

Laura Bell and Ian Ganassi: The Corpses

Laura Bell, a painter based in the Bronx, and Ian Ganassi, a poet living in New Haven, met as artists in residence at the Millay Colony for the Arts. In 2005 they began the ongoing collaborative collage series "The Corpses," starting with an unfinished poem and scrawled phrases on a piece of printer paper stained with coffee rings that Ganassi mailed to Bell. With each mailing, words and images were added and new pieces were begun; at any point, either of them could declare a piece finished. At first it was assumed that Ganassi would contribute text and Bell visuals, but this division soon dissolved. (The series title is a reference to the Surrealist's Exquisite Corpse.)

The Corpses travel to wherever Ganassi or Bell happens to be. The gathering of materials has become a consuming habit: the street, the studio, basements, and gardens offer up inspiration. Poems, drawings, ads, photos, and found objects are joined to paint, ink, crayon, charcoal, and pencil and attached with glue, staples, tape, thread—a painterly, visceral process, the anti-Photoshop. "The Corpses turned us into scavengers," says Ganassi. "We ended up trying to get the whole world into them."

Completion is variable—a Corpse might travel back and forth many times or make only one circuit before being called finished. Some pieces are minimal, some layered; some develop themes, others function almost as diaries (a hospital glove, a postcard). Politics, religion, history, and literature make cameo appearances. A note dropped by a stranger can become the starting point for a new Corpse.

While the process has retained its initial sense of play, the series quickly became more aesthetically profound and demanded a level of ambition equal to the work Ganassi and Bell were publishing and exhibiting individually. Called "joyously Fluxus-like" by Robert Shuster in the *Village Voice* and described by writer Byron Earhart as going "beyond collaborative to a kind of conspiratorial imagination," the Corpses have coalesced into more than a decade of personal and material call and response. At present there are more than 300 finished Corpses, with a dozen or so usually in transit.