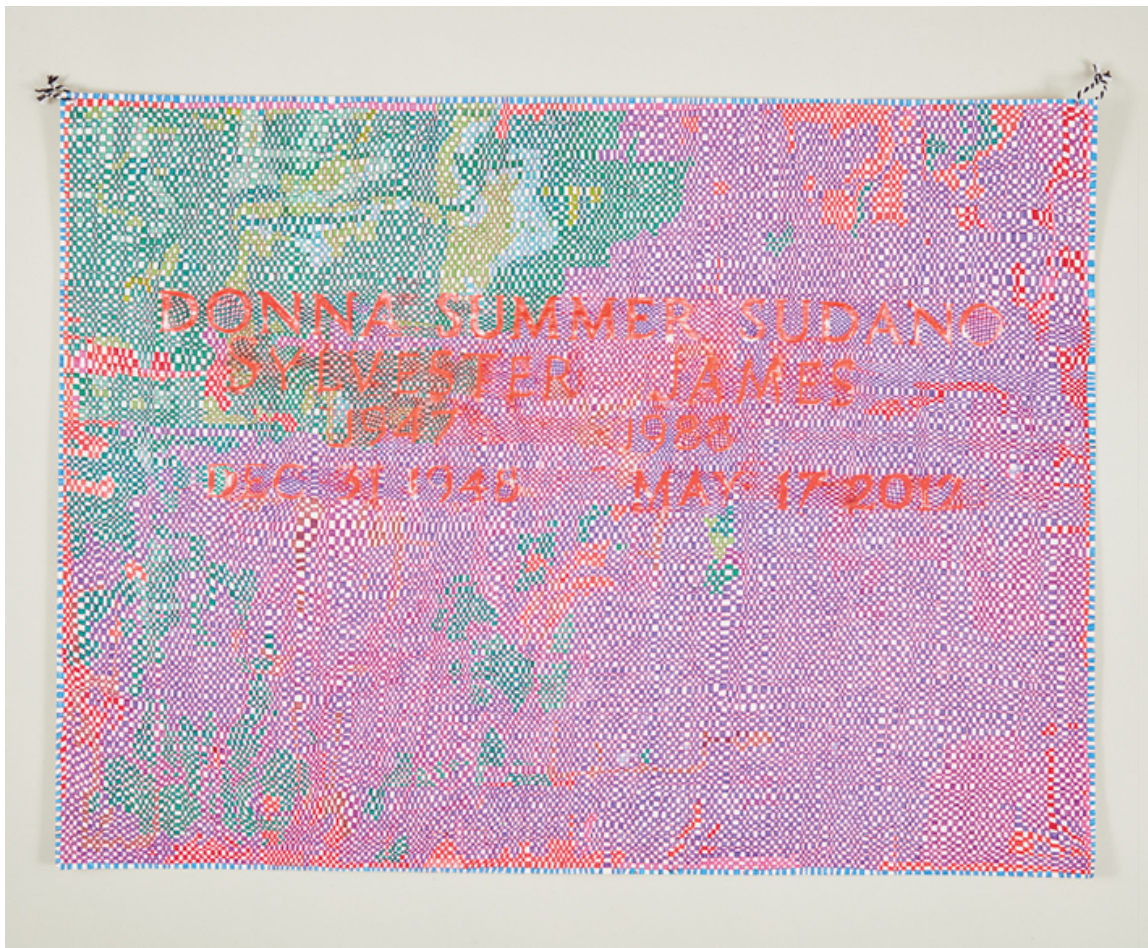


# ARTFORUM

## TO DIE FOR

Alex Jovanovich on the art of Scott Covert

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Scott Covert, *Duo Dead Disco*, 2016, oil wax pastel and ink on paper, 18 × 23 1/8". From the series "Lifetime Drawings," 1985–.

DURING 2021, roughly 1,773 wildfires burned across Arizona. That year, in early July, the artist Scott Covert and his traveling companion, the filmmaker Lex Niarchos, were driving through the state. They were going to Pinal Cemetery, located near the tiny burg of Superior, so that Covert could do a rubbing of the headstone that belonged to the "Bandit Queen" Pearl Hart, one of the last known stagecoach robbers of the Old West. One night, the two encountered a roadside memorial comprising a humble crucifix with some blue

LED lights wrapped around it. Niarchos captured the modest structure in a video. Yet in this clip, we see that the mountainous terrain behind the marker is utterly ablaze: Massive fires crackle against the black evening sky. This extraordinary scene, practically a blink, opens Niarchos's *Scott Covert: Up Until Now*, ca. 1990–2022, a quiet and meditative minidocumentary, just over twenty-two minutes long, that follows the artist as he traverses our crumbling world, visiting burial site after burial site to create his painterly frottages of the gravestones of the illustrious and the infamous. (After leaving Hart, the pair headed to Phoenix to get rubbings from the tombs of Barry Goldwater and Walter Winchell.) This version of the film was created on the occasion of Covert's first institutional survey, curated by Ariella Wolens, at the Nova Southeastern University Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The show's tongue-in-cheek title, "I Had a Wonderful Life," was lifted from the tombstone of Brooke Astor, the hard-nosed American blue blood who died in 2007 at the age of 105—it seems to me an affectionate tribute from one tenacious queen to another.



Lex Niarchos, *Scott Covert: Up Until Now*, ca. 1990–2022, video and digital video, color, sound, 22 minutes 21 seconds.

In 1985, the actress and novelist Cookie Mueller, a friend of Covert's, saw his rubbing of the headstone of Florence Ballard, the former Supreme who's interred at the Detroit Memorial Park Cemetery in Warren, Michigan, and told him he'd found his calling. (Covert had been a longtime fan of the star-crossed singer, who was a founding member of the legendary Motown girl group. Sadly, Ballard was axed in 1967 because of her alcoholism and died only nine years later, at the age of thirty-two, from a heart attack.) In the February 1988 issue of *Details*, Mueller describes a trip to Pen Argyl, Pennsylvania, for the magazine's "Art and

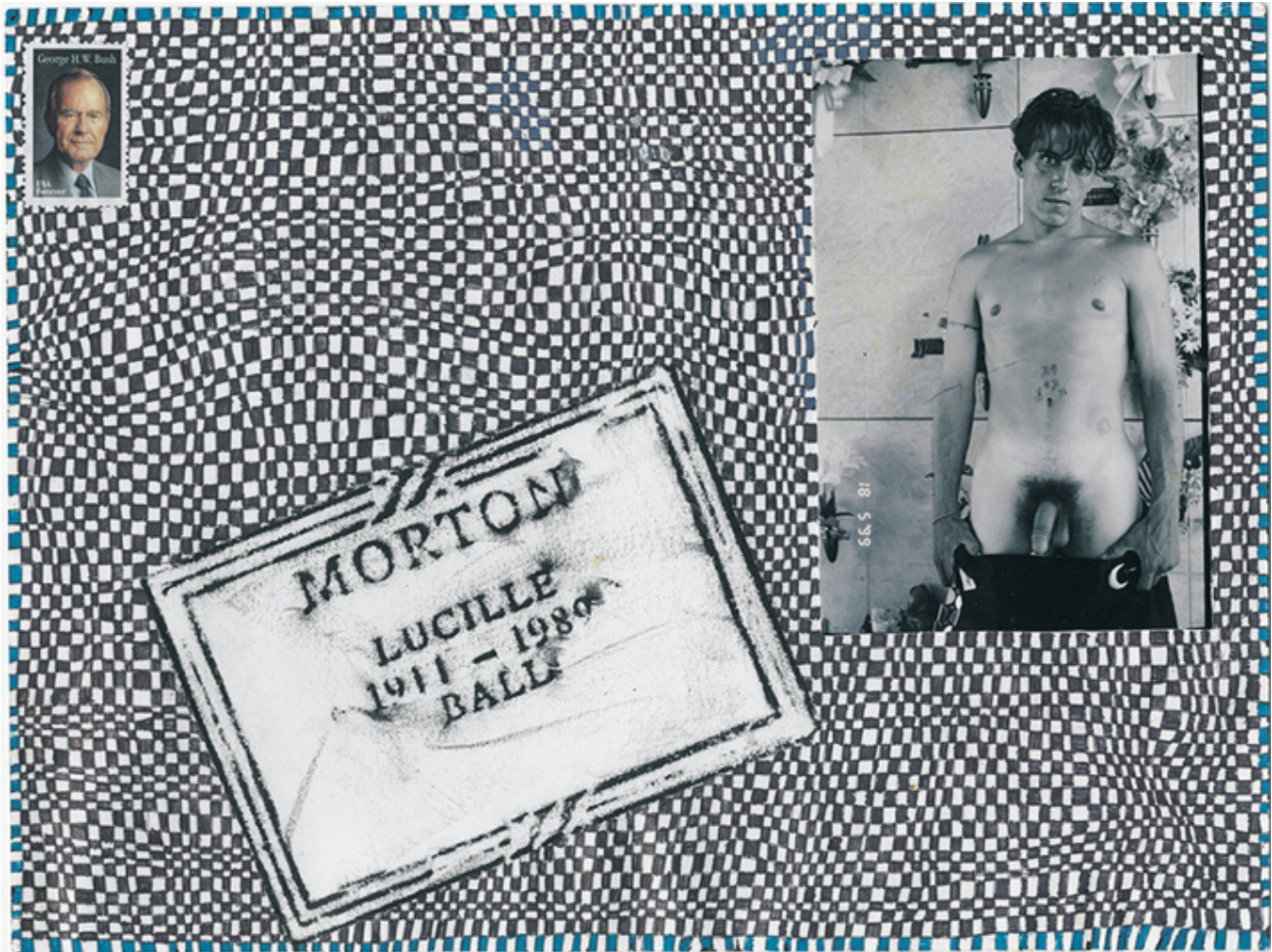


Covert is a kind of noble gleaner for these unsettling end-times, a collector of all those brittle leaves that fell from Earth's once mighty redwoods. Generationally, he's kin to Gary Lee Boas, that consummate fan and photographer who spent endless hours outside thronged stage doors and near red carpets during the 1970s and '80s, hoping to capture Elizabeth Taylor or Joan Bennett or Barbara Stanwyck on film. Yet Covert's not hanging around for anybody, anywhere; the biggest and brightest stars of yesteryear are waiting on him (what other choice do they have?), with his sheets of muslin and boxes of oil wax pastels in tow, to gather their autographs—in a manner of speaking—while basking in their lifeless company. I think of those ancient Chinese rubbings of monuments and metalworks, done on delicate rice paper, that have long outlasted the sources from which they were taken. Maybe one day, when the planet's a charred and fallow husk, a lone soul will come across a painting by Covert in a dilapidated museum with the words BETTE DAVIS emblazoned across it. This person, not knowing who she was, will say her name aloud, perhaps with some confusion, bringing the actress back to life for just a few seconds. It's an oddly comforting thought.



Lex Niarchos, *Scott Covert: Up Until Now*, ca. 1990–2022, video and digital video, color, sound, 22 minutes 21 seconds.

Covert is familiar with oblivion: “I became a major drug addict because of AIDS,” he once told me. “Every morning I’d wake up and look at myself and wonder when I was going to see the purple sores,” he wrote in an essay for *Ursula* magazine a few years ago, referring to the Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions that were often a signpost of the disease. Covert lost too many friends and loved ones, including Mueller, to AIDS. Surrounded by so much unbearable suffering and death throughout the 1980s and ’90s, the artist nearly obliterated himself with drugs and sex. In a group of modestly scaled works from Covert’s ongoing “Lifetime Drawings” series, which he began in 1985—their surfaces are laboriously inscribed with tiny checkerboard patterns that bleed off the edges—we see evidence of that troubled time that is nonetheless flecked with Covert’s trademark black humor.



Scott Covert, *With the Bush*, ca. 2016, oil wax pastel, ink, and collage on paper, 8 1/2 × 11".  
From the series “Lifetime Drawings,” 1985–.

In one of these drawings, a dark, smeary impression of Lucille Ball’s nameplate—taken from the comedienne’s niche in the columbarium at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Los Angeles—sits next to a photograph depicting a well-endowed naked man in a cluttered room . . . the artist’s studio? Elsewhere, Ball’s plaque, captured in a grimy, lipstick-y red, is suspended over a photo of an erect cock, which stands at attention before the resting place of one Michael S.

Salupo, who appears to have died in 1987. In another, the rubbing, tipped at a jaunty forty-five-degree angle, points to a shirtless dude with a scarred and tattooed torso. Pants pulled down and genitals exposed, he glares right into the camera, daring the viewer to break eye contact. In the upper left-hand corner of the composition is a postage stamp with a portrait of former US president George H. W. Bush, his thin, viperish lips curled in a weirdly self-satisfied smirk. The piece calls to mind a postcard, perhaps delivered from one of hell's sexier, more celebratory precincts. Printed at the bottom of the Bush stamp are the words USA FOREVER. In the context of Covert's art, the expression has a comically funereal quality—like something that should be written out in flowers and planted atop America's grave.



Scott Covert, *Betty & Joan #2*, ca. 2019, oil wax pastel and ink on paper, 18 × 23 1/2". From the series "Lifetime Drawings," 1985–.

These images, most of which have never been publicly exhibited, had their genesis in 2003, when Covert heard that Ball's cremated remains were being moved from California to a plot in Jamestown, New York, the actress's birthplace. Before the reinternment occurred, the artist rushed to the Hollywood Hills site and, in what must have been an adrenaline-fueled frenzy,

made one thousand rubbings of Ball's plate in a day. The photographic elements, which document Covert's self-destructive period, were only discovered later, after he had some old rolls of film developed. The drawings' checkerboard grounds, however, push the works into an eternal space. The motifs, which have their roots in cultures going back thousands of years, symbolize all manner of duality: life and death, good and evil, joy and sorrow. This pattern, a type of doodle Covert has been making since he was a kid, frequently expands and contracts, twists, and breaks—much like a heart, until it no longer can.

Alex Jovanovich is an artist and the reviews editor of Artforum.