THE PARIS REVIEW

If There's a Rip in It: A Conversation with Scott Covert

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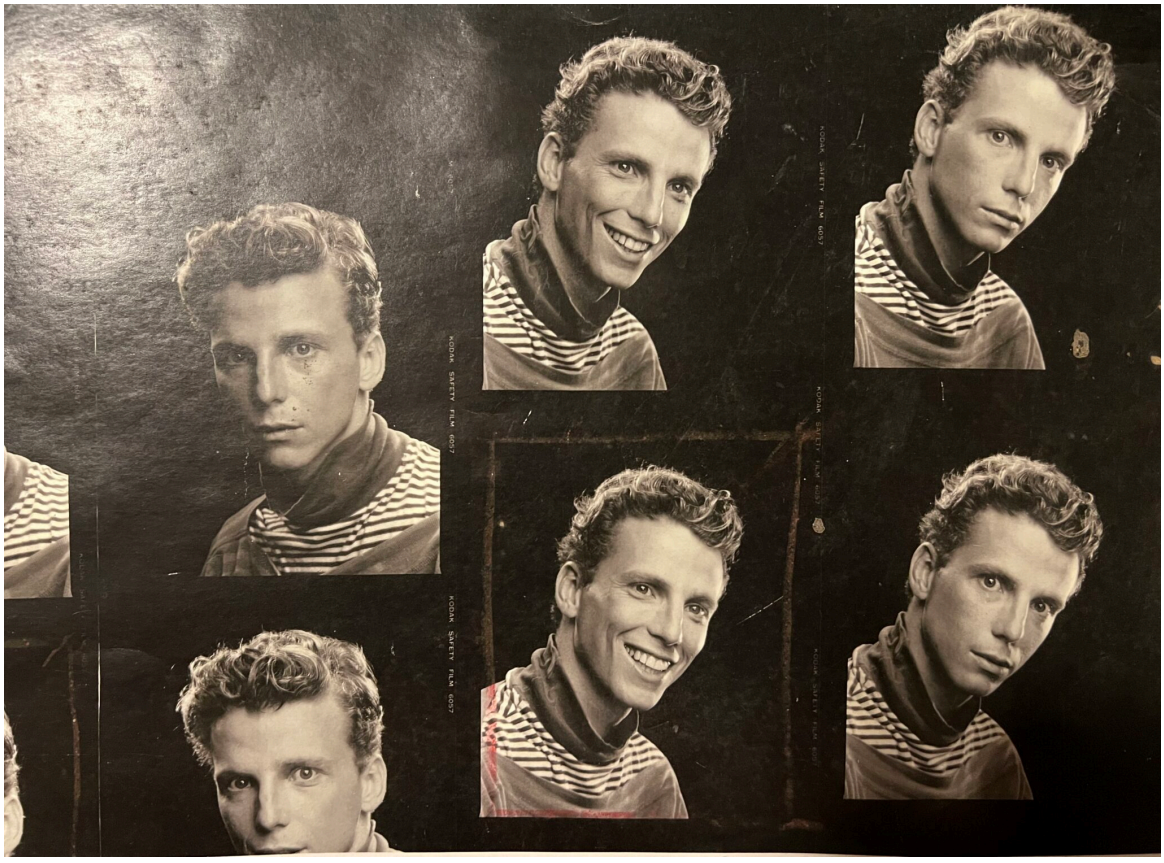

SCOTT COVERT IN 1981.

The artist Scott Covert is easy to spot in a crowd by his thick-framed glasses and mop of blond hair. I met him at a party at the Review's Chelsea office, where I noticed him slipping behind the makeshift bar to swipe a slice from a tower of pizza boxes piled in the corner. "I'm thinking of moving to Paris," he later told me, "because I don't speak the language." Born in 1954 in Edison, New Jersey, he began making after-school trips to New York City at the age of thirteen, catching the bus or stealing unattended cars to get there. After a couple of studio courses at Indiana University and a semester at San Francisco Art Institute, Covert dropped out of school and taught himself to paint. In the late seventies and eighties, he became a fixture of the East Village arts scene that came to be known as "Downtown," cofounding Playhouse 57 with the theater artist Andy Rees, at the storied performance venue and nightclub Club 57 at 57 Saint Marks Place. Covert had his first solo show, curated by Keith Haring, there in 1979. He has since exhibited at galleries in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Paris; his work appears in collections around the globe.

Covert leads a peripatetic life. For some four decades he has crisscrossed the country in his car and flown across hemispheres in search of the graves of composers, rock stars, poets, serial killers, and other cultural totems. From their headstones, he makes on-site rubbings with oil wax crayons, using myriad pigments and varying amounts of pressure. The canvases that make up the Monument Paintings, an ongoing series, are laden with text—layers of names, birth and death dates, epitaphs, and fleur-de-lis—and topped with scribbles and swaths of color. Covert renders some celebrity names nearly indecipherable through the sheer density of their replication; others appear alone in the limelight of the canvas. The paintings showcase his acute sense for depth and texture, as well as his attunement to death's magnetism and absurdity. His work has taken him to Detroit, Montparnasse, Moscow, Luxor, Cairo, and Geneva. Soon, he intends to visit the Trinity nuclear testing site in New Mexico dubbed ground zero: "I'm hoping the government will give me some help. Get some soldiers out there to lift things for me."

INTERVIEWER

When you were a teenager growing up in Edison, were you already hoping to pursue visual art?

COVERT

No, I was more of a dancer. I took classical ballet, jazz, tap. I got to meet faggots because they were all there. And then I realized it was all goofy, and I ran to New York.

INTERVIEWER

So dance fed naturally into performance art?

COVERT

Yeah. I always felt I was special. I never felt inferior, even though the kids in Edison hated me, they banged me up. I have scars all over my body. I was really tortured there—head banged against the curb. I was pretty. You know what I mean? But they didn't make me dress butch—if anything it made me react against them.

INTERVIEWER

You've described attending your grandfather's open-casket funeral service when you were eight years old. There's so much pageantry in the Catholic Church.

COVERT

"Mary, we crown thee with blossoms." I loved the May Crownings.

INTERVIEWER

Did Catholicism and its extravagant treatment of death leave a mark on your work?

COVERT

In eighth grade, I was told by a nun that I was going to burn in hell—I was a homosexual and there was no hope for me. So I went through life with that attitude—I'm going to be burning in hell, what the fuck makes the difference? It didn't make me a mean person. I didn't feel like I could go out and kill people or anything like that, because I didn't want to kill people. But that's what Catholicism did for me. I was always going to die. I was going to be condemned.

But then, my brother's a priest. He's a very, very cool priest. When I was a kid and I was a faggot, he was the one who said, "God has preached that he is the son of man. That means man is God. If you feel no guilt for what you are doing, then you are not going to be in trouble." I was taught that I was the eye of judgment of my life. I'm a part of God, and who knows more of what I've done in my life than me?

INTERVIEWER

Club 57 was located in the basement of a Polish church.

COVERT

An excommunicated Polish church.

INTERVIEWER

Excommunicated for what reason?

COVERT

Because it was basically just getting people into the country.

INTERVIEWER

How did Playhouse 57 get started?

COVERT

Andy Rees was my best friend. He was a genius. He knew everything about every movie, every Broadway musical. He had videotapes—which was unusual back then—to show me. He turned me onto Lana Turner and Ziegfeld Girl. And he was like me. I am a person of action, I don't sit around and talk about things. It's just part of my nature. "We should clean the house." I don't say that. I clean the house. Not recently, but …

INTERVIEWER

I know there was a ladies' wrestling night and a film series at Club 57.

COVERT

Monster Movie Club. I was the first person to put Kenneth Anger's whole Magick Lantern Cycle together and show it. Because we were a church group, we could rent different films from the collection at MoMA at almost no cost.

INTERVIEWER

And you were acting as well. Did you go to the theater a lot?

COVERT

I loved the ballet, and I was fortunate enough to be able to go to New York City Ballet for free. At that time there was a doorman and elevator-man strike at the building I worked in on West Sixty-Seventh, where George Balanchine lived. Everybody had to have their turn at the elevator. I got out of work one day, and there was Balanchine, working the elevator. I said, "No, Mr. B. I will do your shift. You go and do what you've got to do." So I did his shift, and the next thing you know, whenever I wanted to, I could go to the viewing box.

INTERVIEWER

The East Village of that period has been heavily mythologized as "Downtown." What was it like to be there?

COVERT

There were three hundred people in society. Everybody else was other people that you didn't get involved with. But there were only, like, three hundred people that would go to the Mudd Club, that would go up to Hurrah, that would go to Danceteria. Everybody knew each other, and everybody was making art. No matter what kind of drugs you were on, everybody was making something.

I was a drag queen, too. I would do things at Club 57, quick little numbers. Andy Rees and I would go out, and he would be Martha Stevens, Connie Stevens's second-oldest daughter. And he would wheel me in a wheelchair. I swear to God, one day, we were walking down the street like that and Richard Sohl, the pianist for Patti Smith, was walking by in drag pushing a baby carriage. You didn't do things because you needed applause. You did things because you needed to do them. You had fun. It wasn't about the recognition.

It was this group of kids in lower Manhattan, and the rest of Manhattan was something else. I felt like it was a family. Even if you didn't like each other—you didn't like everybody in your family. Cookie was very much a mother figure for me. Rene Ricard was, too.

INTERVIEWER

How did you meet Cookie Mueller initially?

COVERT

Drugs. Just from being around. After I made my first rubbing at the grave of Florence Ballard, the Supreme, I ran back to Cookie. And she loved it. She told me to quit acting to do this, because this was very modern. She said I had to focus on one thing, that I couldn't do everything. Cookie is the one who made me do this.

INTERVIEWER

You started to focus more on painting then, in 1985, and I wonder how influential that downtown environment was on your work?

COVERT

I guess it was. Though I never associated it with all my friends dying and going to cemeteries. Because I really suffered, I lost so many people during the AIDS epidemic. I became a full-blown alcoholic, a drug addict, because I was sure I was the next one to die. So who the fuck cares? Pour me another vodka.

But I didn't relate that to my work at all. I just related the work to what I liked doing, and going to cemeteries got me out of the city. So I started traveling. I liked that. I was making abstract paintings my own way, but I was making abstract paintings. I thought they would be the last paintings of the twentieth century.

INTERVIEWER

So the journey to find the graves was always an important part of the work. You've written about "the moments between the brushstrokes." What are your routines? Do you prefer to work in the morning?

COVERT

I like to get out there and just spend a full day. I don't stop. The driving is a part of the process. I don't listen to music in the car. I have no problem sitting with my own thoughts. When I drive, I like to make my thoughts rest. I notice the landscape. I enjoy seeing how it changes from going through the flatlands into the hills to the tall grass to the woods.

INTERVIEWER

This makes me think of David Wojnarowicz's memoir Close to the Knives. There are these beautiful, hallucinogenic descriptions of driving through the desert, below "the domed curve of the heavens."

COVERT

I'll have to read those. On the Road was the most boring thing I've ever read. I thought, Ugh. Heterosexuals, ew.

INTERVIEWER

How do you select your subjects? Do you decide spontaneously while you're standing in a graveyard, or do you have an idea before you arrive?

COVERT

No, nothing is planned out in my life. I'm here in the moment. Let's see what happens when I get there, because it might start pouring rain. It's always about what's going to happen.

The first time I went to Andy Warhol's grave, it was a big deal. At the time, I would do local cemeteries in New York —Woodlawn, or Leonard Bernstein in Green-Wood. I was working for this company, D.F. King, persuading people how to vote on their stocks. I had no idea what I was talking about, but I was very good at it, so I saved up enough to get an airline ticket to Pittsburgh. I took a train out to Castle Shannon, where Andy's buried, and it was a windy day. I'd brought my paintings in a suitcase, and I was sitting on the grave with them next to me. Then I saw all of my stuff —and I was working mostly on paper then—blowing across the cemetery.

Instead of getting upset, I said, Well, this is the way it's going to be. Things are going to get beaten up. Several months later, there was Julian Schnabel carrying his canvases across the beach to get them beaten up. So, I said, Oh, I'm on the right track. If there's a rip in it, it's okay.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever abandon a canvas?

COVERT

I leave them behind, but then I return. I have a whole bunch of paintings now that I could put thin layers of oil paint on top to see what's underneath. There's always something you can do with something. Right now, I'm getting into collage. When I was in Paris, I couldn't bring as many canvases as I wanted, so I took stationery from the hotel and just started doing rubbings of Schiaparelli—you know, the smaller names. Now I'm starting to glue them onto larger pieces of paper, with other ephemera, and see what that becomes.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me about the piece you're working on now?

COVERT

It's Jacques Rigaut and Raymond Johnson. Two suicide people. And I just found Barbette's grave in Texas. She also committed suicide—the trapeze artist who was in drag. Man Ray photographed him a lot.

I wanted to put in Andrea Feldman, the Warhol superstar, but she was in an unmarked grave. I'm going to see if I can find a headstone for her. Andrea Feldman was a hero. She was just the coolest chick. Whips, they called her. And in an unmarked grave. It was just sad to me. I'd just write, "Andrea Feldman, Warhol Superstar," and the years.

INTERVIEWER

Do you end up thinking a lot about what happens to a person's body after they die—whether they are buried, cremated, placed in a mausoleum?

COVERT

Yeah. Who was it that was just cremated that I was really upset about? Someone always gets cremated and it just ruins everything. Christine Jorgensen.

INTERVIEWER

The first woman to have gender-affirming surgery. Given that you spend so much time in graveyards, does the work ever feel morbid to you?

COVERT

To me, it's beautiful. I'm in beautiful gardens. I would like to live at the end of my life somewhere with a pet cemetery, just taking care of a garden around little animals that are loved. And people could come visit.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds restful, but you seem to have chosen a practice that involves a lot of challenges, technical and otherwise. There must be complications that come with working outdoors, for instance.

COVERT

I have to worry about sundown. I have to worry about how when it's too cold, the canvases freeze, and the crayons don't melt onto the canvas. They flake off easily. It's always worrying about the weather, or if people are going to be there, or where the grave is located relative to the cemetery's office. There are those kinds of things that I always get around. When we were at Rimbaud's grave, it was right by the office, but the man didn't mind because he saw I wasn't hurting the grave.

INTERVIEWER

What would you say is the most difficult part of making a painting?

COVERT

I have to sneak to do everything that I do. I can't get in trouble for doing it, but the cemetery can get in trouble for letting me. It's private property. That's what happened at Père Lachaise. They kicked me out of Gertrude Stein's grave, but I'll go back. They put plastic around Oscar Wilde's grave. But I'll be back, with a locksmith.