

JOHN BROOKS: *ISLANDS ARE NOT FOREVER*
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“What you remember saves you.”

—W.S. Merwin

When asked what role a poet plays in society, Merwin replied: “I think there’s a kind of desperate hope built into poetry now that one really wants, hopelessly, to save the world. One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves while there’s still time.” The futility of this intention is of little consequence; the irrepressible urge to *express, express!* has the power to drown all doubts. Yet as some things come into focus, others lose clarity. Growing hopeful for the future dulls the longing for the past. No matter the angle, something is cut out of the frame.

Islands Are Not Forever holds a mirror to the bewildering complexity of this collective story. Brooks’ drawing debuts with multiple parts, a panoramic landscape inhabited by film stars, artists, and friends, adorned with both personal and cultural motifs, locales, and artistic innuendos. His subjects are selected from past experiences or drawn from life, arranged in an ongoing stream of recollection. The resulting impressions range from forceful to dreamlike: figures in confronting postures demand attention; others drift softly upon the paper, the way an image is summoned from behind closed lids. Spoonbills, known to be fiercely monogamous (but only for a season) emerge alongside Françoise Gilot and Pablo Picasso, Marilyn Monroe, and mysterious unknowns. Elsewhere, men gather—pensive or ecstatic, touching or almost—and all the while, ruins and artifacts sleep among the living, at peace with the inevitability of endings.

John Brooks intends to continue making these drawings for the rest of his life. In that sense, *Islands Are Not Forever* is an incomplete cycle, a list of ingredients without instructions. Its force is born not only from visual richness, but from its function as a collective mnemonic device, an invitation to the beholder to sit in awe, to make a connection, to follow the path forward, or back. Brooks leaves a trace: remnants of time spent by the sea, a Madagascar boa, the signs of Hollywood and a humble hair salon, List’s photographs, Hockney’s painting, ancient busts, fragments of Berlin, a self-portrait, and birds—so many birds.

John Brooks was born in central Kentucky in 1978. He studied Political Science and English Literature at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, with continuing education in art at Central St. Martins and the Hampstead School of Art in London, England. His work has been exhibited across the United States and Europe, and is included in the collections of the 21C Museum Hotels, Grinnell College Museum of Art, among others. Brooks has been featured in *The New York Review of Books* and *The Yale Review*. In 2021, Garth Greenwell penned a feature article about Brooks for the *The New Yorker* titled “A Kentucky Painter’s Travels in Queer Time.”