

INTIMATE COMPANION

A Conversation with Alexander Jensen Yow

MICHAEL SCHREIBER

At age ninety-three, artist and conservator Alexander Jensen Yow cuts a kingly figure, if a benevolent one, with a winsome smile and buttery Southern accent that belie his cool Nordic features. Age has done little to diminish the transcendent beauty and sweet nature of this once-sculpted blond Adonis who, in his youth, was drawn, photographed, and painted by a most remarkable milieu of midcentury artists. Yow's participation in their social and creative company extended far beyond that of model and muse, however: he was a companion to impresario Lincoln Kirstein; a creative collaborator with George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, and Cecil Beaton; and a close associate of Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein, Jared (Jerry) and Margaret French, Bernard Perlin, Monroe Wheeler, and others in their circle. Glenway Wescott wrote admiringly of him, "Jensen Yow is one of the young friends whom I especially appreciate."

MS: How were you first introduced to this extraordinary circle?

AJY: When I was in the navy, I went to the Art Institute of Chicago, and there I saw Paul Cadmus's beautiful painting of the ballet dancers.¹ That was where I first saw Paul's work, though I may have seen it in *Life* magazine or something like that too. But that picture of the ballet dancers was very familiar to me. And then I met Paul Cadmus through mutual friends of mine, Bill Harris and Jack Fontan. That gave me a start. I probably met Paul at his apartment in New York, but then

I met him again on Fire Island. He was living in Lincoln's house on Fire Island and invited Bill, Jack, and me out for the weekend. So we went out there and had a nice time. Then I saw him when I came back to New York. Paul was living on that square in the Village, you know? St. Luke's Place. The studio was on the third floor, which was where Paul lived, and Jerry French lived on the floor below him. And Margaret French was there. Invisible, but she was there.

MS: Margaret Hoening French was an incredibly talented painter in her own right, yet she mostly devoted her life to supporting her gay artist husband.

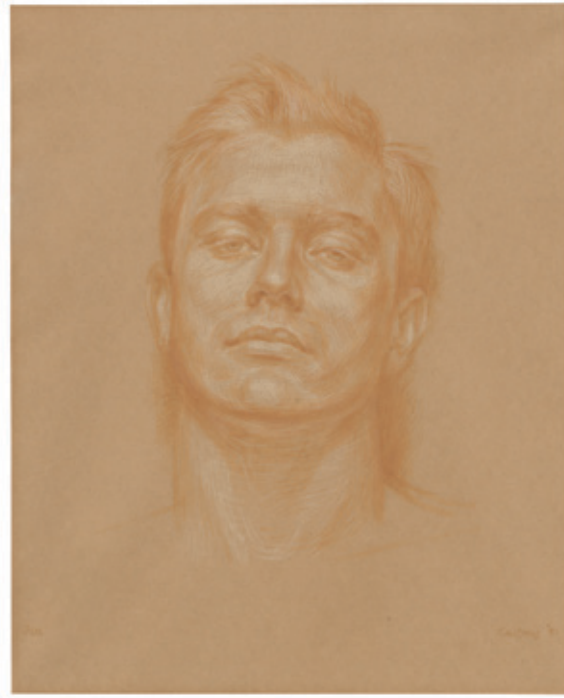
AJY: She was always there. In fact, Jerry had no money except for her.

MS: You, Jack Fontan, and Bill Harris appear in a number of photographs by PaJaMa, the collective formed by Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French.

AJY: Paul posed us and took the pictures. I was never out there with Jerry. There were plenty of personality conflicts all scattered around with these people, but I never knew what they were or anything. Jerry and Margaret would come to dinner at Lincoln's house on Nineteenth Street occasionally, but I never saw them at Fire Island. Jerry was always nice to me though. But his and Margaret's was a strange relationship. I never saw her painting or anything. I know she did paint. She was very nice, but



Paul Cadmus
The Bath, 1951
Tempera on composition board
14 ⁵/₁₆ × 16 ⁵/₁₆ inches
36.4 × 41.4 cm



she was a lot like Fidelma. She was crazy about Jerry, but she was always in the background, you know. Always there. Jerry did what he wanted to do, and she tagged after him. I was so green when I met these people that I didn't quite know how to act, what questions to ask, and what questions *not* to ask. I tried to be discreet, but it wasn't easy.

MS: You seem to have navigated it well. Indeed, both George Platt Lynes and Lincoln Kirstein would come to depend upon you. How did you meet George?

AJY: Bill and Jack took me to George's apartment the first time. George used to give parties pretty regularly, and all these boys would meet each other. I was very impressed with him because I'd heard about him for a long time. When I saw his apartment and his art collection, I was even more impressed. His taste for art and his relationship with painters. He was always influenced by certain painters that he liked, like [Pavel] Tchelitchew, Cadmus, Jared French, and so on. George Tooker.

MS: How did you and Lincoln meet?

AJY: We met at George's house. Lincoln was in England with the ballet company when I first met Paul and George.² I knew *about* Lincoln, I knew who he was, I'd read about him, and I thought he was a god of some kind. But he was very nice to me. He was very nervous. He was very upset about life and everything, generally. I asked him, "Do you ever wake up afraid of the day that's coming?" He said, "Every day. Every day."

MS: But yet he was such an unparalleled creative force. When he bought his house on Nineteenth Street in 1951, he asked you to move in. You remained one of the very few constants in his life, for nearly five decades.

AJY: Yeah, that surprises me too, because he was such an icon when I first met him. He seemed like the president of the United States or something like that, and I never thought I'd become part of his life. But he needed somebody with him all the time, even then, really. He and Paul were also very close friends and never quarreled about anything. Fidelma was always there, but she had a hard time, too, because she was imbalanced also. Lincoln would ask why she wasn't painting a lot. He wanted her to do everything and run the house, but she was also supposed to be painting.

MS: She unfortunately produced very little as an artist, but what she did demonstrates how talented she was.

AJY: Exactly. Well, she was a sweet woman, but she was unstable, too. But she was always an artist. She didn't do a lot, but what she did was very good. She did that portrait of Lincoln that was in *Time* magazine. Her self-portrait, too.

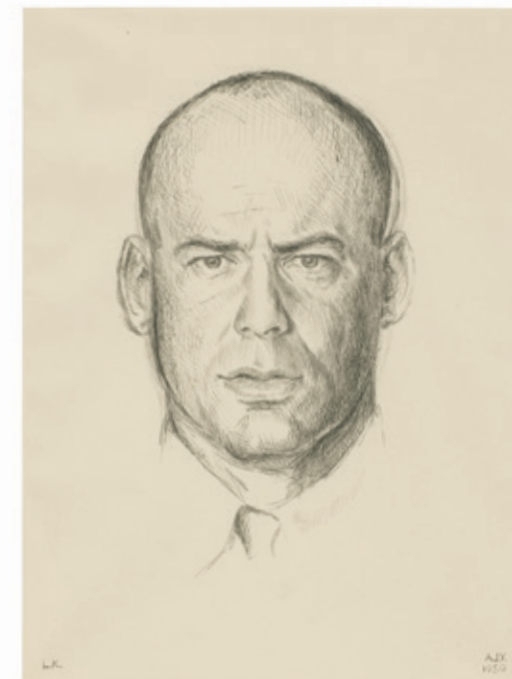
MS: When you first became associated with Paul, George, and Lincoln, you were still an art student at the Cooper Union and then the Art

Students League. Was it your new friends who launched you professionally?

AJY: Paul Cadmus knew this doctor who did articles for a medical journal. He wanted illustrations for it, so I did drawings for it for a while.

MS: Similarly, Lincoln began finding jobs for you, beginning with the Pippin Press, a company he was underwriting that produced silkscreen fine-art reproductions. When that proved unprofitable, the press evolved into Pippin Papers, which made handcrafted wallpaper.

AJY: Its owner was Fred Melton, and they were making prints of items from the Metropolitan and things like that. For some reason, Fred didn't want to do wallpaper. He said it wouldn't work hand printing, silkscreen printing. I rigged it up so I could print some wallpaper on week-ends. It worked fine, and Lincoln thought it



Alexander Jensen Yow
Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein, 1950
Watercolor on paper
13 × 10 inches
33 × 25.4 cm

was great. So they decided to make it a wallpaper business and bought a little showroom on Fifty-Third Street, and then they took me on. The wallpaper was a very great success in the beginning. They commissioned several artists to design it. But Lincoln's interests were not always focused on one thing. He'd lose interest in something and abandon it.

MS: But for you, that particular experience set you on the path to what would become a very successful career in conservation work.

AJY: We were doing reproductions for the Morgan Library of pages of manuscripts. When the Pippin Press fell through, Lincoln decided I should work at the Morgan Library, so he got me the job there as an apprentice in the conservation department. That worked out very well.

MS: Indeed, it did: you ultimately became head of the restoration department at the Morgan Library, leaving after twenty-five years, in 1981, to establish your own successful practice as a conservator. But going back to your professional beginnings, early on you also worked as a studio assistant for George Platt Lynes, often painting backdrops?

AJY: Oh, yes, fashion and ballet backdrops, like *Lilac Garden* [1951]. I did that in George's studio on Forty-Seventh Street. The backdrop was just painted on the walls and the ceiling. No scene paper, you know? I tried to hide the ceiling and the floor. I painted the floor, too. It was a small area, but it worked out very well. I had a photograph taken of the stage setting that I used to guide me through it. I think that's the way it worked. And then George brought in the dancers.

MS: George Platt Lynes also conscripted you to model for him many times. So did Paul Cadmus,

Paul Cadmus
Portrait of Jensen Yow, 1951
Gouache on paper
11 × 8 7/8 inches
27.9 × 22.5 cm



most famously for *The Bath* [1951; see p. 74], for which you and Jack Fontan posed.

AJY: I was impressed with that painting. I was very impressed. It was difficult because Jack and I had been living together, but we broke up. And he got irritated with Paul for putting me in the picture. He thought his lover, Ray Unger, should be in it instead of me, but Paul didn't change it.

MS: You and Jack nevertheless maintained a lifelong friendship. Jack, too, was a frequent model for George Platt Lynes, although you were far more involved with George, both personally and professionally, right up through his untimely death in 1955.

AJY: I worked with George in the studio for quite a while [in the early 1950s], but it was bad times for him right then. He didn't have much work. He was working for Henri Bendel

doing fashion. And that's about all the work he had.

MS: Under George's influence and guidance, you also picked up a camera.

AJY: He helped me a lot. I had a Rolleiflex camera. I had a darkroom in the basement at Lincoln's house, with an enlarger and all the right equipment. I was very serious about it.

MS: And then you similarly made backdrops for Cecil Beaton, creating beautiful, intricate cutouts for his fashion and advertising photos.

AJY: I was so young and innocent in those days. Everything was like a popped bubble to me. Cecil wanted me to take over and do his backgrounds. He wouldn't even be there. He would just say, I want you to do this or that, and then he'd vanish.

George Platt Lynes
Portrait of Jensen Yow, c. 1951
Gelatin silver print
9 1/8 × 7 3/8 inches
23.2 × 18.7 cm



MS: After George's passing, you, Lincoln, and Bernard Perlin, who had become the executor of George's photographic estate, began collaborating on ways to advance George's legacy, beginning with a 1959 exhibition of his work at the Art Institute of Chicago.

AJY: That's right. I got the negatives from Bernard and made a series of prints. I had met Bernard through George. He was a great friend of George and Paul, but Lincoln fell out with him somehow, as he did with everybody. I remember Bernard gave a party for George when George knew he was dying, before he went to the hospital. He was living on the West Side. I remember the apartment was on the second floor. Everybody was there, and we were singing. It was a very jolly party, and I remember the guy who ran the nightclub in the Village, Jimmie Daniels, was there. And a cop knocked on the door and came in and joined the party!

MS: It's astonishing to consider the many fellow artists with whom you've collaborated, either as a model or as a direct cocreator of photographs, drawings, and paintings: Lynes, Beaton, Cadmus. And meanwhile, you continued your

Alexander Jensen Yow
Self-Portrait in Pea Coat and Navy Hat, 1950
Ink on paper
25 1/4 × 20 1/2 inches
64.1 × 52.1 cm

own art making, drawing and photographing Beaton, Fidelma, and various nudes, taking inspiration from such artists as Caravaggio, [Eugène] Atget, Lynes, and Tchelitchev.

AJY: Tchelitchev was a fascinating man and a wonderful artist. I took a long walk with him one day in Connecticut, and he said to me, "These boys who are super realistic painters, they want to paint a bird like it'll fly away. It'll never fly away." And he said something else about Fidelma, that someday she was going to go off in the woods, down to the birds, and never come back.

MS: Prophetic words, as sadly she ultimately did, in a way, as her mental health continued to deteriorate. Through your association with Tchelitchev, would you have also known Charles Henri Ford?

AJY: Yes. Not very well, but I knew him. He was there when I was there, but he was always doing something else. Charlie was always very quiet if he was in the room with Pavlik [Tchelitchev's nickname]. He didn't have much to say, you know. And Lincoln always made fun of him and things. But Lincoln admired Pavlik, always.

MS: You've had the good fortune to live with numerous Tchelitchev works through the years, including the glorious *Lion Boy* [1936–1937; see pp. 123, 125].

AJY: The nude, yes. That was Glenway Wescott's, you know. Barbara Wescott bought it for Glenway, and it was in Stone-blossom.³ The painting went to Monroe Wheeler, then to Monroe's friend, Anatole [Pohorilenko]. And Lincoln bought it from there. It hung in the back room on Nineteenth Street for several years. But I think that I first saw it at Stone-blossom. There were other things that I saw there too. Jared French did triple portraits

of Glenway, Monroe, and George nude—fully nude. They used to hang in Glenway and Monroe’s bedroom. There was another one of American Indians.

MS: *Washing the White Blood from Daniel Boone* [1939].⁴

AJY: Yes. And of course, Paul’s painting of them in front of the house. Stone-blossom was a wonderful house. It was a big, old country house. It was very comfortable, built in the 1800s, I guess. I used to come out here with George to see Glenway and Monroe. Barbara and Lloyd Wescott lived nearby on a big farm with prize cattle.

MS: Until both properties were appropriated by the State of New Jersey after a drought and flooded to create a reservoir.

AJY: It took a lot of little rivers to get it to finally fill up. But it was very slow going. I remember along Route 31, you could look over and still see the foundation of the house.

MS: Thereafter, you became somewhat of a neighbor, living in the vicinity and either host-

ing Glenway and Monroe in your home, or visiting them at their next house, Haymeadows.

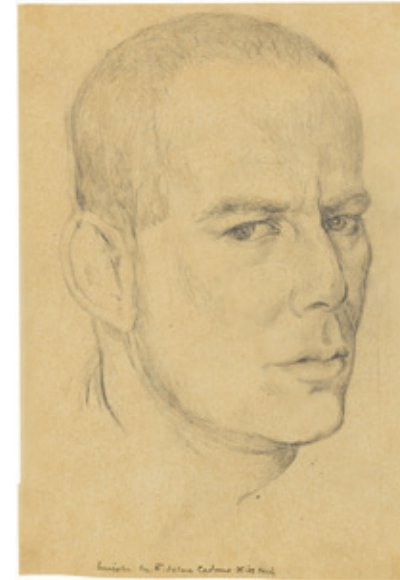
AJY: Haymeadows was beautiful. It was a stone house, built of red sandstone. Glenway would have lunch out on the grass around the house. I love this area. It’s a part of New Jersey that no one ever talks about, you know. It was very remote, just farmland, really, when I came here. My house was in the middle of a farm here, a schoolhouse built around 1900.

MS: From the photos I’ve seen of your property’s evolution over many years, you’ve transformed it beautifully—just another accomplishment in a long life of creativity, evidenced by your own artwork and the personal history recorded in the many photos we’ve looked through together.

AJY: These are my ashes we’re looking through. I always think about all those people that I knew and wonder what happened to them, you know? All those people that George photographed. So many of them. But everybody has died, seems to me. Everybody I’ve known in the past. It looks like another life to me. But it was a fascinating time.

1. Paul Cadmus’s *Reflection* (1944), now in the collection of Yale University Art Gallery, was shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 56th Annual American Exhibition, 1945–1946.
2. Kirstein traveled to England with the New York City Ballet in 1950. On that same trip, he brought the major exhibition *Symbolic Realism in American Painting* to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, as part of his effort to promote “his” kind of painters: Paul and Fidelma Cadmus, Jared and

Margaret French, Bernard Perlin, Pavel Tchelitchev, George Tooker, and other so-called “magic realists.” The exhibition had originated in New York earlier that year at Edwin Hewitt Gallery.
3. Stone-blossom, the New Jersey country home shared by Wheeler, Wescott, and Lynes, can be seen in Paul Cadmus’s painting *Stone Blossom: A Conversation Piece* (1939–1940), pp. 98–101.
4. Now in the collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



TOP LEFT
Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein
Lincoln Kirstein, c. 1939–1941
Pencil on paper
9 × 6 1/4 inches
22.9 × 15.6 cm

BOTTOM
Paul Cadmus
Monroe Wheeler, 1938
Pencil on paper
10 1/2 × 11 inches
26.7 × 27.9 cm

TOP RIGHT
George Platt Lynes
Paul Cadmus and Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein, 1950
Gelatin silver print
9 × 7 inches
22.9 × 17.8 cm