



## Felicitas von Woedtke **Between comedy and provocation: Copley's play with morality and masquerade**

By 1989, William N. Copley could already look back on an extraordinarily eventful life. In 1948, he founded a gallery in Los Angeles, becoming one of the first dealers to introduce European Surrealists such as Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Man Ray to American audiences. Deeply influenced by his close friendships with these artists, Copley eventually became a painter himself, spending many years living between Paris and New York. By the 1980s, however, he had turned away from the major metropolitan centers and spent much of the year in Key West.

The remarkable connection Copley forged between the European Surrealists - with whom he maintained close ties as a young dealer - and the emerging American Pop artists becomes especially evident here. The painting's comic-like staging highlights Copley's self-taught and deliberately unconventional style: anonymized figures, luminous almost poster-like colors, and bold black outlines. The characters remain largely faceless, defined instead by a handful of striking attributes. They appear less as individuals than as types or symbols. The client's pig-like nose functions as a satirical jab at his dubious moral character, while the police officer's exaggeratedly gaping mouth underscores his rather pathetic attempt to project authority. Both he and the man in tails point accusingly toward the woman at the center of the scene - perhaps the madam of the establishment. The supposed culprit behind the moral and legal transgressions is quickly identified.

Yet she remains strikingly composed. Her eyes are obscured, leaving only a sensual red mouth visible. Her arms are folded behind her back, as though she were calmly daring them: "Go ahead - arrest me."

The art historian Rudi Fuchs once wrote of Copley: "The great quality of Copley's art is its absolute lack of moralism." Sexuality occupies a central place throughout Copley's oeuvre. Particularly in the United States, where its representation has long remained bound to social taboo, Copley approached the subject early on as an expression of both individual and societal liberation. The male figures - the police officer and the client - embody the tension between frustrated desire and the pressures of social convention. The women, however, are not presented merely as objects of male desire. Especially in the central female figure, they emerge as self-possessed individuals who appear far more at ease with themselves than the men around them.

Through his highly distinctive narrative language, Copley once again succeeds in exposing the underlying tensions between desire and social control without ever resolving them into clear moral conclusions. *The Kids No Trooper*, which was previously exhibited in 1995 at the Kestner Gesellschaft, is now being offered on the auction market for the first time after thirty years in the same collection.

# 25<sup>R</sup> William N. Copley

New York 1919 – 1996 Key West, Florida

"The Kids No Trooper". 1989

Oil on canvas. 138 × 163 cm (54 ¾ × 64 ⅛ in.). Signed and dated at the center left on the belt buckle: CPLY 89. [3061]

Provenance

Private Collection, Europe (acquired in 1995 at Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich)

EUR 100,000–150,000

USD 118,000–176,000

Exhibition

William N. Copley: Heed Greed Trust Lust. Bilder/ Paintings 1951–1995. Hanover, Kestner Gesellschaft, 1995, cat. no. 76, w. ill.

We would like to thank Anthony Atlas, William N. Copley Estate, New York, for kindly providing additional information.



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