and produce work and be an artist.

To show in a gallery every two years, and if you don't you might as well give it up—that type of thing.

JO ~ Yeah. I was conflicted with that on one side, and on the other side we practically wanted to be hermits. I was devouring Simone Weil and St. Francis of Assisi trying to find out how you could exist and live a menial life and make pictures. At that time, we were working at a department store.

It was really pretty awful. Trying to justify all that and not worry about galleries or the world or what I would say the next time a friend called and said, How are your pictures going? [Laughs] Well, today we set up cans at the grocery store. So that was a big conflict. It was resolved later when our jobs were threatened at the hospital. As the hospital evolved and lost its teaching status, the question arose as to who would run it: psychiatrists or nurses or social workers or recreational therapists. Because we were part-time our job was vulnerable—while a state worker working full-time would have to commit murder before you fired them. So I decided to go out and look for a market, see if I could sell something so that we would have some sort of income if we lost our jobs. It was financial necessity that set us off. But it was a larger conflict before that. There was always that pressure. Your family—your father—paid to send you through college and what do you do with it? The question was about freedom, but even in the freedom there was a lot of conflict. And it changed, later it evolved: say you have a collector that owns a number of your works—what if you take a direction that causes him to never buy another one? [Laughs] Or you're a total failure and he's spent a lot of money and all that investment goes down the drain. All these thoughts, you don't give in to them, but it doesn't mean that they are not there.

What kind of advice would you have for a younger artist just starting out? It seems that it takes a lot of courage to go the route you did.

JO ~ I'm kind of an elitist as far as museums and things go. I want to get all the people out so I can go in and look at all the pictures. I'm coming from that kind of a world. And I would tell somebody not to teach if they didn't have to, or to only teach part-time. We did the right thing by going into a profession that was involved in art but was a little off. I wasn't teaching people how to do art, but I was dealing with art. It didn't interfere artistically with me: I didn't have to worry about my students coming in and saying, Ellsworth Kelly just came up with such and such, what do

you think? I was free of that. So I would advise them to look for work outside of art in some field—it could be related, but it doesn't have to be teaching. When I taught I really couldn't produce very much. It really cut into me because I was so conscious of wanting to teach right, and my obsession went into teaching rather than into the art. I would suspect that's what happens. I would just urge a person to do—just forget the technical aspects in a sense and express what you have a need to—the art grows out of a need. It's all commonplace, right?

A final question: what do you think all of your references to acrobats are about?

JO ~ Some of the acrobats represent, for me, the idea of sexuality. I think it's the extreme. Acrobatics pushes what the human body can do to the extreme limit. I have always had a fantasy, which in a sense is suicidal [Laughs] . . . We used to go to Bar Harbor every summer, and when I get up on a ridge of a mountain, overlooking the water, I'd have to lie down—not because I'm afraid of heights but because I wanted to fly off the thing. I had this terrible terrible urge—believing that I could do it. Well, I can do it in the world of my photo-montages. And I really want to do it. It's the extreme point of physical action, and in that sense it ties into sexuality: an extreme feeling, where you aren't you, you lose yourself. I see the acrobat in the same way. It's also the clown, or the imaginary world of the circus. I love to watch acrobats and go to the circus.