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I Won't Fear My Passions Like a Coward: On William E. Jones's "Fall into Ruin"

by Rob Goyanes | September 22, 2017



Film still from William E. Jones' *Fall into Ruin*, 2017



The best art dealers all have a fictitious quality as if slyly tiptoeing from the pages of a novel, ideally long and untranslatable, their very presence, their mystery, their history a rich mélange of whispered anecdote and cruel rumour.

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IN HIS POEM "Dangerous Thoughts," the gay Greek poet C. P. Cavafy invoked the voice of a Syrian student in Alexandria:

Strengthened by study and reflection.
I won't fear my passions like a coward;
I'll give my body to sensual pleasures,
to enjoyments I've dreamed of,
to the most audacious erotic desires,
to the lascivious impulses of my blood ...

Born in 1863 in Alexandria, Egypt, Cavafy grew up in poverty before attaining a modest clerk position at the Irrigation Service of the Ministry of Public Works. Cavafy's poetry — fiercely original and defiantly, erotically gay — made for radical, fin-de-siècle balladry, although his work mostly only circulated among friends and relatives while he was alive. Almost 50 years after Cavafy's death, in 1982, the American artist William E. Jones, who was just 19 years old at the time, met Alexander Iolas, one of the most important art dealers of the 20th century. They met in Iolas's bedroom: two bronze horses guarded the edges of the bed, a chandelier dangled over it, and a painting by Harold Stevenson hung on the wall behind it, which portrayed a man splayed out with a towering antique column in place of his penis. Iolas was just waking up, and his lover was nearby, getting ready for the day. The first thing that Iolas said to Jones was whether he knew the work of Cavafy. "I had no idea who [Cavafy] was — none," Jones told me.

Iolas then said to him, "He is one of us."

In most ways, Jones couldn't be more different than Iolas. Born in 1962 in Canton, Ohio, Jones grew up in the small industrial town of Massillon, about an hour's drive from Cleveland. His grandfather was a farmer before he worked in the steel mills, and



Jones would grow up to become an established artist and filmmaker after graduating Yale and CalArts. Alexander Iolas — a pseudonymic combination of Alexander the Great and Iolaus, the nephew and lover of Heracles — was born Constantine Koutsoudis in 1907 to a pair of wealthy Greeks living in Alexandria. Iolas went on to become an art dealer responsible for showing many a canonical artist, a list that reads like a primer on postwar art: Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, Man Ray, Jean Tinguely, René Magritte, et cetera. Upon hearing this thing about Cafavy being “one of us,” Jones didn’t quite understand: did Iolas mean that the poet Cafavy was an Alexandrian Greek like Iolas was, or was Iolas referring to himself and Jones, indicating that they were all gay men?

“That delicious ambiguity sort of sent my young mind reeling,” Jones says. The budding artist was bewildered by this eccentric, rich gay man, and especially by everything with which he surrounded himself. The home, which came to be known as Villa Iolas, is in Agia Paraskevi, a suburb of Athens. The entrance had two giant bronze doors in bas-relief, which led to 20 rooms where antiquity danced with modernity: Byzantine icons, Picassos, Baroque furniture, Ernsts, ancient columns from the earliest days of civilization. “I am a Greek and all the Greeks love columns ... And here they are,” he told *Town & Country* magazine in 1984. Jones was blown away by the aesthetic, historic bestiary that was Iolas’s home.

During that fateful visit in 1982, the teenaged Jones took pictures of these wild juxtapositions. He had mostly forgotten about the images, but 30 years later, in 2011, he unearthed them from his mother’s basement. They were used to create his 30-minute film *Fall into Ruin*, which documents his experience with the Greek dealer and his estate, shown recently at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. “What I struggled with for a long time was how I could draw a boundary around the story that would make sense for me,” Jones says. “I eventually did a first-person narration and stuck very closely to my personal memories.”

Those narrated memories in the film include his first impressions of Athens, how it was “chaotic, crowded, and unpleasant,” how “there were cars everywhere belching out pollution that had eroded the sculptures on the Acropolis,” but there was also the simple awe of seeing Delphi and all these architectural sites that comprised the original polis, where the concepts and notions, good and bad, of Western democracy were first fleshed out. Undoubtedly however, Iolas — and his estate, a refuge from Athens’s urban chaos — is what made the biggest impact. Though the Ohioan artist didn’t grow up in a state of total deprivation, “culture for me as a child was a kind of abstraction,” he says, something only to be found in the pages of textbooks and in museums: “The door to this world opened to me when I met Iolas.”

Alexander Iolas was born seven years into the 20th century. His father made his wealth as a “cotton classifier,” and his parents dealt in antiques, two commodities for which Egypt has a very favorable climate. Growing up in the mythical, poetic port city of Alexandria, among the significant Greek population that resided there until the Egyptian revolution of 1952, Iolas’s family was firmly bourgeois. Though happily entrenched in the upper class, the young Iolas learned early to navigate the lower echelons of society, especially when it came to sex (as Jones remarks in *Fall into Ruin*, Iolas met Cavafy while the poet lived above a brothel).

After taking a dance lesson in Cairo, Iolas moved to Berlin at the age of 17 to study ballet, where he was also beaten up on one occasion by Nazis. A talented dancer, he was sent to Salzburg and from there to Paris. At 20 years old, he collected his first work of art: a Giorgio de Chirico, for which he paid 20,000 francs in weekly installments. “How to get more paintings, I asked myself,” and so he did. Using a combination of his wealth and bartering, by the mid-1930s, he had acquired a number of Magrittes, Picassos, Ernsts: “I also bought some drawings by Toulouse-Lautrec from his cousin when nobody wanted his drawings.” Not knowing English yet — he was eventually equally fluent in English, Egyptian, Greek, French, and German — he traveled to the United States for dance recitals. At immigration, he answered “yes” to all the questions: “Yes my father had been in prison and wants to kill the president, yes my mother was a prostitute, yes I had syphilis and really hated New York.”

Growing tired of dance, he decided to open a gallery in New York, and then in Paris, Madrid, Geneva, and Rome. The importance of Iolas is difficult to overstate: he is credited with introducing Surrealism to the United States; he gave Warhol his first solo show in 1952; and he was one of the earliest dealers to grease the wheels of an emerging, intercontinental art industry. Iolas had what is called an eye, that inexplicable ability in identifying talent and beauty. Seen from a different lens, Iolas was simply able and privileged to choose what he liked, and then craft a trend from it. The dealer was a natural showman, known for wearing outlandish outfits of diamond-studded red-heeled boots, raccoon and chinchilla coats, and pirouetting as he charmed his collectors. In a 1965 interview with art historian Maurice Rheims, Iolas said, “I await the audience, I perform. I don’t consider the gallery as a commercial occupation. It’s a purely artistic occupation. An exhibition has to be a ballet.”

The filmmaker Jones had quite a different life trajectory. In his first feature-length film, *Massillon* (1991), he profiled his Midwest-



ern hometown, using images he took but also footage from his dad's home movies. In the film, Jones describes how he doesn't really remember many of the events on their own, but rather, the movies themselves are the memories: places like Niagara Falls, its massive mist rising in the grainy video, the camera not still for one second, as if Jones's dad wanted to capture everything possible. Jones talks about how his family went to church regularly, how in Sunday school he was told that the bondage of blacks was natural because of their inferiority, how he was told not to listen to rock music or have long hair: "Men should look like men, or else they wouldn't go to heaven." In the film, he also tells of an experience in fifth grade, how two of the class troublemakers loudly traded accusations of the other sucking their dicks. He thinks they were making it all up, but it hints at the difficulty Jones must have had at times in his small, postindustrial Ohio town: "I think it's very common: if you grow up in an industrial city, the horizon isn't very wide and culture is this thing that's way up there that you can't necessarily have access to. It's something that really only an elite get to participate in."

Besides his own life, Jones examines the objects of his desire in his work, how they are all entangled in the larger industries of production and consumption. Using rigorous research in tandem with intimate, personal recollections, Jones's body of work is inseparable from his own physical body and is indistinct from the warrens of the archive. In *Finished* (1997), Jones tells the story of Alan Lambert, a gay porn star from Quebec. Jones first saw Lambert in an ad for a phone sex line called *Uncut Talk*. "He seduced me through this image, I wanted to know more about him," Jones narrates in the film. He cut out the image of Lambert. Through interviews and footage shot by Jones, the artist patches together a story about the gay porn star and the industry. A year after he cut out the image that so seduced him, he received the disturbing news that the 25-year-old Lambert had committed suicide, in a public square in Montreal. Jones's work is very different from the work in which Iolas was interested, but there is a direct line between the two.

The paths of Iolas and Jones would begin to cross when Jones was an undergrad at Yale. In his dorm, Jones had a Man Ray poster hanging up — it was the work *Peaches*, three clouds floating above three peaches, the title a play on the French words for peach and sin. The poster was a reproduction of an advertisement for an exhibition at the Iolas gallery in Milan. Upon seeing this, Jones's roommate said that Iolas was in fact her great uncle, and asked him if he wanted to join her in trip to Athens to visit.

The film *Fall into Ruin* reveals some, but not all, of the unusual circumstances that constituted Iolas's life. Jones tells of an old man in Iolas's house, "whose whole function was to tell fortunes from coffee grounds," and of someone named Maria Callas, a delicate young man "who seemed always to be on the verge of fainting." Like the Surrealists he championed, Iolas was a surreal character, but one who also "exuded an air of antiquity," Jones says. "I think his survival depended on a certain level of cunning. His outrageousness was a pose. He looked like a frivolous person to a lot of observers, but he was actually quite a serious person. The persona he crafted was a way of getting through life, a way of passing through various social spaces, and amusing people. He gained quite a lot from that. But this wasn't the kind of life I could imagine myself inhabiting."

Iolas's politics, despite the indicators to the contrary, were mostly right-wing. "In terms of class politics, he was interested in an old-fashioned aristocracy," Jones says. "These were his clients, these were the people he wished to socialize with," and yet, "when it came to sex he was interested in the lowest class of people." Iolas was fascinated by the extreme, disparate ends of society, and though he helped many artists, he did not seem to consider charity to be an end in itself. As Iolas told Nikos Stathoulis in a 1976 interview, "Whatever I gave is nothing compared to what I took." A man of deep contradiction and mystery — he was average in this regard — he still saw the usefulness of art being available to society at large.

Toward the end of his life, Iolas became a pariah. The aforementioned fainting Callas sold a story to a Greek tabloid about Iolas smuggling antiquities (which may have some truth in it), but also that he was dealing drugs and hosting orgies with underage boys. Iolas was one of the first public figures in Greece to contract AIDS, and was shamed in the Greek press. "He was the AIDS monster of Greece," Jones says. As Iolas was dying, friends and lovers started vying for his collection, and he gave much of it away. In 1987, at the age of 80, Iolas died in New York.

Villa Iolas, which Iolas intended to become a public center for contemporary art, was met with a lack of funding and legal impasses. Abandoned, it was reportedly looted of its remaining works, stripped of its gilded elements, and Iolas's personal archive destroyed. When Jones returned to the home in 2016 to take more images for *Fall into Ruin*, he found a bombed-out, graffitied den — a post-modern, microcosmic version of Alexandria's looting by empires, its library burned to the ground. The film shows leftist messages such as NO MORE BORDERS and ACAB written on the property.

Despite Iolas's aristocratic tendencies and less than savory politics, there is no denying his incredible story and ability. Jones says that *Fall into Ruin* speaks directly to a specific segment of the art world: "It's to the gallerists and collectors who wish to be doing

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something more than making money, those who wish to leave a mark, to do something distinctive, to do something interesting.” Jones told me a story about Iolas’s Paris gallery, which never made much money but was very close to his heart: “The landlords would come by for the rent, and somebody would slip out the backdoor and sell a painting from the backroom, really on the spur of the moment, and collect some cash very quickly then give it to the landlord.”

In today’s corporatized art world, Iolas represents a different breed of dealer and collector. Perhaps not the ideal depending on one’s politics, but still, someone who saw the threads that run throughout all of history, someone who embraced and exploited all the spectacularity of cultures ancient and modern, and helped foster those artists in whom he believed: “The kind of personal relationships that Iolas had with his artists, the kind of flair that he had, the disregard he had for practical concerns, the great enthusiasm he had for parties — this is not as common in the art world as it was in his days,” Jones says. “This is a loss.”

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