

print

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cover. John Coplans, *Hands Spread on Knees*, spread from 2002 report
1. John Coplans, *Frieze, No.7*, from the 2002 report

A NAKED APPEAL

For 20 years, Cleveland design firm Nesnadny + Schwartz has created striking (and sometimes shocking) annual reports for its giant corporate neighbor, Progressive. The secret weapon? A massive collection of contemporary art.

By Todd Pruzan

They may not know much about art, but the staffers at the Cleveland headquarters of the Progressive Corporation know what they like. "Every day is interesting – like going to an art gallery." "Some pieces leave an impression on me of sorrow, desolation, and despair." "Some of the pieces look like my little brother did them."

Everyone's a critic, but not everyone works at an auto-insurance giant whose 400 corporate offices are stocked to the ceilings with a massive collection of some 6000 pieces of contemporary art. Not everyone works in an office whose employees discuss the acquisitions (and occasionally complain about them) as though they were strolling through a museum. And not everyone gets invited to share his or her esthetic opinions with the company's stockholders.

But in 1987, Cleveland-based design firm Nesnadny + Schwartz invited Progressive's staff to discuss the company's growing collection of works by Barbara Kruger, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Diebenkorn, Sol Lewitt, Keith Haring, and numerous young, emerging artists, and included the employees' candid remarks in that year's annual report to the shareholders. For Nesnadny + Schwartz, it was just one strategy in what has become an ongoing, 20-year relationship with Progressive, representing the company through annual reports that – aside from the usual letters from the CEO, statements of income, and corporate cheerleading – look more like museum catalogs than any other annual report.

Owning a few shares of stock (or walking away from a Progressive-insured fender-bender) won't grant anyone admission to view the latest Charles Long installation, but shareholders do glimpse a tiny slice of the corporate catalog once a year. And Nesnadny + Schwartz's 2002 annual report unveiled Progressive's collection very literally: Its 22 elegant nude self-portraits by photographer John Coplans made for the most startling Progressive annual report in two decades.

The report's die-cut cover opens onto a large closeup photograph of two splayed fingers, their skin sprouting coarse hair and etched with deep, world-weary lines. The digits almost look like the legs and buttocks of an elderly man – which is exactly what appears on the following spread, in a four-part series of a reclining nude grasping his left ankle. On succeeding pages are images of the models twisting torso, his interlocked fingers, his back and shoulders and fists, though never his face.

The model is also the photographer, who boasts an extraordinary history. Coplans, founder of *Artforum* magazine, grew up in South Africa and was a pilot in the British armed forces in World War II before he became immersed in the American art world. He began shooting self-portraits





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2. Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, *Calendar*, cover of the 1996 report.

3. Gerlovina and Gerlovin, *Ladder*, cover of the 1996 report.

at 60. And each shot in Progressive's 2002 report captures the 85 intense years etched into the artist's trunk-like legs, immense back, and expressive, elephant-skinned hands. The photographs are clean, honest and unadorned as underscored by the report's theme, "Transparency."

We realized that after Enron, every annual report this year would have the subplot, 'I Am Not a Crook,'" says Mark Schwarz, president of Nesnadny + Schwartz. "Obviously, in the context of what's going on in the world of corporate communication and disclosure, transparency is vitally important to the corporate world. We looked at the idea of transparency, and metaphorically the work of John Coplans is about self-examination and the idea of exposing everything."

Progressive's CEO, Glenn M. Renwick, chooses the theme of each annual report, and the corporate art department selects thematically suitable work by as many as 30 artist before meeting with Nesnadny + Schwartz each August. In negotiating contracts with artist, Progressive agrees to purchase several artworks and sometimes commissions new pieces. The company's curators don't always see eye-to-eye with the design firm; in the 2002 report, the art department replaced one of Nesnadny' + Schwartz's preferences with a Coplans image it felt was more appropriate for shareholder's sensibilities. (The art department received mostly enthusiastic feedback about the report, as well as two phone calls from shareholders offended by Coplans's revealing shots.)

Progressive's massive, and growing, art collection fits neatly into the philosophy of its chairman, Peter B. Lewis, a billionaire donor to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, site of the new Frank Gehry-designed Peter B. Lewis Building. Progressive began collecting artwork in the early 1970s and aims to distribute to each of more than 400 Progressive offices, says Toby Lewis, curator of Progressive's corporate art department (and Peter Lewis's former wife).

Occasionally, some of the art department's choices stir criticism more pointed than those in the 1987 annual report. In 1995, Progressive provoked an employee petition demanding the removal of Kerry James Marshall's painting *Bang*, a caustic critique of American racial politics. Toby Lewis defused tensions by standing in front of the painting to discuss it with staffers, and ultimately inviting the artist to visit Progressive to do the same.

"The annual reports usually commission an artist or group of artists to respond to a corporate theme," says curator Lewis. "The art here at Progressive is done by emerging artists, so I find them when their careers are just starting and the prices on their art is reasonable."



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- 4. Stephen Frailey, *Untitled*, spread from 1990 report.
- 5. Greg Colson, *untitled mixed media*, spread from 2000 report.
- 6. Gregory Crewdson, *untitled photograph*, spread from 1990 report.
- 7. Robert ParkeHarrison, *Turning to Spring*, cover of the 2001 report.

Rarely do annual reports get more unusual than Progressive's. A 1990 report included a Cibachrome shot by Bruce Charlesworth, depicting a man carrying a woman's limp body near road signs and a guard rail. And the 1999 report was devoted to the eerie tableaux of photographer Gregory Crewdson, depicting the uneasy relationship between nature and human society. Few public companies

would dare represent themselves with a photograph of wild birds milling around dozens of towering stacks of Wonder bread.

Typically, Nesnadny + Schwartz runs with less risky themes and artists. The 2001 report (theme: "Service") featured the work of Robert ParkeHarrison, whose surreal, staged daguerotypes of a man working on the landscape with crude, oversized tools could easily be mistaken for elaborate stock photography. In contrast with such visual trickery, John Coplans's nude self-portraits may come as one of Progressive's boldest statements in all of N+S's reports.

Coplans's photographs are all recent, previously unpublished images. And this report is a poignant one: Given Coplans's deteriorating eyesight, Progressive may be showcasing some of his last portraits. "Some people think they're pretty grisly, but I think they're really beautiful," says Schwartz. "Sometimes the truth is not pretty."



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