MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Jasper Johns

Press Packet

Cotter, Holland. "Divide and Conquer." *The New York Times*, September 24, 2021, pp. C1, C12–13.

Solomon, Deborah. "Here's All the World In One Concise 'Slice.'" *The New York Times*, September 19, 2021, Arts, pp. 112–13.

Mooallem, Stephen. "The Meaning of Jasper Johns." *Harper's Bazaar*, September 2021, pp. 236–39, 277.

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The New York Times

NEWS | CRITICISM

Weekend Arts

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2021 C1

HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW

Divide and Conquer

JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A monumental show, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at the Whitney Museum, reveals Jasper Johns's protean talent.

CRITIC'S PICK

Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror
Whitney Museum of American Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art

"Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror," the largest survey of the artist's work anywhere to date, officially opens next Wednesday, and is designed to be not just a blockbuster, but a blockbuster x 2.

The American artist's last East Coast survey, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1996, had 225 works; the new one has twice that number. The earlier show filled two floors of MoMA; this one spreads over two museums, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It looks differently splendid at each.

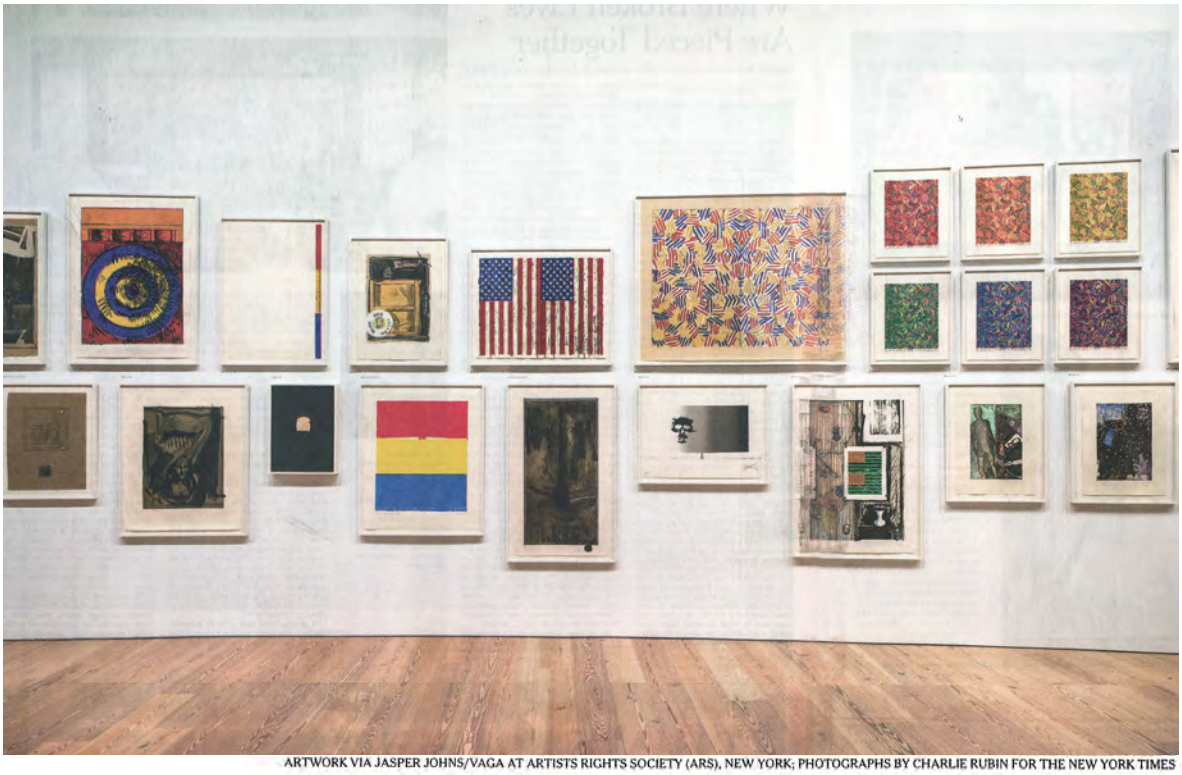
Should you make an effort to see both halves? Absolutely. They've been designed as separate but complementary experi-

CONTINUED ON PAGE C12

JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; CHRISTOPHER LEAMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A bounty of work by Jasper Johns: Top, a gallery view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, with, left, "Mirror's Edge" (1992), and, right, "Mirror's Edge 2" (1993). Center, "Painted Bronze" (1960). Above, a gallery view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with, from left, "Device Circle," "Thermometer" and "Jubilee," all 1959.

Cotter, Holland. "Divide and Conquer." *The New York Times,* September 24, 2021, pp. C1, C12–13.



ARTWORK VIA JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jasper Johns: Divide and Conquer

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

ences, and each, though different in content and emphasis, tells a full Johns story. Yet it's the story they tell together that's the truer one, the one that lets a notoriously complicated body of art look and feel as richly original as it really is.

And that richer view seems necessary given that, despite Johns's uncontested historical status, a critical consensus on him remains unsteady. It certainly was in 1996. One frequently voiced take on his career at the time was that he had a hot, fast, early run with his flags, maps and targets, then got tangled up in unproductive experimentation, and finally settled into decades of hermetically personal and repetitive work. He went from inspired Pop progenitor, proto-Conceptualist and Neo-Dada game changer to teasing puzzle master.

One look at the new retrospective tells you that take was dead wrong. Repetition? His art is built on it. And it's strategic and inventive. Six decades on, his career — he's 91 and still a studio rat — continues to be an active conceptual spreadsheet and a generative memory machine.

Personal? It's the feature of his art I most treasure. He has always seemed drawn to, or at least unafraid of, subjects that his contemporaries ignore, or dodge, or handle with Teflon mitts: mortality, spirituality, human intimacy, and the fear of it. And, again, a sense of his investment in these elements comes through most clearly

CRITIC'S PICK

Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror
Opens Wednesday, and runs through Feb. 13, at two museums:
Whitney Museum of American Art; 212-570-3600; whitney.com.
Philadelphia Museum of Art; 215-763-8100; philamuseum.org.

Top, a broad installation view at the Whitney Museum of "Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror." Right, views of "Summer" (1985), left, and "Winter" (1986) in Philadelphia. Far right, "Souvenir 2" (1964), also in Philadelphia.

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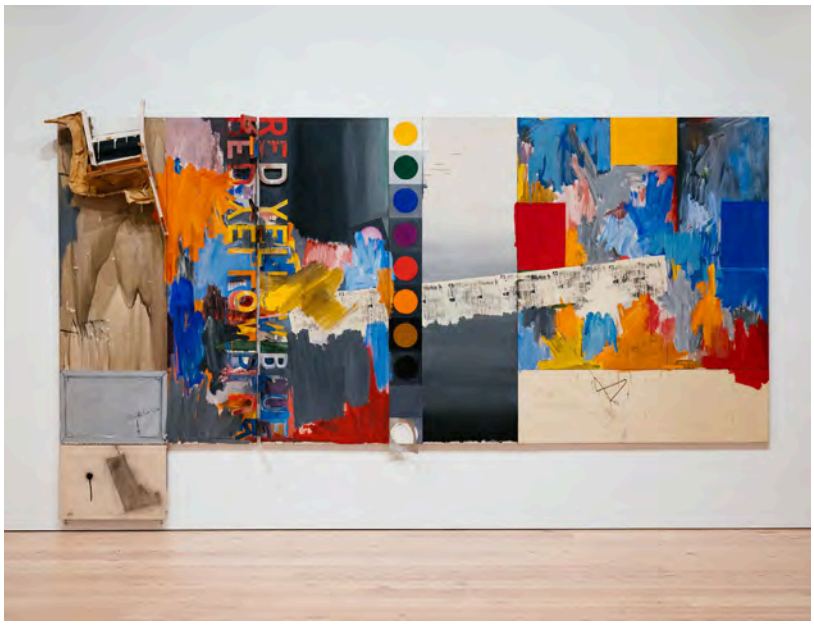
Six decades on, his career — he's 91 and still a studio rat — continues to be an active conceptual spreadsheet.



"According to What" (1964), at the Whitney Museum, includes Marcel Duchamp's silhouette in a latched panel at top left. Above, from left, "Painted Bronze, 1960," and "Diver, 1962-63," both at the Whitney. Below, from far left, "Usuyuki" (1982), a rarely seen work by Johns, and "Watchman" (1964), both in Philadelphia.

when the span of his output — early and late, "major" and "minor" — is fully laid out, as it is in this two-venue retrospective, organized by Scott Rothkopf, senior deputy director and chief curator at the Whitney, and Carlos Basualdo, senior curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum.

Some of their paired thematic installations are straightforwardly historical. Philadelphia recreates a 1960 Johns solo exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery, a show that still looks like a sendup of then-fashionable "action painting." A corresponding installation at the Whitney evokes a 1968 Johns solo, in which the ethereal painting "Harlem Light" attests to his move to mural scale.

Two other now-canonical monuments, "According to What" (1964) and "Untitled" (1972) — get rooms of their own, one at the Whitney, the other in Philadelphia. So do series of virtuosic prints. Lining a Whitney gallery is the great 1982 series of monotypes based on the artist's 1960 bronze sculpture of a Savarin can. In the one in Philadelphia, large high-color 1990s etchings, packed with quotes from older work, optically leap from the walls.

But it's parts of the show less obviously focused on masterpiece displays that most interest me, because they seem to bring us — this is fanciful, I know — closer to an artist who, though tight-lipped about personal information, has consistently embedded his art

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ARTWORK VIA JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER LEAMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

with autobiographical data and personal emotion that can be traced through "Mind/Mirror."

Some facts of his life are well known. He was born in 1930 in Georgia, and grew up in South Carolina. After his parents divorced, when he was 2, he lived on and off with his mother, but mostly with grandparents and an aunt. After a year or so of college, he moved to New York City with ambitions to be an artist.

An Army stint during the Korean War took him to Japan, where he would later return. In 1954, he was back in New York, and there he met Robert Rauschenberg, five years his senior and already an art-world star in the making. They lived together as lovers in Lower Manhattan, and hung out with another male couple, John Cage and Merce Cunningham. It was at this time that Johns produced his first American flag painting — owned by MoMA, it opens the Philadelphia half of the show — and made history.

In the context of New York art of the time, dominated by Abstract Expressionism, the picture was radical. Realistic, impersonal, populist, inherently political, it was everything, or a lot, that AbEx was not. Paintings of other "found" images emerged from Johns's studio: targets, United States maps, and stencil-style numbers from 0 to 9.

The exhibition rightfully gives them good play. The Whitney devotes a large gallery entirely to flags and maps in varying sizes and media, and of different dates, from the 1950s to the 2000s. Philadelphia follows the same model in a gallery called "Numbers." In addition to celebrating formal variety and conceptual subtlety, the parallel installations establish the idea of the eternal return of images in Johns's art. Like memories and emotions, they keep coming back, with different weights and meanings at different times and in different contexts, always the same, never the same.

When Johns's flags first appeared, though, what they changed forever was American art. They made gestural abstraction begin to look operatic and sappy and uncool. Their tightrope walk between depicting flags and actually being flags threw the art-life divide, and values attached to it, into crisis, a little the way NFTs do today.

And while the flag paintings' inexpressive, deadpan air was, for some viewers, an existential problem, for others it was a solution. Expressively, emotionally, these paintings seem to give nothing away; indeed, seemed to have nothing to give. And when the art historian Moira Roth wrote of certain art produced during the 1950s — an era of repressive politics and rampant homophobia — as representing a self-protective "aesthetic of indifference," she was talking about art like Johns's. Viewed in the light of this show, even this earliest work is tinged with emotion — anxiety, if not active fear.

And anyway, banishing feelings from art, if the feelings were strong, could only last so long. In 1961, Rauschenberg left Johns for someone else and Johns, the vaunted anti-expressionist, brought anguish and anger to his work. Many of the paintings he produced that year and the next were in shades of gray, and their expressive titles were unmistakably personal. "Liar" is stenciled across the top of a dour 1961 painting at the Whitney. Another, titled "Painting Bitten by a Man," is scarred with tooth marks. A third, "Fool's House," in Philadelphia, has a broom attached, as if to make a clean sweep.

And it can be no coincidence that several works from this time refer to gay cultural figures. The large, dark

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1962-63 work in charcoal and paint on paper called "Diver," one of Johns's most beautiful works in any medium, is a homage to the poet Hart Crane, who jumped to his death from a ship after being caught cruising a sailor. (The Lower Manhattan building where Johns and Rauschenberg lived had views of Brooklyn Heights, where Crane once lived.)

Another elegiac 1961 picture, "In Memory of My Feelings — Frank O'Hara," takes its title from a lament on lost love by a gay poet who was a friend of Johns and an art-world fellow traveler. This picture appears at the Whitney in one of the retrospective's most overtly biographical installations, titled "South Carolina." After the breakup with Rauschenberg, Johns retreated to a beach house in his home state, and there his work began to lighten up, as evidenced by the 1964 "Studio," a mural-like painting that incorporates a full-size imprint of a screen door, an image of a palmetto frond, a brush and a string of paint-spattered beer cans — real ones — dangling from its surface.

The corresponding installation in Philadelphia documents another important place in Johns's life and art, Japan, where he traveled in 1964 and where, thanks to artists he met there, his interest in printmaking intensified. One of his most celebrated assemblage paintings, "Watchman," from 1964, is a centerpiece of this gallery, along with two works that incorporate a photograph of the artist, the only one that appears in his art. But the real glory is a selection of abstract prints Johns made between 1977 and 1995 with Japanese artists in Tokyo and New York (he is seen in action in an accompanying film by Katy Martin).

These prints, composed of unstable patterns of crosshatched parallel lines, are collectively titled "Usuyuki" or "light snow," the name of an 18th-century Kabuki play that Johns has described as being about "the fleeting quality of beauty in the world." Awareness of that reality has always been part of his art, and is especially pronounced in his late art, which is the work I've come to love most, precisely because it's not arcane or hermetic; it's fully felt and reality-grounded.

I'm talking about paintings like the 1982 "Perilous Night," named for a Cage composition, hung with casts of bruised arms, and made on the eve of AIDS. I'm thinking of "The Seasons" (1985-86), a series about delight in the world, memory, and clocks running down. (Johns appears as a blank gray shadow in each picture.) I'm thinking of the "Catenary" paintings of the late 1990s, each with a string draped on its surface, an emblem of gravity at work, perhaps a thread of life. And I'm thinking of the images of vaudevillian skeletons, and a weeping soldier, and spiral nebulae that have preoccupied the artist of late.

And I'm thinking of the idea, suggested by this show, that artists are mirrored in their art. True? For years Johns has told us we wouldn't find him there, or at least he wouldn't tell us how we could. Maybe that was part of his reception problem. Critics, like most people, resent being told you have information they can't know, because you won't share it. I think the problem is over now. Partly this is because Johns seems to have become more open over time. (There's a biography, by Deborah Solomon, in the works.) And partly because, as the retrospective demonstrates, his recent work feels easily accessible.

Or maybe it's just the way I've come to approach it, and him. I'll let art historians sort out his formal achievements, which, especially considering he's mostly self-taught, are protean. I'll let them tally up lists of the artists who have influenced him and those he has influenced. (The second list will require the services of a research firm.) I'll rely on them to solve the problems, and answer the riddles he's set, or try.

And basically, I'll stay with the impression I had, as I walked through the shows in Philadelphia and New York, that I was perusing a rigorous but passionate personal diary, a six-decade record of work, need, love, anger, renewal, sweat, fear, and resolve. It's being recorded by an artist who, particularly over the past quarter century, has, in his art, consistently mapped the psychological terrain of aging, and who, in his present work, takes the position of a deer standing in the path of oncoming headlights — distant at first, coming closer, almost here — and holds his ground and stares them down.

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The New York Times

Here's All the World In One Concise 'Slice'

The newest painting by Jasper Johns was inspired by a fan letter from a renowned astrophysicist who has long harbored a fascination with the artist. Now here's a first look.

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

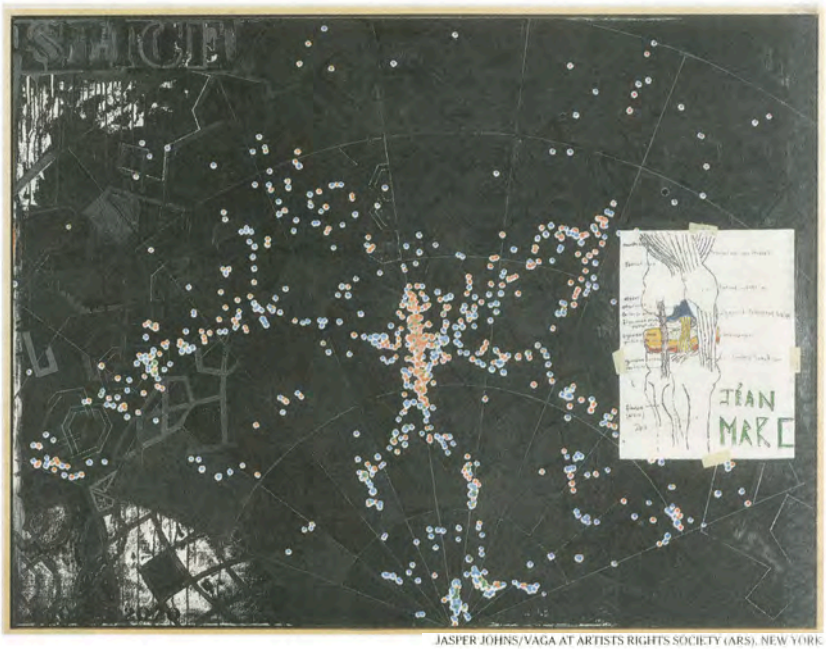
At 91, Jasper Johns is turning out impressive and touchingly personal work. During the solitary months of the pandemic, he completed a painting titled "Slice," and a group of related drawings and prints. Likely to be a standout of the show "Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror," a two-venue retrospective opening Sept. 29 at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Slice" is a large, horizontal and predominantly black oil painting that combines unrelated images of a map of outer space and a human knee.

When I first saw it in July in the artist's barn in Sharon, Conn., I was riveted and asked him to help me decode it. Without elaborating, he mentioned a name that was new to me: Margaret Geller.

A few days later I reached Dr. Geller, an astrophysicist at the Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Mass., and a recipient of a MacArthur fellowship, known as the genius grant. She's recognized as a pioneer in mapping the universe. The story of her history with Johns, as it turns out, sheds much light on the genesis of his painting and the role that a random encounter with a person can play in the creation of a work of art.

I learned that she has harbored a fascination with Johns since 1996, when, on a visit to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, she happened to see his "Mirror's Edge 2" (1993), a chalk-blue and gray canvas scattered with images that felt like clues in a mystery. She was transfixed by the lower half, which contains a ladder, an illustration of a whirling galaxy, and a stick figure falling headfirst through space.

Dr. Geller, now 73, believed that the painting chronicled, of all the crazy things, the highs and lows of researching cosmology. "To me, what the painting said is, you climb



JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

up this ladder to the galaxy. You try to understand: How did it originate? What is it made of? And then you fall back through space not knowing whether you are right or wrong."

She was pleased to find that the galaxy depicted in "Mirror's Edge 2" was M101. Twice as large as our own Milky Way, M101 was cataloged in the 18th century by the French astronomer Charles Messier, which accounts for the M in its name. Its spiraling arms have earned it an affectionate moniker: the Pinwheel Galaxy.

Dr. Geller couldn't wait to write Johns to ask how he became so knowledgeable about astronomy. But she had read that he was inordinately private and loath to discuss the meaning of his work. She thought, "I don't want to write and have him not write back."

Two decades went by. In the fall of 2018, encouraged by a friend, she finally sent off a

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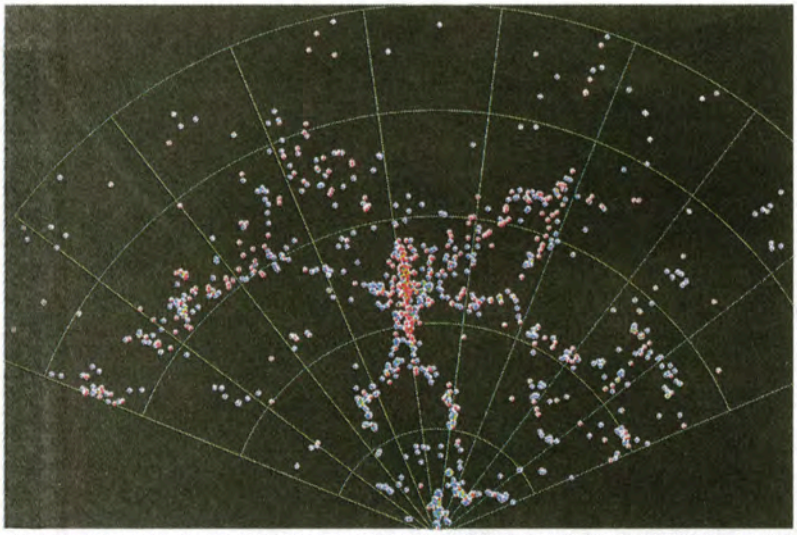


V. DE LAPPARENT, M.J. GELLER, AND J.P. HUCHRA, 1986, ASTROPHYSICAL JOURNAL LETTERS, 302, L1 (GRAPHICS BY M.J. KURTZ)

Jasper Johns's "Slice" (2020), opposite page, which was inspired by an astrophysicist's map of nearby galaxies, above, also incorporates an image of drawing of a knee by a student from Cameroon. In Margaret Geller's map Johns saw something very familiar: a stickman.

letter saying how much "Mirror's Edge 2" meant to her. She enclosed a computer printout of her own work: a map entitled "Slice of the Universe," which shows the distribution of nearby galaxies. Its publication, in 1986, brought her and her collaborators great fame in their field.

Six months passed before she heard back from Johns. "It was a very terse letter," she told me. "I had asked him how he found M101, and the answer I got was, 'I am not interested in astronomy.' So I thought that was the end of that."

It was, in fact, Johns told me, far from the end. Interested in images of all sorts, the artist was intrigued by the map she sent. Googling around, he found a few educational videos in which Dr. Geller explains her work. What is the universe? "It's our home," she told a PBS talk-show host in 1993. "It's the last line in our address."

Johns is well known for his own preoccupation with cartography. (The Whitney show will include a selection of his map paintings of the United States, in which his vigorous brushwork crosses state boundaries and at times dissolves them.) Dr. Geller's map held a special appeal for him. When you look at it closely, the random-seeming dots and galaxies coalesce into a distinct and delectable shape — that of a giant stick figure, a pointillist Gumby with outstretched arms and bowed legs flowing along with the fabric of the universe.

It was an amusing coincidence. Johns had long featured stickmen in his work. They usually appear in little troupes and might be waving paintbrushes or just dancing around the perimeter of things, perhaps a nod to his dear friend Merce Cunningham, the great modern dancer and choreographer, who died in 2009. Now, he learned from the "Slice" map that nature had spun its own alluring stick figure in the midst of the infinite darkness of the firmament.

Early in 2020, Dr. Geller received another letter, one that startled her. "He told me that he was thinking about making a painting, and since he was old he wasn't sure if he would finish it. And if he finished it, I would be partly responsible for this painting."

He had always found inspiration in pre-existing images. You can start with his early "Flag" paintings and his debt to the seamstress Betsy Ross. His use of commonplace subjects spawned the Pop Art movement of the '60s. But unlike the Pop artists, with their Campbell's soup cans and comic-book women crying on the phone to their boyfriends, Johns is not interested in satirizing consumer culture. He is a more interior and poetic artist who shows how objects can be entrusted to express feelings and ideas, conjuring presences and absences.

"Slice," in the end, does borrow from Dr. Geller's map, as viewers can see when the painting makes its debut in the Whitney half of "Mind/Mirror." There he is: that funny stickman dangling in the sky, his body rendered in red, blue and green dots rimmed in white pigment.

Other elements are no less important. The painting derives much of its power from its tarry, visceral surface. On the left side, black pigment thins and drips, exposing patches of bare canvas as well as a linear pattern (which happens to be based on Leonardo's drawings of knots). Light fades. Something is vanishing.

The right side, by contrast, is dominated by a hand-drawn illustration of a knee. It is fixed in place with four little pieces of masking tape that look so real you might be tempted to peel them off the canvas, but they're just a trompe l'oeil illusion. Johns found the original knee drawing, which was done by a high school student from Cameroon named Jéan Marc Togodgue, in the office of an orthopedist whom the artist sees for his longtime knee problems.

All in all, "Slice" captures the haphazardness of life, with its mix of the achingly personal (a throbbing knee) and the coldly impersonal (the infinite expanse of outer space) and no clear connection between them. The artist seems to be saying that even his paintings are mere objects, as separate and eternally silent as the maps and illustrations and other oddities they depict.

As Johns lamented when we first met in 1988: "One wants one's work to be the world, but of course it's never the world. The work is *in* the world; it never contains the whole thing."

On the other hand, "Slice," I think, is full of genuine linkages that cut across the distances of time and space. Although Dr. Geller has never met the artist or spoken to him on the phone, the painting reminds us that connections between individuals do not always require words. Sometimes an image is enough. And sometimes a painting, as much as a galaxy, can brim with points of light.

Solomon, Deborah. "Here's All the World In One Concise 'Slice.'" *The New York Times*, September 19, 2021, Arts, pp. 112–13.

Harper's BAZAAR

From top: *Three Flags*, 1958; *Savarin*, 1982

The Meaning of JASPER JOHNS

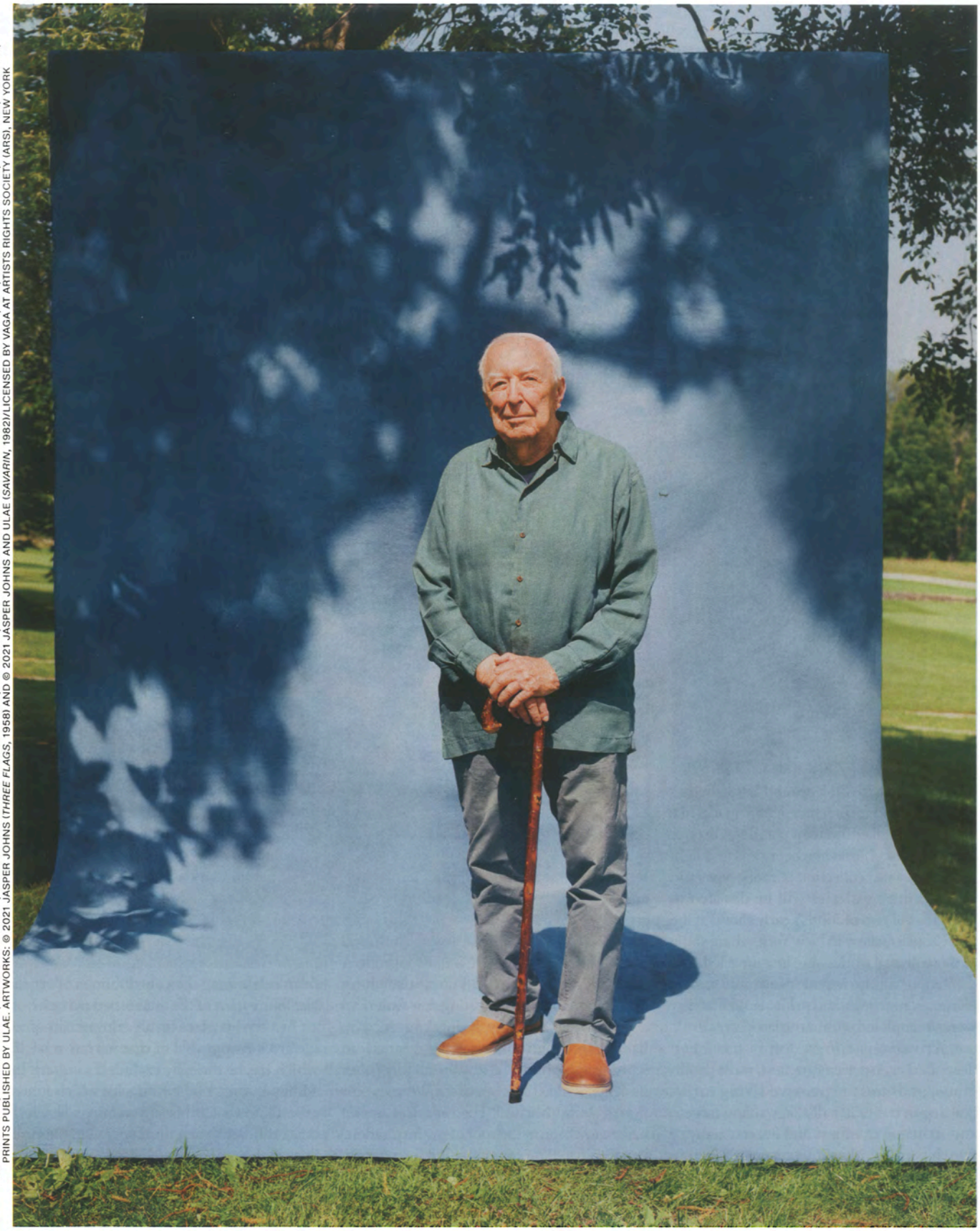
For decades, people have tried to get INSIDE *the* MIND *of one of America's most* VISIONARY, ENIGMATIC ARTISTS. *Now, they finally get their chance.*

Text by STEPHEN MOOALLEM
Photographs by JOHN EDMONDS

To say that Jasper Johns is ambivalent about having to discuss the intentions or meanings behind his art would imply that there is some part of it he doesn't find distasteful. Johns has always been reluctant (and unwilling) to "explain" himself or his work. He isn't humorless; in fact, he's the opposite. He has just never been interested in the public parts of being an artist that involve submitting himself as a specimen for examination. Johns has developed a Zen-like threshold for uncomfortable silences—a skill that, at 91, he has refined to an art in itself. (In the 1990s, he had a rubber stamp made that said "Regrets, Jasper Johns," which he'd use to decline invitations and requests; the stamp found its way into a series of works shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 2014 under the title "Regrets.") During the pandemic, Johns took the opportunity at his estate in Sharon, Connecticut, to toil away unfettered on the multiple projects he always has going—or at least less fettered than usual. "I was able to work in the studio without as much interruption as typically occurs," Johns says. "Most of the time was spent on a painting and a few drawings and a print that took more time than usual to resolve and is now, finally, being printed—I hope!"

The respite is about to end. On September 29, "Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror," the most comprehensive retrospective ever of Johns's work, is set to open simultaneously at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. ➤

Mooallem, Stephen. "The Meaning of Jasper Johns." *Harper's Bazaar*, September 2021, pp. 236–39, 277.



THREE FLAGS, 1958: ENCAUSTIC ON CANVAS (THREE PANELS), 30 7/8 × 45 3/4 IN (78.4 × 116.2 CM) OVERALL; WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; PURCHASE, WITH FUNDS FROM THE GILMAN FOUNDATION, INC., THE LAUDER FOUNDATION, A. ALFRED TAUBMAN, LAURA-LEE WHITTIER WOODS, HOWARD LIPMAN, AND ED DOWNE IN HONOR OF THE MUSEUM'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY, 80.32. *SAVARIN*, 1982: MONOTYPE, 50 × 38 IN (127 × 96.5 CM); BILL GOLDSTON, JAMES V. SMITH, THOMAS COX/ULAE; WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; GIFT OF THE AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY ART FOUNDATION, INC., LEONARD A. LAUDER, PRESIDENT, 2002.228; PRINTS PUBLISHED BY ULAE. ARTWORKS: © 2021 JASPER JOHNS (*THREE FLAGS*, 1958) AND © 2021 JASPER JOHNS AND ULAE (*SAVARIN*, 1982)/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

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THIS PAGE, *USUYUKI*, 1982; ENCAUSTIC ON CANVAS (THREE PANELS), 71 × 113 3/4 IN (180.3 × 288.9 CM) OVERALL; SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NAGANO, JAPAN. OPPOSITE PAGE, *UNTITLED*, 2018; OIL ON CANVAS, 39 × 30 1/8 IN (99.1 × 76.5 CM); PRIVATE COLLECTION; PHOTO COURTESY THE WILDENSTEIN PLATTNER INSTITUTE, NEW YORK. ARTWORKS: © 2021 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The exhibition will showcase nearly 500 pieces across the two institutions, with each museum exploring the Johns canon through "echoed" or "mirrored" lenses. The Whitney and the PMA will present different programs connected by "chapters" that are built around loose themes and motifs and incorporate iconic works like his American flag and map paintings, bronze sculptures of objects like beer cans and light bulbs, and a vast collection of monotypes and prints. Entire galleries will be devoted to restagings of two of Johns's early shows at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, where some of those pivotal works were first unveiled. The exhibition will also include previously unseen paintings, drawings, and prints, as well as new works completed within the last year.

At various times, Johns has been described as America's greatest, most prodigious, and most expensive living artist. Starting in the 1950s, his flags, maps, targets, and stenciled numbers and letters, many of which were rendered in encaustic (a mix of hot wax and pigment), explored the nature of representation, language, repetition, and meaning. His work seemed to foreground process, or the making of art, with an almost eerie sense of detachment and anticipated movements like Pop art, conceptualism, and minimalism. It also signaled a move away from the more gestural painting of Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. In 1964, he jotted his recipe for success in a sketchbook: "Take an object / Do something to it / Do something else to it. [Repeat.]" The fact that he chose to do that with symbols of American national and political power and systems of enforced logic, like targets, numbers, and letters, was what made his work so potent. The gaze of the art world was shifting to New York, and Johns and his close friend and fellow artist Robert Rauschenberg, along with choreographer Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage, were part of a pioneering new American avant-garde. (Fittingly, Ralph Lauren, who has engaged with Americana and American iconography in more ways than any other designer, is a lead sponsor of the Whitney portion of "Mind/Mirror." "The American dream has always been at the root of my inspiration," Lauren says. "The cowboy stood for a person who wasn't afraid of hard work, wore his jeans until they wore out, and then patched them. That's at the heart of the American values that I've always celebrated and still believe in.")

While Johns's popularity has waxed and waned, the market for his work has not. In 1980, the Whitney purchased Johns's *Three Flags* for $1 million, then a record price for the work of a living artist. In 1988, Johns's 1959 painting *False Start* was auctioned at Sotheby's in New York for $17 million, topping a record Johns himself had set the previous night with his 1958 painting *White Flag*, which went for $7 million. Another flag painting was sold privately to hedge-fund billionaire Steven A. Cohen in 2010 for a reported $110 million.

Nevertheless, "Mind/Mirror" comes at a curious juncture in American art. In recent years, much of the emphasis in the nation's major institutions has begun to veer away from celebrating the contributions of artists like Johns—part of the established narrative of art history, his place firmly entrenched—and toward a reappraisal of that narrative itself, which has historically excluded so many. In addition, some of the works for which Johns is best known, like his flag paintings, also resonate differently at a moment when the fault lines in the union that the flag is supposed to represent are so apparent. The flag itself was wielded by the throng that led the siege on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6; it's

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"I don't REMEMBER *what my* IDEA *of being an* ARTIST *consisted of as a* CHILD, *but I knew that to* BE *one, I would* NEED *to be* SOMEWHERE *other than* WHERE *I was."*

This page: *Untitled*, 2018.
Opposite page: *Usuyuki*, 1982.

hard to look at Johns's maps now and not think of political maps, with red and blue states and district lines that have been redrawn, or "heat" maps designed to diagram the spread of Covid-19 variants. Johns says he has tried to keep up with the news, even when it's been tempting to look away. "There were specific events—those that took place on January 6, the presidential inauguration, the Supreme Court confirmation hearings—that I watched with interest," he offers. "Generally, it has been difficult and discouraging to follow current events."

Planning for "Mind/Mirror" began in 2016; it was originally slated to open last year before it was pushed back because of the pandemic. "We tried to do a show that in its very structure replicates some basic procedures at play in Johns's oeuvre," says Carlos Basualdo, the PMA's senior curator of contemporary art, who oversaw the exhibition with Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's senior deputy director and chief curator. "The work is inquisitive and poses thoughtful questions that are very urgent. What is the relation between signs and meaning? What is memory? What is truth?"

"The biggest surprise for me was to confront head-on Jasper's incredible capacity for reinvention," says Rothkopf. "History has a way of smoothing out an artist's work or making certain shifts look inevitable. But Jasper has never been on autopilot."

At this stage, Johns has seen his art analyzed, organized, and curated in a multitude of ways; the Whitney even held its own retrospective back in 1977. But he finds the *(Continued on page 277)*

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format of this new show intriguing. "I have never seen an exhibition that was divided between two different cities, so this is going to seem odd in that respect," he says. "For an artist, I suppose, any exhibition of his or her work may seem retrospective and too familiar."

Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia. After his parents divorced when he was a toddler, he was sent to live with his paternal grandfather in Allendale, South Carolina. He had infrequent contact with both his parents for most of his childhood. His father's mother had passed away, and Johns's grandfather had remarried, but his late grandmother had an interest in art. Her paintings were all over the house. In a group of works from the mid-1990s, Johns included a floor plan, drawn from memory, of his grandfather's home. "I don't remember what my idea of being an artist consisted of as a child, but I knew that to be one, I would need to be somewhere other than where I was," Johns says. "That idea appealed to me and contributed to my determination to become one. Even as a teenager, I knew little about the United States other than having learned their names in grammar school, but 'New York' seemed exotic and about as far away as one might get."

By 1953, Johns had made it there. He'd first come to New York in 1948 to attend Parsons but was drafted into the Army during the Korean War. He served for two years, with a six-month station in Sendai, Japan, before being discharged. Not long after his return, he met Rauschenberg, with whom he developed a particularly tight bond; they ended up working out of the same building on Pearl Street in the Financial District. They also collaborated with Cunningham and Cage on performance projects. But things, for Johns, were not going well. One day in 1954, Johns decided that there was a difference between wanting to be an artist and actually being one, so he destroyed all of his work. Soon after, he had a dream about an American flag. The next morning, he stretched some bedsheets across a wooden frame and began to paint that flag—at first with the oil paint he had on hand, but later switching to encaustic, which was used in ancient Egypt to create portraits of the dead and had the added benefit of drying quickly.

Johns has said that part of what he liked about the flag was that it was already designed—it was a "ready-made" image in the vein of the manufactured objects like bicycle wheels and urinals that Marcel Duchamp incorporated into his art—so he didn't have to create it. Johns has expressed similar feelings about his use of other recurring images like skeletons, catenary lines, and rulers: They were "things the mind already knows," and any deeper reading or attempt to decode or organize them into some sort of language is about not him but us.

Rothkopf recalls meeting with Johns at the artist's home in Connecticut in the early stages of organizing "Mind/Mirror." At one point, Rothkopf mentioned that the exhibition, then scheduled to open in 2020, would be up in time for Johns's 90th birthday, to which Johns responded: "The possibility of my future existence has nothing to do with this show." Rothkopf now says, "I'm half Jasper's age, so it's hard for me to imagine what it feels like to be 91, but I have learned from him not to take one's own future for granted."

I ask Johns if he ever had a Plan B if becoming an artist didn't work out. "No," he says. "Even though so much seems to happen by chance, I don't think that I ever considered an alternative." He adds: "Of course, always looming was the possibility of failure." HB

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

REVIEW

ICONS

Making and Breaking Rules

At 91, Jasper Johns is the subject of a major new exhibition divided between museums in two cities.

By Peter Saenger

Jasper Johns has been one of America's most famous artists since the 1950s, when he began to make his highly distinctive paintings of everyday images like flags. Those early works remain his best-known, but a new retrospective opening Sept. 29 shows that Mr. Johns, 91, has never stopped exploring new directions. It's a testimony to his long, productive career that "Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror" needs two museums—the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—to display approximately 550 artworks spanning seven decades.

To Philadelphia goes the honor of showing Mr. Johns's earliest flag painting, from 1954-55. "One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag," he later recalled, then spent almost six months turning the dream into reality. Mr. Johns applied bits of printed newspaper to a stretched bedsheet with a brush and encaustic, a method of mixing hot wax and pigment that dates back to the ancient Greeks.

Critics were divided over whether the result glorified or attacked the idea of America. Meanwhile Mr. Johns returned to the subject dozens of times, and went on to create similar sets of inventive and obsessive variations on targets, numbers and letters. In the exhibition, a 1958 "Flag" looks like the stripes have been cross-hatched out on second thought, and a "Figure 2" from 1963 is apparently being absorbed by its background graph paper. In the 1959 "False Start," the word "red" appears stenciled onto a patch of blue.

Artists before Mr. Johns had created series of paintings devoted to a single subject observed under changing natural conditions, like Cézanne's apples or Monet's haystacks. But curator Scott Rothkopf of the Whitney sees Mr. Johns's images as being closer to abstract art. Rather than reproducing particular objects, his paintings draw on archetypal images that, in Mr. Johns's phrase, "the mind already knows" before seeing them.

> Johns's paintings draw on images that 'the mind already knows.'

Mr. Johns's work can be witty as well as striking. One story goes that the artist Willem de Kooning remarked that the gallerist Leo Castelli, who represented Mr. Johns, was so slick a salesman that he could sell two beer cans. Mr. Johns responded by casting a bronze sculpture of two cans of ale, "Painted Bronze" (1960), and Castelli sold it.

Mr. Rothkopf, who co-curated "Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror" with the Philadelphia Museum's Carlos Basualdo, calls the ale cans "in a way the conceptual hinge of the entire exhibition." The show's subtitle alludes to the way much of Mr. Johns's work is about repetition and doubling. But his approach was different from the exact reproductions that would make Andy Warhol famous a few years later. Warhol's Brillo boxes are "precise copies of commercial packaging," in the words of the Philadelphia Museum's description, meant to make a statement about the nature of art and mass production. In "Painted Bronze," by contrast, Mr. Johns painted the ale cans by hand, leaving each with different imperfec-

Saenger, Peter. "Making and Breaking Rules." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 11–12, 2021, p. C14.

Above: Jasper Johns's 'Three Flags' (1958). Right: 'Fall' from 'The Seasons' (1985-86).

JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (2)

tions. One even has the markings of a can opener and is much lighter, as an empty can would be.

Mr. Johns's style changed dramatically in the 1980s, says Mr. Rothkopf: "You see a real opening up in the work of different kinds of imagery...almost that he'd made certain rules for himself as young artist in the '50s and by the '80s was willing to kind of break them all." In the four-painting "The Seasons" (1985-86), split between the New York and Philadelphia shows, allegory and autobiography seem close at hand. The images in "Summer" include the artist's own shadowy form, a ladder close to stars or leaves against a green background, two American flags, the "Mona Lisa" and a pierced palm, seemingly an echo of Crucifixion imagery.

His more recent work, while still enigmatic, is more emotionally direct. One series of paintings is based on a photograph published in Life magazine in 1965, showing a U.S. Marine named James Farley weeping for a comrade killed in battle in Vietnam. Mr. Johns alters the image in various ways, darkening it until the figure of Mr. Farley is hard to discern or doubling it, possibly to stress the fragmentation of personality that can come with grief.

Sometimes the ambience of Mr. Johns's late paintings is cosmic. In an untitled 1997 painting, the artist has set a black-and-white image of what could be the Milky Way against a sky-like background with gold highlights. There are also disjointed cartoon-like eyes, what could be the curlicue of a nose, and a ruler, another of Mr. Johns's longtime favorite images. The final element of the picture shows an inverted Big Dipper and three human stick figures. Here Mr. Johns has broken his usual silence on the meaning of his work: According to Mr. Rothkopf, he has dubbed a figure holding a brush "the painter."

Saenger, Peter. "Making and Breaking Rules." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 11–12, 2021, p. C14.

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art Weekend

Jasper Johns: Hiding in Plain Sight

Johns has repeatedly used one motif whose source has never been identified.

by John Yau
May 29, 2021

For years, an observation that Frank O'Hara made about Jasper Johns's art has stuck in my head:

> Jasper Johns is [...] a very misunderstood artist, whose art presents to many something easily assimilable and understood, but Johns is one of the most mysterious artists of our time, an artist whose work is *not* formal, in the sense that it is understood or expounded. He has the experience, which may or may not be unfortunate for him, of seeing his paintings greeted with delight because the images are recognizable when they are filled with pain ("Art Chronicle," *Kulchur*, Summer 1962)

I have always linked O'Hara's observation with a statement that Johns made to Roberta Bernstein about his use of use of plaster fragments in early works, such as "Target with Plaster Casts" and "Target with Four Faces" (both 1955):

> Any broken representation of the human physique is touching in some way; it's upsetting or provokes reactions that one can't quite account for. Maybe because one's image of one's own body is disturbed by it.

Jasper Johns, "Green Angel" (1990), encaustic and sand on canvas, 75 1/8 x 50 1/4 inches. Stenciled on front, upper right: J. JOHNS 1990 / ST. MARTIN, F.W.I (Photography by Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics, Rockford, Ill. © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, New York; © Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS) NY)

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns: Hiding in Plain Sight." *Hyperallergic*, May 29, 2021.

From his first exhibition at Leo Castelli (January 1958) to his most recent exhibition at Matthew Marks (February 9–April 6, 2019), one of Johns's recurring themes has been the damaged human body. For more than six decades, he has used a variety of materials and processes to fashion and record shattered body parts, traces of skin, broken anatomies, grief that viewers can only glimpse, and grinning, jaunty skeletons standing in doorways, wearing dapper hats and sporting canes, as if they are waiting to greet us.

One of Johns's processes is to trace an image and then alter it, while maintaining its exact contours. The changes that he makes to his source material are in keeping with a well-known note that he made in his sketchbook: "Take an object / Do something to it / Do something else to it. [Repeat]."

An early example of this is the encaustic painting "White Flag" (1955), in which he covered a collaged ground of paper and fabric with white encaustic, attaining a colorless, cadaverous presence. What caused the flag to lose its color, to become funereal, to become a sign of surrender?

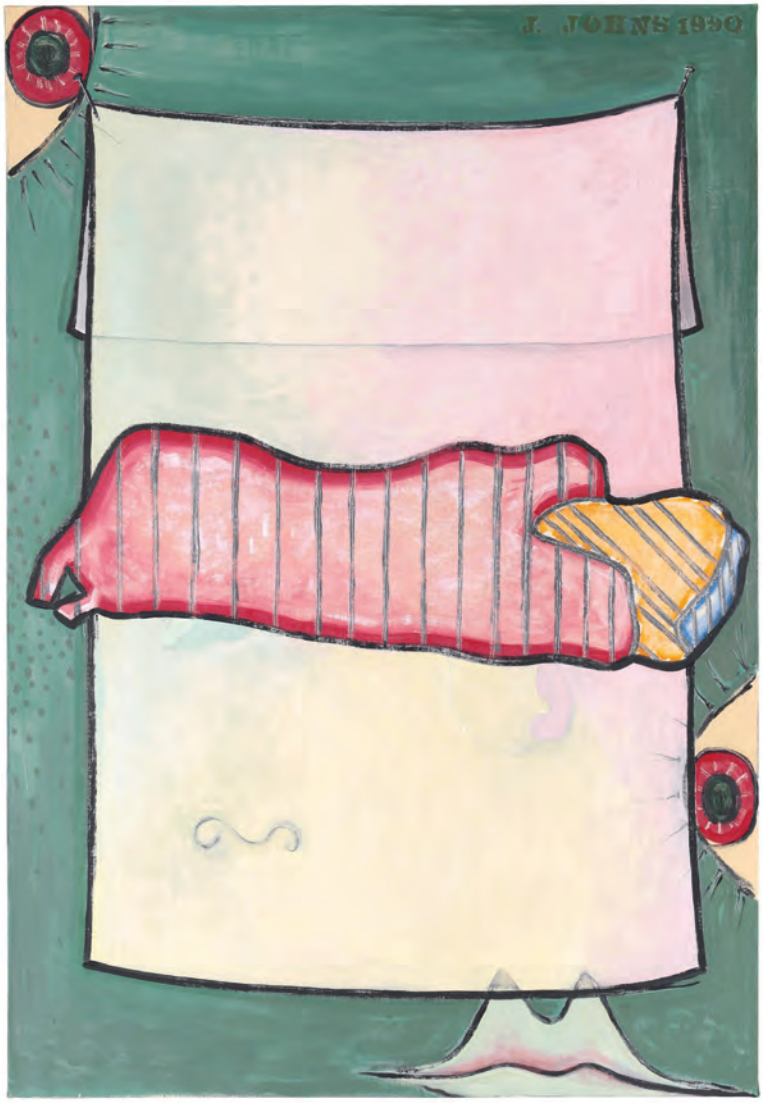
Johns's repeated examinations of pre-existing subjects, or what are commonly called "readymades," is very different from the approach taken by Andy Warhol and his followers, which is to appropriate an object and do one thing to it. Johns's transformation of readymades does not lend itself to mass production or to production by a studio assistant. His works are not variations.

Johns's restating of motifs derived from modern artists including Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp, along with Northern Renaissance artists such as Hans Holbein and Matthias Grünewald, has routinely led to him being accused of being obscure or hermetic. Within this context, Warhol is commonly described as a democratic artist, while Johns is characterized as elitist — terms that seem wrong in both cases.

At the same time, obscure as he supposedly is, viewers are often delighted by his "mysterious" and puzzling works as long as we don't have to recognize their embodiment of "pain," particularly since it seems to have no obvious source, and there is no one and nothing to blame for it.

One motif of Johns's has never had its source identified. He introduced it in the painting "Green Angel" (encaustic and sand on canvas, 73 1/8 by 50 ¼ inches, 1990), which was first included in the exhibition *Jasper Johns*, at Leo Castelli Gallery (February 16–March 9, 1991). The gallery poster announcing the exhibition pictured "Green Angel" (1990), which was the first time he used this motif.

The motif resembles two joined figures, one vertical and one horizontal, neither of which the viewer can identify with any certainty. The vertical figure rises up from the painting's bottom edge on a support that seems too narrow for the rest of the body. It is made of flat, interlocking areas of blue, orange, red, yellow, and violet. The horizontal figure is beige stucco and featureless, as if shrouded. Its dark gray outline distinguishes it from the vertical figure, which is not outlined. A thin, lighter



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (1990), oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 25 1/4 inches. Stenciled on front, upper right: J. JOHNS 1990 (Photography by Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics, Rockford, Ill. © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, New York; © **Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS) NY**)

line forms an irregular V that runs from the top of the figure, near what we are apt to read as a shoulder, to the bottom edge. The division suggests a head and body. A short appendage protrudes from the lower left side of the prone figure, seemingly squeezing a cropped, rounded red form we read as belonging to the vertical figure.

In "Green Angel," John combined this new motif with one he first used in "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 22 5/8 by 16 1/2 inches, 1985): two cropped eyeballs with long lashes, one nestled tightly in the painting's upper left corner, peering down, the other peering in from the painting's right edge, more than halfway down. Along the painting's bottom right edge, he has depicted what could be read as a pair of lips or two mountain peaks. On the lower left is a curved horizontal line that we could read as nostrils.

Johns sets this combination of a schematic face and abstracted figures against a green ground. The schematic face suggests that we are looking at someone staring inward at a figural combination that is both familiar and elusive. The most obvious association is with a mother holding a child, but everything about this reading is off, starting with the anatomy. The vertical form does not invite associations with a woman, particularly a Madonna or mother, while the horizontal forms seems too large to be an infant. Is the prone figure alive or dead?

Ever since I first saw "Green Angel" and related works, I've been reminded of Johns's statement to Bernstein about people being "touched" and "upset" by "a broken representation of the human physique." To me, Johns's empathetic response hardly seems that of an artist who is aloof, ironic, or overly intellectual and emotionally distanced. Rather, I think Johns is refusing to claim that he is especially sensitive or tormented, which is a cliché mainstream view of artists.

At the same time, I remained curious about the source, and grew even more so because Johns used it, or part of it, in 13 more paintings he completed between 1990 and '97.

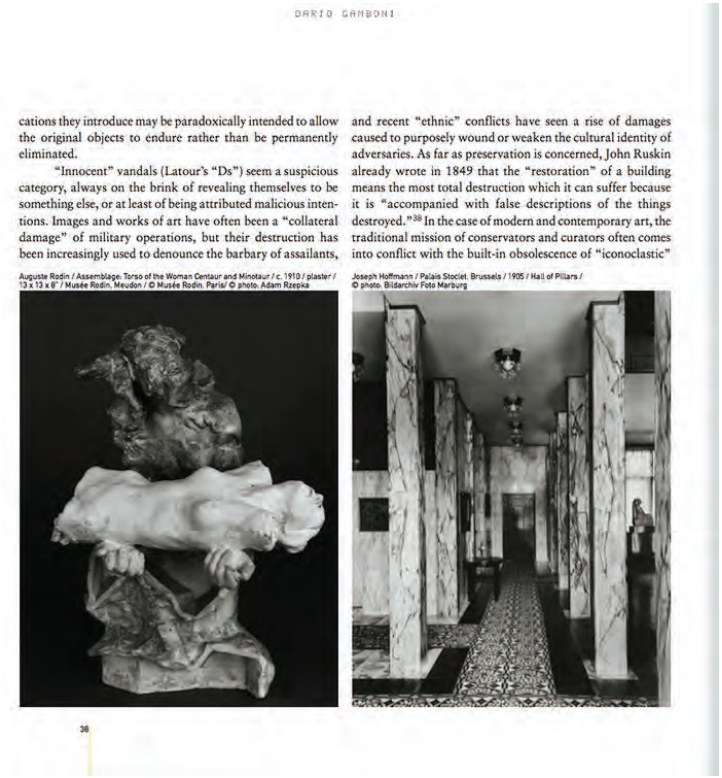
Poster for *Jasper Johns: Paintings and Drawings* at Leo Castelli, 1991 (image courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)

This is what the Museum of Modern Art's website says of the etching and aquatint "Green Angel 2" (1997), in the museum's collection:

> Johns has looked to other artists for motifs and patterns to serve as compositional elements in his own work. While many of his references have been identified — from work of the modern master Pablo Picasso to that of Matthias Grünewald of the Renaissance — here Johns presents a shape traced from an unnamed work. He decided not to make the source known because it might hamper spontaneous responses. To date, the *Green Angel* motif has appeared in over forty paintings, drawings, and prints.

Would we think differently about the motif if we learned its source? Would it reinforce the belief that Johns is hiding something because of what it might reveal about him (a view I have never put much stock in)? Did he

choose the “Green Angel” motif because of its relationship to the familiar, almost stock, trope of mother and child? If the figure is not the “Green Angel,” is the angel the schematic face? What is our capacity for compassion, particularly in a world that is beset daily with horrific, institutionally sanctioned violence and unreported instances of human abuse? Can we stay open and respond? What moves us?


DARIO GAMBONI

cations they introduce may be paradoxically intended to allow the original objects to endure rather than be permanently eliminated.

"Innocent" vandals (Latour's "Ds") seem a suspicious category, always on the brink of revealing themselves to be something else, or at least of being attributed malicious intentions. Images and works of art have often been a "collateral damage" of military operations, but their destruction has been increasingly used to denounce the barbary of assailants, and recent "ethnic" conflicts have seen a rise of damages caused to purposely wound or weaken the cultural identity of adversaries. As far as preservation is concerned, John Ruskin already wrote in 1849 that the "restoration" of a building means the most total destruction which it can suffer because it is "accompanied with false descriptions of the things destroyed."[38] In the case of modern and contemporary art, the traditional mission of conservators and curators often comes into conflict with the built-in obsolescence of "iconoclastic"

Auguste Rodin / Assemblage. Torso of the Woman Centaur and Minotaur / c. 1910 / plaster / 13 x 13 x 8" / Musée Rodin, Meudon / © Musée Rodin, Paris/ © photo. Adam Rzepka

Joseph Hoffmann / Palais Stoclet, Brussels / 1905 / Hall of Pillars / © photo. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg

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The page in question from *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (screenshot by the author)

I returned to these questions today because I got an email from Cristobal Lehyt, an artist whom I did not previously know, which read:

Hello
I hope this email finds you well.
I am just writing because I saw this image and thought that you might be interested.
Maybe you have seen it already — I might be late in sharing this find — but if you haven't maybe this will be of interest to you.

The black and white image is of an assemblage by Auguste Rodin titled “Torso of the Woman Centaur and Minotaur” (13 by 13 by 8 inches, c. 1910), which is in the Musée Rodin, Meudon, France. Ironically, 10 years after Johns first used this motif in his work, which he flipped in “Green Angel,” the black and white image of Rodin’s assemblage was reproduced in a book, *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (ZKM and MIT PRESS, 2002). Both the Rodin and Johns’s “Painting Bitten by a Man” (1961) were included in the chapter “Why Are Images so Ambiguous” by Dario Gamboni, 41 pages apart.

I sent the Rodin image to Jasper in an email with this statement: “I thought of you when I looked at this piece.” His answer was even shorter: “I should think that you would!”

Found in Greek mythology, Minotaurs and centaurs are opposites. A Minotaur is a beast with the head of a bull and the body of a man, while a centaur has the head and torso of a human and lower body and legs of a horse.

In Rodin’s assemblage, the dark Minotaur supports the prone white torso of the woman centaur, which has been severed from her lower animal body, on his forearms. His white hands are visible beyond her body, the fingers closed.

Yau, John. “Jasper Johns: Hiding in Plain Sight.” *Hyperallergic*, May 29, 2021.

Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (1994), encaustic on canvas, 28 1/2 x 42 1/4 inches. Stenciled on front, lower right: J. JOHNS 1994 / ST. MARTIN F.W.I (Photography by Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics, Rockford, Ill. © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, New York; **© Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS) NY**)

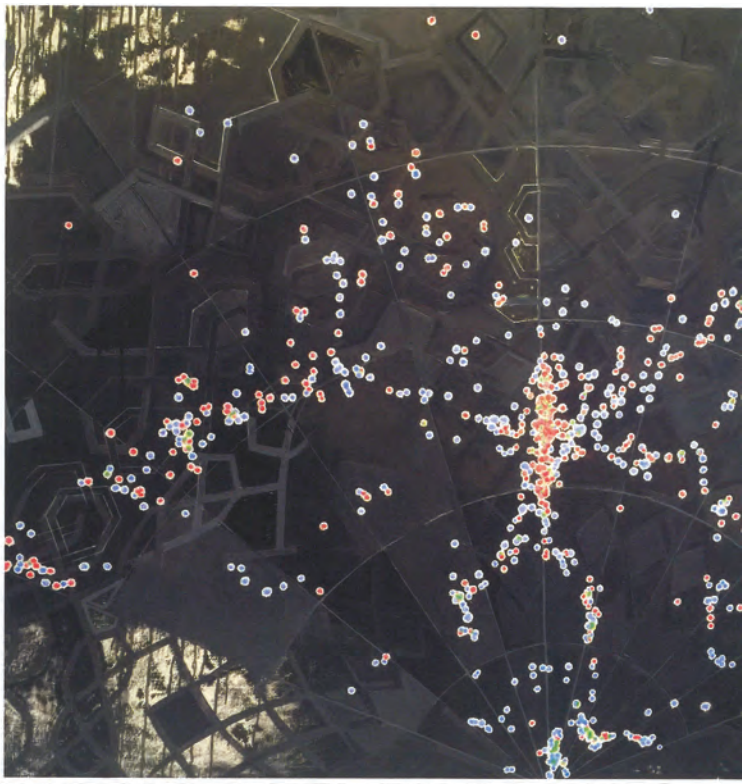
What are we to make of the severed torso of the woman centaur, her head thrown back? Is Rodin's combination of incommensurable creatures erotic, violent, tragic, or sad? How did this scenario come to pass? Both the centaur and Minotaur seem to be victims of unnamed cataclysms.

Did Johns suppress the source because he wanted to restate the torment of their impossible relationship in a way that is more accessible to the viewer? Or because it enabled him to focus on two opaque figures that, while seemingly joined, don't fit together?

Is the face in "Green Angel" looking at himself as a creature made up of parts that are bonded but don't fit together? Or is it looking at the dependent figure that is both joined to and separate from the towering one? Why is the prone figure monochromatic and the vertical one in multiple colors? The painting suggests that we are observing someone in a state of reflection, which would explain why we might not be able to identify what we are looking at. How and why did the image disturb him? Might not the state of disturbed looking be an inescapable condition? Does there need to be a key to all these questions? Might not Johns want us to keep looking without "reaching," as John Keats warned against, "after fact & reason"?

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns: Hiding in Plain Sight." *Hyperallergic*, May 29, 2021.

ARTFORUM



Detail of a work in progress by Jasper Johns, April 13, 2020, approx. 50 × 66".

WISH YOU WERE HERE

THIS ISSUE came together very fast, organized in apartments scattered across the pandemic's epicenter. There's a vertigo to it all—of starting work just as the merry-go-round stops. This magazine, built piece by piece in our kitchens and makeshift offices, destined for other homes. Our nerves are on the surface, but they're alloyed with hope.

ON THE COVER is a bouquet of tulips. The artist Tosh Basco bought the flowers at the beginning of quarantine with their partner, Wu Tsang. They documented the flowers as they decayed. The picture is primed for metaphor, and part of its appeal is that it's not hard to understand: It radiates the early boom-bust parable of tulipomania. The fable of the modern artist, extracting beauty from the transient, the fleeting, the contingent. All that phony separation of nature and culture that got us into this mess.

The artist sees decomposition as the prelude to composition. They see hope. Shot with an iPhone 8, it is an elegant, magic image, surprising in its novel familiarity. The background flickers with clinquant batches of "degradation," the lambent grays spooked by slippery crystals of reds and blues and greens. The imperfect JPEG decays too, lending the descended tulips a crisp luster. I think the friction is poignant in print. It is a perfect picture of an artist at home.

FAMILY SHOWED UP from all over. Paul B. Preciado was in Paris, sick with the virus. When he came to, he sent his ambitious dispatch convoking a "new understanding of community with all living creatures." Our publisher Tony Korner put us in touch with old friends of the magazine, the art dealer Paul Stolper and "non-musician" Brian Eno, which led to a kismet collaboration with Peter Saville. Editors Elizabeth Schambelan and Lloyd Wise secured transmissions from John Kelsey, Eileen Myles, Andrea Zittel, and many others. Alexandro Segade made a new pandemic apologue, conscripting characters from The Context, his

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stellar debut graphic novel. We wrote the artist Anicka Yi, who opened the door to her ongoing conversation with Tobias Rees, director of Transformations of the Human at the Berggruen Institute. They enlisted art historian Caroline A. Jones, whose brilliant essay on symbiontics appears in this issue, a teaser for a larger package Yi and Rees are drafting for summer. "What will we trade for fear, postpandemic?" Jones asks. With customary dedication and good humor, managing editor Jeff Gibson sewed it all up, even as Covid-19 hit his own home.

Part of the vertigo is not understanding whether things are moving very slow or very fast. Responding quickly to the virus meant pushing forward the magazine's traditional schedule. This is our May/June edition, with the next issue to arrive in July. It was only a few months back that I wrote a piece about friendship. It ended with a thesis, which feels even truer in this world: Being together is the only reality. I did not mean this as a metaphor, though I should add that togetherness doesn't have to mean other people and that aloneness can be its own kind of commune. Another question might be about what we mean by alone—about how we can be together, or make a reality, in the face of new tactics of separating. (You can always learn something from lesbians: "Separatism is more than a mere 6'," advises Ridykeulous in their project.)

JASPER JOHNS sent a fragment. A work in progress. If I let my mind wander, it resembles the maps on the screens I track with erratic zeal—aggregations of election results and contagion, indexes of inequality, pollution, crime. A bunch of the red and blue and green dots cluster ominously around one of the radial axes.

Don't overread the map thing. Resemblances are misleading. Once you're back on the streets it'll resemble a manhole cover. It's been a long time since Leo Steinberg admitted to overcoming his "initial dismay" at Johns's paintings, won over by "something that impressed me as the intensity of their solitude." Johns protested at the time; he didn't like any evidence that he had "been there" at all.

But he's there, working now. Johns remains one of our great artists of de-alienation, and of "two flinty things together." This glimpse from the studio is a different kind of flinty thing; it discloses a horizon beyond the picture plane: This fragment carries a seed. Something is being made. That is the promise. The fact of this fracture coming together is something to which we can look forward.

— David Velasco

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THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Miller, M.H. "The Escape Artist." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 3, 2019, cover, pp. 46, 76–81.

Jasper Johns's paintbrushes and a da Vinci poster in his Connecticut studio.

BEHIND THE STORY

Jasper Johns has a reputation that precedes him: He is known as a difficult interview, offering cryptic responses that beguile the press, to whom he often declines to speak. Early in his career,

in 1960, he told an interviewer, "I don't think you can talk about art and get anywhere. I think you can only look at it." In portraits, he can often be seen wearing an intense frown. Traveling to his home in Connecticut to speak with him for this issue's cover story (Page 76), I was prepared to encounter nothing less than a sphinx, glaring out at me behind frozen eyes and refusing to answer questions. This was a foolish presumption, of course, but I was still surprised to find a man who was friendly and open, with an almost wistful smile. He frequently interrupted the conversation with fits of laughter.

Joel Sternfeld, who photographed Johns a few days after my own visit, was equally struck by the dissonance between the Johns we think we know and the man himself. He'd been given rigid instruction beforehand: no pictures of an artwork in progress, no sweeping views of the studio, no exterior views of the studio or the grounds of the house, no pictures of the artist at work. This, along with those old pictures of Johns's frown, made Sternfeld expect a tough day. "What I have come to believe," Sternfeld told me, "is that he's a deeply thoughtful, deeply philosophical person, whose default face is not representative of his true personhood." He shot numerous photos of Johns not only smiling but also cracking up, and he learned that a picture of Johns's smile is, in fact, more characteristic of the artist than his famous frown. — M. H. Miller

JOEL STERNFELD

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The Escape Artist

Jasper Johns's work has managed to speak both to and for the American consciousness for the last 60 years. He's not done yet.

By M. H. Miller
Photographs by Joel Sternfeld

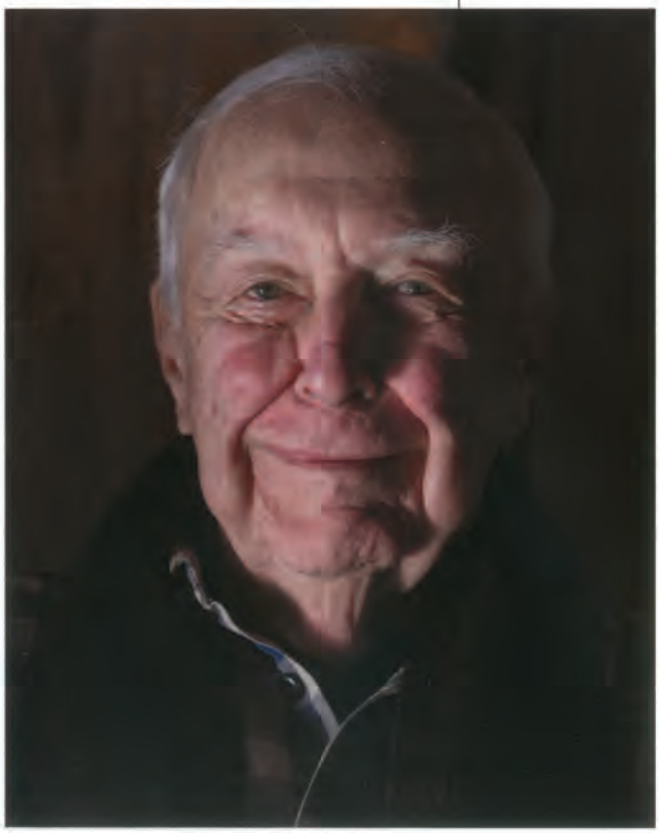
JASPER JOHNS LIVES on a sprawling estate in Sharon, Conn., a rural town in the Berkshires with a population of about 2,700 people. The property is stark and hilly, made up of a series of small barnlike structures, one of which houses Johns's studio. Every detail inside the studio seems intentional, as if each object were a clue about the man himself. There's the unframed poster, pinned to a wall, of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of "Ginevra de' Benci" (circa 1478), with whom Johns occasionally shares an intense, unsmiling gaze; there are the silver cans that hold his brushes; there is the model of the human skull on a table.

In a 1977 interview with the author Edmund White, Johns described his experience of meeting Marcel Duchamp, one of his artistic idols, who, with the Cubist paintings and ready-made sculptures he began making in the years leading up to World War I, helped drag art into the 20th century in much the same way that Johns would recalibrate the priorities of painting and sculpture at the end of the 1950s. "Just his physical presence was impressive," Johns said of Duchamp. "I suppose all the mythology sensitizes you, prepares you to be impressed, to feel awe." This is an apt description of Johns himself, who has, for much of his adult life, cultivated the aura of an enigma.

At 88, Johns remains physically imposing: He is barrel-chested, and his once boyish face has weathered into a craggy atlas. When I visited his home, he showed me the mostly bare walls of his studio before leading me upstairs, into an informal gallery room, with windows that looked out on the surrounding landscape, which felt, with the naked trees on the horizon, vast and lonely in the early December chill. Even his gait as he climbed the stairs had a meaningful vigor, as if he was trying to prove to the steps that he could still conquer them. Johns is a solitary figure, among the final survivors of an era, and for the better part of 60 years, he has declined to offer any easy explanations about his work, or to be a spokesperson for postwar American art, though people would like him to be. He has been one of the primary architects of the contemporary art world, and has also opted out of its social trappings entirely. For decades, he has divided his time between quiet towns along the East Coast and a remote retreat designed by Philip Johnson in St. Martin. Now, he rarely leaves Connecticut. The curator John Elderfield has called him "the hermit of Sharon."

The next years will be busy ones for Johns. His first show of new works in five years is currently running at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. He has been the subject of numerous surveys, and in the fall of 2020, he'll have the largest one to date, split between two institutions — the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he had a retrospective in 1977, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which he started visiting in 1958 to view the museum's collection of sculptures by Duchamp. The show will run simultaneously at both museums, which the Whitney's Scott Rothkopf, the co-curator of the show along with Carlos Basualdo in Philadelphia, described as "unprecedented."

Johns has assiduously avoided his public throughout his career, and yet he has also managed to consistently speak to what it is to be alive in America at any given moment. From his iconic paintings in the mid-50s of the American flag, which seemed to embody the fallout of Red Scare nationalism, to the modish apathy of his bronze sculptures of banal objects like flashlights and light bulbs, to his almost compulsive return in his later paintings to a holistic system of ambiguous symbols like galaxy spirals and cartoonish stick figures holding exaggeratedly large paintbrushes, he has been in a constant state of reinvention. He is the rare artist whose work has never become stale, who in his 80s is still creating strange and mysterious images that could be looked at endlessly and never fully reveal themselves. Whether Johns is actually *about* anything (or nothing) in particular has been the central question of his work, and yet it is ultimately less important than his endless search for meaning itself — the mere act of the lone artist entering the studio every day and deciding to continue. His constant presence is defined mostly by self-erasure, which has made him an artist who has disappeared almost entirely into his work. There is a sense that he's been here forever, and that no one will replace him once he's gone.



Jasper Johns, photographed in Sharon, Conn., on Dec. 19, 2018. Opposite: Johns's "Untitled" (2018).

I CAN'T SAY that my encounter with Johns did much to upend his reputation as an impenetrable figure. He had a remarkable ability to cut off a conversational thread with a single look. When asked if there were any younger artists he admired, he said, "Mmhmm." Asked for specific names, he responded with an unsmiling, "No." His speech was punctuated by long, powerful silences during which he stared out into the distance, looking at nothing in particular but doing so with such a sense of purpose it was as if he were searching the hills for the words he wanted to say before emerging with a

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full-paragraph answer. When we sat upstairs — a book of paintings by Edvard Munch, with whom Johns shares a morbid sense of symbolism, between us — there was a certain amount of negotiation regarding my recording our interview. I told him it was the only way I could know that I've quoted him accurately. "That's what I'm worried about," he said grimly before relenting.

Yet there was also a great warmth to him. He would frequently laugh at the things he said, his eyes brightening. He spoke with a mid-Atlantic accent that recalled Cary Grant, but when the conversation turned to his childhood in South Carolina, a southern lilt announced itself. In these moments, he could be surprisingly forthcoming, almost avuncular. I asked him why, unlike most artists who achieve the level of acclaim he has, he has never taught at a university. "I wouldn't know how," he said. Then he told me a story. When he was in basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina in 1951, he became friendly with a woman named Augusta Burch, who was in charge of the base's service club, where soldiers would go to listen to records and write letters. Learning that he aspired to be an artist, she asked him to make a mural based on the work of Charles Dickens for the service club's stage. Later, she started a culture center at Fort Jackson devoted to the study of music and art, and when Johns finished his basic training, she helped get him transferred there. He was supposed to give art lessons to other soldiers. "But I certainly didn't teach," he said. "I just watched what people did."

Part of the job also involved arranging small exhibitions, and he organized one around artworks by children, which he had borrowed from a school at the recently opened Columbia Museum of Art nearby. One afternoon, a general from another base visited the culture center and mistook the works on the walls for those made by the soldiers instead of children. "He looked around," Johns said, "and he announced, 'What these men need is a teacher!' "

Johns was born in 1930 in Augusta, Ga., and grew up in South Carolina. According to family lore, he was named for William Jasper, a sergeant in the Second South Carolina Regiment during the Revolutionary War who was best known for hoisting the regimental flag after the mast was broken in the battle of Fort Moultrie, near Charleston, in 1776 and holding it under fire from a British warship until it could be repaired. (He died during the 1779 Siege of Savannah, purportedly attempting to plant the regiment's colors again.) Johns's parents divorced when he was 2, and his mother started a new family — without him. Asked once by Deborah Solomon, his biographer, why he didn't simply live with his father, Johns responded, "He didn't invite me." Raised by his paternal grandfather, a farmer, until his death, when Johns was 8, he spent most of the remainder of his childhood living with an aunt, the only teacher at a two-room schoolhouse that Johns attended in the town of Allendale. There were about 12 people at the school, and his aunt taught all of the grades. The students would rotate around his aunt's desk for their lessons, which was situated near a wood stove: In first grade, you sat on a bench. By fifth grade, you stood behind the teacher's desk. It was a childhood of disappointment and rejection, of suffocating loneliness. "No one in my family, as far as I know, had ever traveled anywhere," he said. "I don't know that my mother had ever been out of the state until I was an adult." He wanted to be "anywhere but there, at that time." The only art he was exposed to growing up were paintings of his dead grandmother in his grandfather's house, but, without encouragement or any real reason, he found himself compelled to make art from a young age. It became both a way of attracting his indifferent family's attention to himself and, later, his primary means of escape.

After leaving the army in 1953, he arrived in New York to start his career as an artist. The city had only recently usurped Paris as the center of contemporary art with the rise of Abstract Expressionism, a distinctly American painting style defined by spontaneous marks and obsessive explorations of color, which by the beginning of the '50s had become a world-famous aesthetic movement thanks to artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. Their popularity was so great that, in helping to mainstream a radically new style of painting, they inspired a rigid set of parameters and rules for what painting should look like. In his essay " 'American-Type' Painting" (1955), the critic Clement Greenberg praised Abstract Expressionism's "new kind of flatness, one that breathes and pulsates," one that represented a break with the Cubist and Surrealist painting traditions that flourished in Europe between the world wars.

By the mid-50s, when a 23-year-old Johns entered this insular milieu, the Abstract Expressionist artists and their supporters were already taking their artistic superiority for granted. He met Robert Rauschenberg through mutual friends around early 1954, while Johns was working at Marboro Books, a discount chain that sold overstock titles. The two would soon reorient the direction of contemporary art, but they had humble beginnings. Shortly after meeting him, Rauschenberg enlisted Johns's help in his own day job, designing window displays for the Bonwit Teller department store. The following year, the two moved their studios into the same

JASPER JOHNS, "UNTITLED," 2018. OIL ON CANVAS © 2019 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY. COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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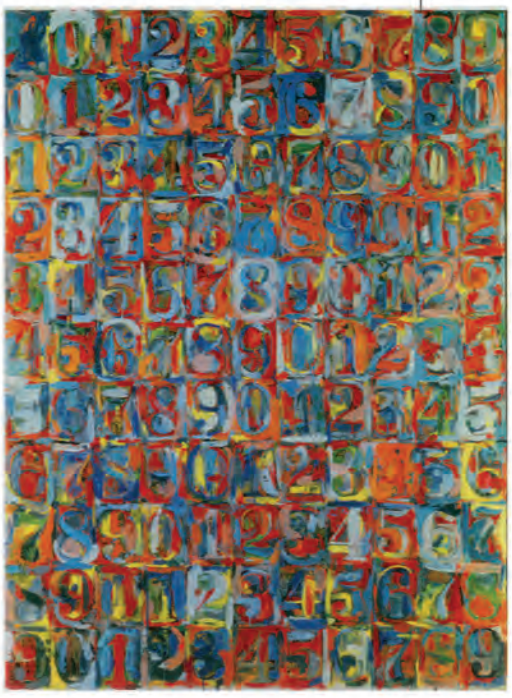
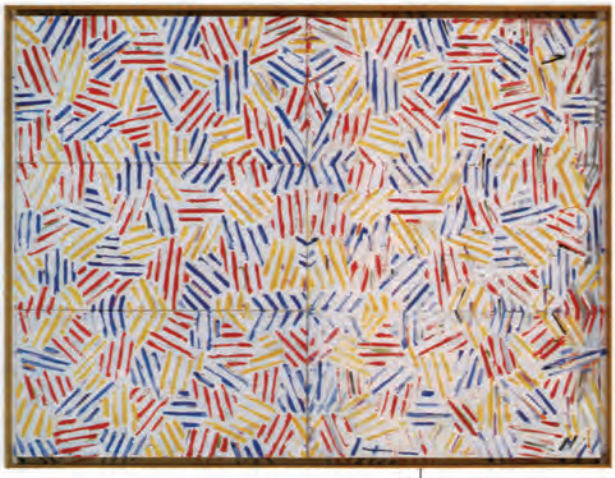
building together on Pearl Street, and through Rauschenberg, Johns met Merce Cunningham and his collaborator and romantic partner, the composer John Cage.

Johns was the youngest of this group — and the only one without a formal art education. He'd studied art at the University of South Carolina and spent less than a year at the Parsons School of Design in New York before dropping out and joining the army because he couldn't afford the tuition. Cage and Cunningham both taught at Black Mountain College, the experimental art school in North Carolina where Cunningham founded his dance company, and where Rauschenberg had also studied, along with his soon-to-be-wife Susan Weil, under the tutelage of the German painter Josef Albers. (Albers, a renowned instructor of the Bauhaus in Germany who left the country after the rise of the Nazis in 1933, taught "learning by doing.") These men's ideas "were better formed than mine," Johns said, "and they were more experienced and strongly motivated to do what they were doing. Cage and Rauschenberg and Merce, those three people were the people most important to me at that time. They had been to various kinds of schools, had traveled, had worked at Black Mountain, which I think was important to them. And I benefited from that. That reinforced a kind of forward movement."

In March 1957, he and Rauschenberg were living in the building on Pearl Street — Rauschenberg upstairs, Johns downstairs — when the dealer Leo Castelli paid a visit to Rauschenberg. Castelli, an early champion of Abstract Expressionism, had opened his own gallery on the Upper East Side a month earlier and was courting Rauschenberg. During the visit, Rauschenberg told the ambitious dealer that he had to go downstairs to get some ice from Johns's studio (the two shared a refrigerator). Castelli said he was curious about Johns — he'd just seen a painting he'd done of a green target that was





included in a group show at the Jewish Museum. "So Bob came down to my studio," Johns told me, "and said, 'Leo Castelli is upstairs and would like to meet you.'" Johns told Castelli to call sometime and he'd show him his work. "He said, 'Can't I see it now?' I thought it was inappropriate, since he'd come to see Bob, but at any rate, we went downstairs." Castelli offered him a show on the spot. "That was the beginning," Johns said. He would show with Castelli for the next 40 years, until Castelli's death in 1999.

Johns's debut solo exhibition at Castelli's gallery on the Upper East Side 10 months later is now legendary. His work was a series of familiar symbols — American flags, targets, numbers — painted on newsprint with encaustic, in which pigment was mixed with heated beeswax. (This was, at the time, a truly esoteric method, best known from the Fayum mummy portraits from the first couple centuries A.D.) The show now has the reputation of doing nothing less than announcing the death of Abstract Expressionism. This is reductive, of course — de Kooning and others would continue to have long and successful careers after the arrival of Johns — but his work did dramatically reimagine the possibilities of what could happen on a canvas. If Abstract Expressionism was a melodramatically psychological exercise, with each splash of paint communicating some anguished search for American identity in the midst of the Cold War's atomic glow, here was something cool and detached, familiar and yet forever unknowable. It was as if Marlon Brando had driven his motorcycle onto the set of a Clark Gable movie.

At 27, Johns became an overnight success and an indecipherable oracle of modern America. He was clearly saying something, but what? Was his American flag a canny critique of Eisenhower-era imperialism? Was it an ironic tribute to his namesake, someone who quite literally died for the flag? Was it a tautological exercise, a heroic attempt to separate the flag from its context? Johns has only ever given the same story: One night, in 1954, he dreamed of painting a flag, and the next morning he got up and started doing it. He spent much of the next five years painting the flag in various forms, and then, for a while, mostly stopped. When asked about this in a 1963 interview with a German magazine, he said: "They added two stars," a reference to Alaska and Hawaii becoming states in 1959. "Since then, the design does not interest me anymore."

IT'S TEMPTING TO think of Johns's career in two parts: with Rauschenberg and post-Rauschenberg. Johns may not be forthcoming with details of his personal life, but he is an expert self-mythologizer, and there is likely no romance between two visual artists in postwar America that occupies the same level of importance in the public's imagination as Johns's with Rauschenberg. Between 1955 and 1961, the two lived and worked in proximity to one another, first on Pearl Street and then, in 1958, when the

Clockwise from top: "Corpse and Mirror II" (1974-75), one of the artist's crosshatch paintings; "Target With Four Faces" (1955); "Numbers in Color" (1958-59). Opposite, clockwise from top left: the sculpture "Painted Bronze" (1960, made after Willem de Kooning remarked that an artist could give the gallerist Leo Castelli two beer cans and Castelli could sell them); Robert Rauschenberg's "Short Circuit" combine (1955), featuring a painting by Rauschenberg's former wife, Susan Weil, in one hidden compartment and Johns's flag in another (the flag was later stolen and replaced with a copy by the artist Elaine Sturtevant); the iconic "Flag," (1954-55); "Racing Thoughts" (1983), featuring a photograph of Castelli on the left.

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Pearl Street building was condemned, over a hero sandwich shop at 128 Front Street, this time with Johns upstairs and Rauschenberg downstairs. They shared ideas, motifs and materials and ended up carving a path for much of the art that has emerged in the 60 years since. Most of the subsequent artistic milestones one can think of — from Andy Warhol's first Campbell's soup cans in 1962 to Tracey Emin putting her own bed on view inside the Tate Gallery in 1999 to Kerry James Marshall's use of collage, printing and other variables on the canvases of his early paintings — originated with the work Johns and Rauschenberg produced during these years.

Rauschenberg's "combines," a series of works the artist began making in 1954 that combined elements of painting and sculpture (Johns described them as "painting playing the game of sculpture"), took contemporary art down from the wall and into new territory entirely. Johns was often present in these works, sometimes spiritually, often literally. One, "Short Circuit" (1955), included a flag painting by Johns inside a compartment with a small door. Another combine, "Untitled" (circa 1954), sometimes referred to as "Man With White Shoes," was a wooden structure that resembled a front porch, partially painted and mounted with objects ranging from a taxidermied hen to personal ephemera: a letter from Rauschenberg's son, photographs of his parents, a picture of Johns. In 1958, Johns expanded on the strange familiarity found in his paintings of flags and numbers by making sculptures of everyday objects (light bulbs, beer cans) that he cast in bronze, prefiguring Warhol's fascination with mass production and pop culture symbolism by several years. His paintings, like Rauschenberg's, began to incorporate sculptural elements, as with "Target With Four Faces" (1955), which included the familiar target but with four plaster casts of an eerily expressionless face, cut off just below the eyes, peering out from beneath a wooden slat affixed to the top of the painting.

As they worked on redefining the avant-garde, the two made money by creating window displays for department stores under the name Matson Jones (Matson was Rauschenberg's mother's maiden name; Jones was a near homonym for Johns). There is a certain art historical narrative that claims Johns and Rauschenberg were the founders of Pop Art, engaged in some ideological battle of wits with Warhol. Johns downplayed this — "I don't think I saw myself in relation to Andy," he said, though he added that Warhol did give him a silk-screen with which to practice — but he and Rauschenberg were at least competitive with him in terms of their commercial work. For Johns and Rauschenberg, the window displays were merely a financial tool, but Warhol, who was best-known at the time for his commercial illustration, did so under his own name and had become quite successful. He'd bought a drawing of Johns's from a group show, and when the two met, around 1958, Johns told Warhol that he knew his work. "He seemed very pleased for a moment," Johns said, "until it became clear that I was referring to his commercial work. He did drawings for I. Miller," the shoe manufacturer with a shop in Times Square, "and I explained that Bob and I had been commissioned to do a window display for I. Miller based on Andy's drawings. And he said" — here Johns pitched his voice into a kind of sheepish whine — " 'Why didn't they ask *me* to do it?' "

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JASPER JOHNS, "PAINTED BRONZE," 1960 (CAST AND PAINTED 1964), BRONZE AND OIL PAINT (3 PARTS), EDITION OF 2 (2/2), COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST © 2019 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY, PHOTO BY JAMIE STUKENBERG, PROFESSIONAL GRAPHICS, ROCKFORD, ILL. © 2019 THE WILDENSTEIN PLATTNER INSTITUTE, NEW YORK; ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, "SHORT CIRCUIT," 1955, COMBINE: OIL, FABRIC AND PAPER ON WOOD SUPPORTS AND CABINET WITH TWO HINGED DOORS CONTAINING A PAINTING BY SUSAN WEIL AND A REPRODUCTION OF A JASPER JOHNS FLAG PAINTING BY ELAINE STURTEVANT, THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO/ART RESOURCE NY © 2019 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY; JASPER JOHNS, "FLAG," 1954-55, ENCAUSTIC, OIL AND COLLAGE ON FABRIC MOUNTED ON WOOD (3 PANELS), THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, NY, USA. DIGITAL IMAGE © THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/LICENSED BY SCALA, NY/ART RESOURCE, NY © 2019 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY; JASPER JOHNS, "RACING THOUGHTS," 1983, ENCAUSTIC AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS, PHOTO BY JAMIE STUKENBERG, PROFESSIONAL GRAPHICS, ROCKFORD, ILL. © 2019 THE WILDENSTEIN PLATTNER INSTITUTE, NEW YORK, THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK © 2019 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY

Then, in 1961, Johns and Rauschenberg's relationship ended. They crossed paths from time to time after that,

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but they never had any planned encounters. (Rauschenberg died in 2008, at 82.) Little is known about what caused this breakup — Johns told me that they simply drifted apart. The fact that so few details of this partnership have emerged, in no small part because Johns and Rauschenberg usually declined to talk about it, means that it has taken on a kind of mythic status. Rauschenberg frequently conscripted his romantic partners in his work, including his wife, Susan Weil, and Cy Twombly, with whom Rauschenberg had an affair that contributed to the end of his short-lived marriage with Weil. For his part, Johns's relationship with Rauschenberg has not necessarily been confined to the closet. Writers of the '60s and '70s called them "close friends," though this has shifted in more recent years to "sometime lovers." The details that do exist mostly come from the work they made during this period and directly following their estrangement. Critics have long speculated, for instance, that Johns's dour gray painting "Liar," from 1961, which features the titular word in prominent capital letters at the top of the paper, was about Rauschenberg. Regardless of any details, sexual or otherwise, about their union, what emerges most powerfully from the work they produced while together is evidence of an intertwined existence, an intimacy that was in a way closer than marriage. "Jasper and I literally traded ideas," Rauschenberg told Calvin Tomkins in his 1980 biography "Off the Wall."

After they parted ways, each remained a celebrated artist, but their respective roles shifted. Rauschenberg became more overtly political and was embraced by an American counterculture that used his work to critique a variety of causes, from the Vietnam War to climate change. Later, in the '80s, he would start a project called the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, in which he traveled the world, attempting to use his art as the impetus for cross-cultural dialogues that he hoped would lead to world peace. He'd fund this program in part by selling works from his collection, including at least one Johns painting from when the two were living together.

Johns retreated increasingly inward. He'd never discuss topical concerns, or be so bold as to think his work might solve any of the world's problems. He largely shunned public adoration. (One exception came in 1999, when Johns played a kleptomaniac version of himself in an episode of "The Simpsons," stealing light bulbs and appetizers from the kind of art opening he has generally avoided in his actual life.) But in speaking about Rauschenberg, Johns was, if not quite animated, at least open. Asked if he ever grows tired of being asked about Rauschenberg, he replied, "Not today." When I suggested that Rauschenberg and Johns were each other's main audience, Johns replied without hesitation, "That's true." He said the two would show each other their work constantly, and once their friendship ended, Johns was never able to find another kindred spirit on this level. "The relationship with Bob was extremely important to me," he said, "as an artist and as a human being. So to end contact with an honest opinion that you are willing to accept — to have it or not to have it is a huge difference."

NOT LONG AFTER his split from Rauschenberg, Johns found himself once again in South Carolina, for a show at the Columbia Museum of Art, which turned into a kind of reunion with the people from his childhood. As he recounted in a 1966 television documentary, someone at that gathering told him about a house for sale in remote Edisto Beach, south of Charleston. He went to see the place and didn't particularly like it — the interior was painted pink — but, perusing the cabinets, he found a half-empty bottle of bourbon beneath

Above: details from Johns's studio. Left: a recent painting, "Untitled" (2018); Opposite: Johns's studio.

JASPER JOHNS, "UNTITLED," 2018. OIL ON CANVAS © 2019 JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARS, NY. COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Miller, M.H. "The Escape Artist." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 3, 2019, cover, pp. 46, 76–81.

the kitchen sink, which he took as a good omen. Johns began taking breaks from New York — first in Edisto, then at his houses in the Caribbean and in Stony Point, N.Y., where John Cage was his neighbor — until he finally moved to Sharon in 1998.

Since the mid-60s, Johns has been working with the same strange codex of symbols that seem to comprise a language that only Johns himself is fully fluent in. "There are not that many artists in the 20th and 21st century who are quite so consistently returning to and reworking what is essentially a small lexicon of images," the Whitney's Scott Rothkopf said. His work following his first decade as an artist has been defined by a continual resuscitation of these images, like ghosts that he can't quite elude. There is the empty coffee can, crammed with paintbrushes, something like Johns's primal scene, which he has sculpted and cast in bronze, made into a lithograph and painted at various points in his career. There are his almost absurdly simple crosshatched marks, which began appearing in his work in 1972, and which he claimed offered "the possibility of a complete lack of meaning." There are stick figures holding paintbrushes. There are skulls. There is his remarkable use of the color gray to blanket a painting in sorrow. Though he returns to the same motifs again and again, he complicates their meaning continuously with the addition of some new, often acutely personal element — a portrait of Castelli (as in "Racing Thoughts," from 1983); the blueprints for his grandfather's house (as in "Mirror's Edge," from 1992); the artist's own signature, sourced from a rubber stamp he had made that said "Regrets, Jasper Johns," an object that made it all the easier to turn down whatever someone wanted him to do. Indeed, there are two Jasper Johns — one who is unable to keep the past at bay, whose memories seem to trickle into his paintings like water from a broken faucet; and one who does things by rote, with a kind of cool indifference — and both are present in his work.

These personas have been at odds in his life as well, of course. There is the Jasper Johns who wrote a letter in 1959 responding to a review by the critic Hilton Kramer that he didn't like ("thank God, art tends to be less what critics write than what artists make," he wrote) and the Jasper Johns who claims to be surprised anyone has an opinion about his work at all, as he said to me and nearly every other interviewer he's spoken with. There is the Jasper Johns who spoke in the 1970s about wanting to sell a painting for $1 million, a figure then unheard-of for a living artist (in 2014, a flag painting sold for $36 million at a Sotheby's auction) and the Jasper Johns who avoids any knowledge of the contemporary art world like a conscientious objector. For someone who claims to have no opinion about art fairs or auctions or any of the other global machinations of the market, he also recounted, admiringly, a story he'd heard about Jackson Pollock walking by a Mercedes-Benz showroom, pointing at a car and saying, "One painting." Johns has only attended two art fairs, the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, in Paris, and once to Art Basel in Switzerland, in the '70s. A bookseller at Basel was selling a book he made with Samuel Beckett in 1976, called "Foirades/Fizzles." "I looked at that," he said, "and then I just sort of walked through the place. It was all foreign and unpleasant to me."

Though I had expected Johns to be guarded about his past or his personal life, it was a surprise to find him cagiest about his artistic process. Trying to ask him about his personal approach to art making felt like pushing a boulder up a hill and watching it tumble back down once I'd reached the top.

Does he have a routine when he goes into the studio?

"Just going into it is the routine, I guess," he said.

How many works does he produce in a given year?

"I have absolutely no idea how to answer that."

Has the way he works changed over time?

"Probably," he said, though after a momentary pause, he continued: "It's hard to say how. I think I produce fewer works now. I assume that has to do with age, but I don't know. And I don't know what other people think of my production. I've occasionally worked on something for a very long time, so it doesn't seem like I'm producing anything, but eventually something will get done."

He went on, telling me that he just finished a painting, which would be included in his exhibition at Matthew Marks, that he spent three or four years working on. He wouldn't say which work.

How does he know when something he's spent that amount of time on is finally done?

"I think you just give up," he said.

WHEN WE WERE finished talking, I asked if Johns would show me some of his new work. "I don't think we should," he said with a sigh. "But we can. We'll have to make a trip." We went outside and got into a Polaris Ranger UTV — a kind of off-road golf cart. ("It's necessary, I'm afraid," Johns said; his property is large, and he moves slowly these days.) He drove us to another structure on the property called the Blue Barn, where he'd hung his recently completed works. A Bruce Nauman sculpture, "Jasper's Cat" (1990) — a 60th birthday gift from Castelli — which looked like an enormous scale balancing two animalistic globs of flesh, was just inside the barn's entrance. John's had seen Nauman's show at the Museum of Modern Art that had opened a few months before, during a rare trip into the city. It wasn't an enjoyable experience. The show was loud, the museum was loud and there were people everywhere.

Deeper into the barn, there were about a dozen works hanging on the walls, made between 2012 and 2018. The three most recent works, a charcoal drawing and two paintings, all had the same figure at the center, a shadowy silhouette of a man wearing a tiny fedora, his skeleton visible like an X-ray, the body slightly angled and holding what appeared to be a thin cane, as if it were about to break out into a song and dance. There were familiar symbols competing for space on one of the paintings: crosshatches, stick figures holding paintbrushes, a presumably random sheet of newspaper. I kept returning to the skull with its goofy hat, the closed mouth stretched into a sinister smile. I assumed this was a kind of self-portrait: the artist as he nears 90, trying in vain to protect himself as his work is once more dragged in front of his public under threat of the same cyclical routine he's been performing for 60 years — being asked what it all means, keeping his mouth shut, surviving as everything around him both changes and stays exactly the same.

But I said none of this, and we both stood there for a while in silence. The painting, once again, spoke for itself.

Miller, M.H. "The Escape Artist." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 3, 2019, cover, pp. 46, 76–81.

The New York Times

Fine Arts | Listings

Weekend Arts II

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2019 C15

ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW

Ghosts Among Infinite Invention

JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY; VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Jasper Johns's "Untitled" (2017), an acrylic over etching with collage on canvas. It's among the works in his latest exhibition, "Recent Paintings & Works on Paper," at Matthew Marks Gallery in Manhattan.

A new show gives the deepest image of Jasper Johns, who's still innovating at 88.

AT 88, JASPER JOHNS is not slowing down. After spending more than six decades cultivating an extensive and influential body of work, he continues to be relentlessly productive and inventive.

His art has sometimes been described as somber or melancholic. His latest exhibition, "Recent Paintings & Works on Paper," at Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, depicts moments of inconsolable grief and concludes with a gallery full of portrayals of skeletons, albeit ones wearing dandyish boaters.

CRITIC'S PICK

Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper
Matthew Marks Gallery

Yet in its sheer variety and vitality, this exhibition is optimistic, and generous in spirit. It reaffirms Mr. Johns as, foremost, a painter's painter and a working artist rather than an art historical subject. In it he revisits three or four previous series — extending, editing or recombining their motifs — and introduces two new ones that more than meet the Johnsian standards of mystery, suggestion and painterly allure.

One group of the new arrivals consists only of three small, dense 2017 canvases painted in acrylic, their familiar but freshly arranged motifs in marvelous color

CONTINUED ON PAGE C22

Smith, Roberta. "Ghosts Among Infinite Invention." *The New York Times*, March 1, 2019, pp. C15, C22.

Jasper Johns's Ghosts Among His Infinite Invention

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C15

schemes and featuring a new addition: a 1938 reclining nude by Picasso, upright and reversed. The other newcomer is based on a photograph taken during the Vietnam War, in which, as is his want, Mr. Johns shuttles toward abstraction and back again, this time over the course of two paintings accompanied by a group of 11 works in ink on paper or plastic. Together in a room of their own, the drawings form the show's quiet center.

Mr. Johns's last two solo exhibitions of new paintings in New York drilled straight down into the well of a single — and new — device or motif, yielding coherent, tersely titled ensembles of paintings, drawings and prints. His great "Catenary" works (1997-2003), unveiled at Matthew Marks in 2005, center on gray blackboardlike paintings, each with a fragile piece of white string drooping across its surface. Attached to either side of the canvas, the string forms a catenary, or a curve essential in design — anything from roadways to artificial bodies of water — as implied by titles like "Bridge" and "Near the Lagoon."

In 2014, the "Regrets" series (2012-14) had its debut at the Museum of Modern Art. The title comes from a rubber stamp — "Regrets," coupled with Mr. Johns's signature — which he devised to decline social invitations.

In this series, "Regrets" turns dark, psychological and philosophical. They are among his first to be entirely photo-based, being derived from a damaged photograph of the British painter Lucian Freud, seated on a bed in his studio, hunched over, covering his face with his right hand. Mr. Johns took this seemingly anguished pose and amplified, fractured and distorted it by adding various patterns and combining the image with its reverse. This mirroring doubled the photograph's deeply torn corner into a central shape resembling a tombstone. With very little encouragement, the stains and creases just above it emerged as a skull.

Rather than drilling straight down, "Recent Paintings & Works on Paper" spreads out, like a free-form, multidirectional root system. Several paintings are uncharacteristically small for Mr. Johns, which gives the show a marvelous intimacy that calls attention to his different paint handling, and how it changes from series to series.

The best "Regrets" paintings may actually be here: four downsized canvases painted in acrylic, made since the Modern show and influenced by the prints from the series. (Their dimensions are the same.) In combinations of gray or white, primaries or secondaries, their quasi-Cubist shatterings and flattenings create abstraction as a kind of mounting rubble, but Freud's face-shielding hand and arm are always discernible.

IMAGES BY JASPER JOHNS/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY.

Left, "Untitled" (2018), oil on canvas, displays a surfeit of greens — a color somewhat scarce in Mr. Johns's repertory. Right, "Untitled" (2018), encaustic on canvas, is based on a photograph taken during the Vietnam War by Larry Burrows of Life magazine.

Opposite the "Regrets" additions, the two untitled paintings that introduce what is likely to become known colloquially as the "Farley Breaks Down" series are isolated, side by side, on a wall. One is somewhat smaller than the other; both display a surfeit of greens — a color somewhat scarce in Mr. Johns's repertory. They initially appear abstract, with gentle push-pull tensions of plane and brushwork complicated by the imprints of steel mesh in three sizes (extra fine, fine and small). But the phrases stenciled across their top and bottom edges — "Farley Breaks Down/After Larry Burrows" — indicate an image, of Farley breaking down, made by someone other than Mr. Johns. And so you sense, and then see, a figure, covering his face, slumped at its center and typically doubled because of mirroring.

Made in 2018, these paintings are based on a 1965 photograph taken in Vietnam by the Life magazine photographer Larry Burrows (1926-1971). Mr. Johns came across it in 2002, before the "Regrets" series. It shows a grieving American soldier at the end of an unsuccessful mission, collapsed on a trunk, with his face buried in his hands, which rest on the top of a suitcase. The man inhabits these works like a ghost, among the greens, browns and yellows of camouflage and jungle. An upright shell casing to his left is often expanded to form a vertical column, recalling the pieces of wood lathe used in several earlier works, and suggesting the base of a very tall cross with the mirrored Farleys recast as Mary and the Magdalene. In the smaller of the two paintings, a rough shape is visible through a door. It resembles a rock with an X-shape made of tape; it could also be the bandaged head of a corpse laid out and waiting for its coffin.

Toward the end of the show are three linocuts based on a wonderful painting at its beginning — a 2016 canvas dominated by an expanse of cerulean blue bordered by the artist's lovely stretched-face scheme, more than 30 years old and inspired by Picasso. This consists of cartoon eyes with sunbeam lashes, bow-tie lips pushed to the painting's edges and an inchwormlike curl of nostrils floating free midfield. It seems to propose a painting as a sentient thing, if not quite a being, or a visual metaphor for thought (yours, mine, ours) reshaped by art.

CRITIC'S PICK

Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper
Through April 6 at Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

Smith, Roberta. "Ghosts Among Infinite Invention." *The New York Times*, March 1, 2019, pp. C15, C22.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Review of Books

NYR Daily

Jasper Johns's Visions in Green

Deborah Solomon

Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Untitled, *2018*

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

Human skulls are enduring motifs in art history, and Jasper Johns has a longstanding acquaintance with them. A skull peers out from the corner of his work as early as 1963–1964, in a bright, blocky painting called Arrive/Depart. The title alone offers a view of life as starkly unsentimental as any memento mori. We arrive in the world, we depart from the world, and there is no guarantee of happiness in between.

The theme permeates Johns's large, very moving show at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. Johns, who is now eighty-eight years old, did much of the work in the past few years, and it captures him meditating on age and evanescence with remarkable directness. You would have to turn to Edgar Allan Poe to find an American artist more in touch with the grave. Yet the show doesn't feel lugubrious, perhaps because Johns has been prolific and inhabits the new work so vividly.

The works on view are crisply divided into five series, the largest and most ambitious of which might be called "Farley Breaks Down"—to borrow a phrase that is stenciled across two paintings in a way

Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Farley Breaks Down, *2014*

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

that suggests that the letters of the alphabet are themselves breaking down or decomposing as they fade in and out of view.

Farley, as it turns out, is James C. Farley, a former marine who served in Vietnam and survived the war. The dozen works in the show that overtly reference him are based on a 1965 black-and-white photograph in Life magazine by Larry Burrows, the British photojournalist. It shows Farley weeping in a supply shack; he had just completed a helicopter mission that left one of his buddies dead. He later said in an interview that he felt a twinge of embarrassment when he first saw the photograph in Life. Real marines are not supposed to cry. Yet the image is stirring precisely because it undercuts clichés about American heroism. Farley is a masculine version of the "Mater Dolorosa," the art-historical archetype of the weeping woman.

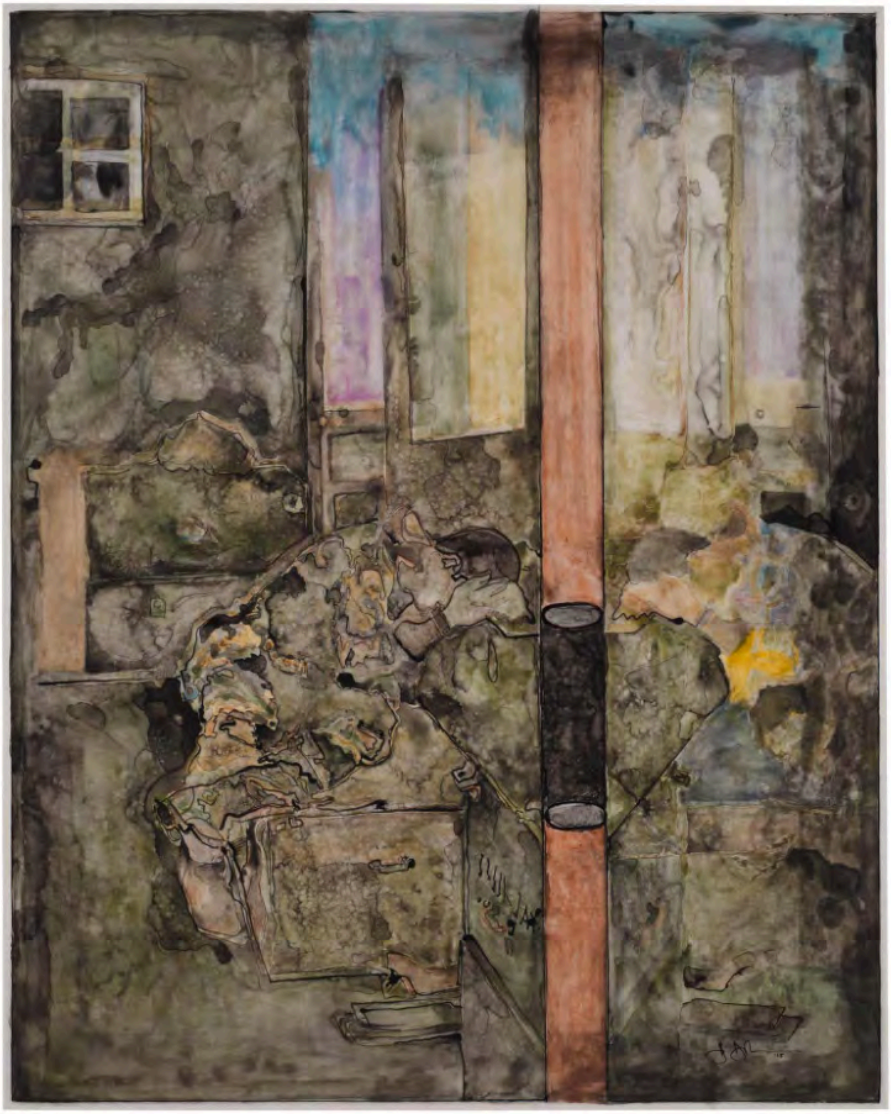
In Johns's many depictions of him, Farley is usually paired with a second figure—a mirror-image, Farley in reverse. The two figures never touch or mingle; a beam stands between them with the insistent verticality of a Barnett Newman "zip." But look closely and you will see what appears to be a heart shape, or rather the matching halves of a heart, rising out of the seam that separates Farley from his doppelgänger. The distance between them is momentarily bridged.

It's fascinating that Johns, who earned his first fame with paintings of targets and the American flag, has returned, after a celebrated career spanning more than six decades, to military imagery. Johns himself served in the army during the Korean War. This is not to say that his paintings are autobiographical in the conventional sense, nor that they can be read primarily as anti-war statements. Rather, the public references in his work transform themselves into a private symbolism with which Johns takes possession of his interior combat.

Johns, who grew up in small-town South Carolina in the years following the Depression, seldom offers explanations of his work. For most of his adulthood, he has lived alone, and the symbolism embedded in his paintings adds a protective distance between him and his audience. Tellingly, perhaps, all but six of the works in the current show are untitled.

He can be more playful than is sometimes acknowledged, and the new work abounds with perceptual riddles. Attentive to the dead space between objects, Johns often creates volumes from voids. In the current show, especially in the works that belong to his Regrets series, hidden forms popped out at me: an urn, a tombstone, a skull in chic sunglasses, and, of all things, a seated old woman with a ruffled bonnet resembling Whistler's mother.

The work can also be enjoyed in purely formal terms. This is especially true of a group of drawings done in ink on sheets of plastic, an idiosyncratic medium from which Johns extracts a tender, tremulous draftsmanship. Plastic, unlike paper, has no absorptive fiber, causing ink to pool on the surface or leave runny rivulets. Some of Johns's drawings in this medium evoke other kinds of spillage—spilled milk, spilled seed, spilled tears.



Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Untitled, *2015*

The show also inspires color-stained thoughts. There was a period, earlier in his career, when Johns downplayed his gifts as a colorist, to the point where his close friends noticed the absence. In an interview with Joan Retallack in 1991, the composer John Cage mentioned that the artist Robert Rauschenberg, a former lover of Johns's, "used to say about Jap that he was the only artist he knew of who was color-blind, who didn't know the difference between two colors… he didn't respond to color."

Today, that claim is in need of revision. Of the two untitled paintings devoted to the Farley theme, the larger one stands about six feet tall and offers an exquisite symphony of greens. They range from the palest white-infused viridians to yellowish chartreuses to hues that look so mossy and alive you would think they could grow another coat of paint on their own. When you step back and contemplate the painting from across the room, you might think you are seeing an aerial view of farmland divided into so many pristine garden plots.

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

The color green, oddly or not, occupies a singular prominence in Johns's biography. It was an all-green painting of his that initially caught the eye of art dealer Leo Castelli. In March 1957, Castelli happened upon Johns's Green Target in a group show at the Jewish Museum and wondered who the artist was. Less than a year later, Castelli gave Johns his debut show. Today it is treated in textbooks as an overnight sensation that halted the reign of Abstract Expressionism, with its quest for lofty truths, and inaugurated a new kind of art that lavished attention on everyday objects and images.

I once asked Johns what led him to paint his Green Target that color. He replied, "It's probably green because I was so accustomed to using primary colors. I was trying to do something else." By something else, I presumed he meant secondary colors. The comment was eye-opening. In his early work, his choice of colors, as much as the targets and flags he adopted as his subject matter, was governed by a self-imposed system that minimized the exercise of personal taste. These days, at last, he is free of such constraints.

Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Untitled, *2018*

The emotional climax of the Matthew Marks show comes in the back gallery, in a room of skeletons that reverberates with the memory of distant masters: Van Gogh, Cezanne, Picasso, who each painted potent likenesses of skulls. Johns's new skeleton motif, I was told, derives from a dollar-store toy, a foam puzzle that was given to him by a friend. His riffs on the image are impressively varied. The skeletons slip out of one work and into the next in a mesmerizing procession that can put you in mind of the imagery of Mexico's Day of the Dead.

In a breathtaking suite of twenty-four drawings, roughly book-sized, the skeleton metamorphoses from a figure of meticulously embroidered detail into a mere blur of ink. In one particularly enchanting drawing, the skeleton is a swatch of pearl gray, outlined in white and floating against a darker, gunmetal-gray ground. His facial features have been rubbed away, but he has a muffled sweetness about him, perhaps because the string in his hands, a reference to the sweeping curves in Johns's Catenary series (and his show at Matthew Marks in 2005) is here reinvented as a jump rope.

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Untitled, *2018*

Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Jasper Johns: Untitled, *2018*

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

Elsewhere, in a vibrant oil-on-canvas painting standing more than four feet high, the skeleton is encased in a rectangle of Prussian blue that thins out toward the bottom. The space can be read as a coffin or a crypt, and its occupant is buoyantly rendered in broad ivory strokes. His rib cage is especially dramatic; it looks like an upside-down palm leaf, or perhaps a shovel. I loved the "rush" sign affixed to the wall in the background, a red rectangle lifted from the workaday realm of packing and shipping. It is rendered in urgent upper-case type, a reminder that time is "rushing on" despite our wish to stick around for another leisurely cup of tea.

In yet another variation, an etching printed on a sheet of Egyptian papyrus, the skeleton appears in a Cubist parlor. With its oval composition and sepia tones, the etching evokes the early efforts of Picasso and Braque and the advent of analytic Cubism, a brave-new-world "ism" that here seems quaintly antique. Hints of non-art languages flank the skeleton on either side. There's a left hand gesturing in sign language, a stencil with the letters of the alphabet (in reverse), and a group of stranded stick figures who appear to be trying to SOS for help. So many languages, so little communication.

Johns has been borrowing images since the beginning of his career. He has been hugely influential on succeeding generations of artists who cull their motifs from the ever-widening image bank of popular culture. But unlike many of those who followed him, Johns's recycled imagery isn't intended ironically. He's not seeking—by recycling a dollar-store skeleton or a picture from Life of a crying soldier he never met—to make a droll comment about the death of originality, or an appraisal of an era in which media images have supplanted reality.

Rather, it seems, Johns's surrogates and stand-ins allow him to voice feelings that could not otherwise be expressed. The anguish of the mute body has been one of his longtime, if underacknowledged themes. It's suggested even in his early masterwork Target with Plaster Casts (1955), which contrasts a target-circle, a dream of wholeness and emotional contentment, with a body that cannot express itself—the parts cut up and tucked away into boxes. Some critics see a night-and-day difference between Johns's early and later work, arguing that he now pursues emotion as zealously as he once renounced it. But to me the works are all of a piece. There's a direct line connecting the Green Target to the tears of Farley and even to the jump-roping skeleton. They hint at things that are felt but which remain unsaid and unsayable.

"Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper," is on view at Matthew Marks Gallery through April 6.

February 21, 2019, 4:03 pm

Solomon, Deborah. "Jasper Johns's Visions in Green." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2019.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART + WEEKEND

Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality

In these works, we are looking at a merging of organization and dissipation, an image of our destiny.

John Yau

Years ago, while speaking to Roberta Bernstein about his early works, "Target with Plaster Casts" and "Target with Four Faces" (both 1955), Jasper Johns stated:

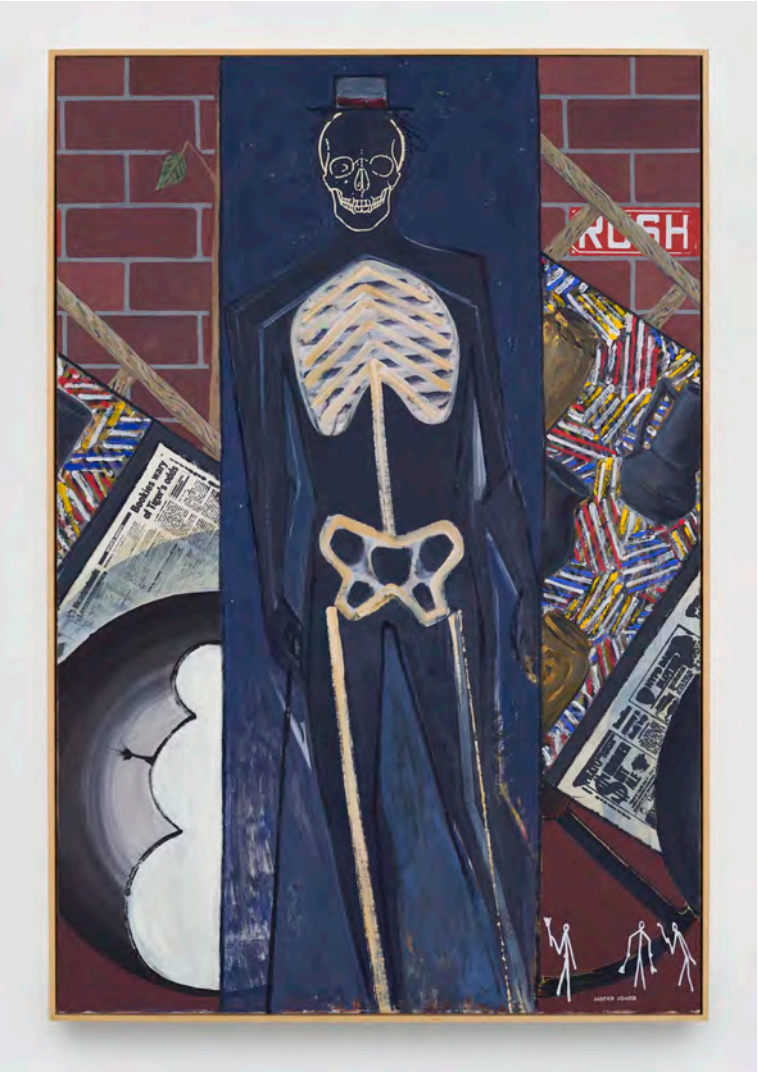
> Any broken representation of the human physique is touching in some way; it's upsetting or provokes reactions that one can't quite account for. Maybe because one's image of one's own body is disturbed by it.

In his current exhibition, *Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper*, at Matthew Marks Gallery (February 9–April 6, 2019), which includes much but not all of the work the artist completed between 2014 and 2018, viewers are invited to contemplate Johns's latest examples of "broken representations of the human physique," among much else.

By applying different processes and techniques to these and other representations, Johns has found a way to continue being candid about aging, mortality, and the dead selves we leave behind. The works in this exhibition constitute a deeply felt, intellectual inquiry into what it means to exist, to live with one's memories, to grow old, and die.

What the exhibition should settle once and for all is that Johns's greatness did not end with his formal innovations of the mid- to late '50s, or with his exploration of the crosshatch in the 70s; instead, he has broadened and deepened his thinking over the entire course of his career so far.

The relentlessness we feel pulsing through his work — his "take an object / Do something to it / Do



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2018), oil on canvas, 50 3/4 x 34 1/8 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, all images courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

something else to it" aesthetic — is the fusion of emotional urgency and formal concerns with intellectual curiosity in the service of discovering the limits of what one is actually experiencing.

Approaching 90, Johns has not settled into a style or mode of production, nor has he become wistful or nostalgic about his past. Rather, he has found a way to keep moving forward while living in the present and what it gives to him — be it a photograph of a helicopter crewman, Lance Corporal James Farley, taken by Larry Burrows during the Vietnam War for a photo-essay in LIFE (magazine); a reproduction of a torn and wrinkled photograph published in an auction catalog; or the FBI's return of a painting that he had abandoned and asked his former assistant to destroy.

There are 38 works in the exhibition. One is a suite, "Untitled" (2018), which consists of 24 sheets, each of which measures approximately 11 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches. The sheets are divided evenly between those done in ink on plastic and those done in ink on paper, and each group is sequentially numbered in the upper right hand corner, like pages from two different but linked books.

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic,* February 17, 2019.

Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2018), ink on paper or plastic, 24 sheets, each approximately: 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

The recurring motif in all the sheets is a new one for Johns: a jaunty skeleton wearing a porkpie hat, sometimes sporting a cane and sometimes holding a skull in front of his crotch. In one of the paper works, Johns has juxtaposed the skeleton with his motif of a catenary line, so that it appears as if he is skipping rope. Johns's mordant humor is just one of the many pleasures of this extraordinary exhibition.

Thematically speaking, the exhibition can be divided into five groups, each of which centers on a carefully arranged constellation of motifs or a preexisting image. Along with the new motif of the spry skeleton, there is a vertical, ink on plastic, "Untitled" (2016), which seems to be an outlier, not a part of any group. Materially speaking, the works range from paintings to linoleum prints to a small etching done on confetti paper.

Johns's sensitivity to materials coupled with his willingness to try different resources, processes, and surfaces, is largely unrivaled. The paintings are done in acrylic, oil, and encaustic, with some augmented by silkscreen. There is a large etching of a skeleton holding a skull in front of his crotch that was printed on Egyptian papyrus.

What stitches these disparate works together is Johns's interest in seeing with one's own eyes, guided by the mind's eye — the everyday world and the insights one might gain through the imagination in pursuit of a larger truth: the effect of time on us all.

This concern is immediately apparent in a large, square blue painting, "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 40 by 40 inches, 2016) on the front wall facing the gallery's window, looking onto the street. Johns did this

Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

"Untitled" in response to a similar "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 44 x 66 inches, 1997), which he made nearly 20 years earlier and I don't believe has ever been shown.

Both paintings have the same motifs: a pair of cartoon-like eyes staring into the painting; a curlicue line that can be read as the bottom of a nostril; a pair of lips that can also be read as mountain; a trompe l'oeil image of a ruler; a trompe l'oeil "poster" of the Milky Way's dense swirl of stars, paired with a "poster" of the Big Dipper, which is shown upside down and in reverse, from right to left, with a white line connecting the seven stars. This reverse direction is echoed by the three stick figures below, which are also moving from right to left. They seem to be holding large brushes.

Are the disembodied eyes looking at the world or are they looking inward and remembering the past? Are these ways of looking and remembering completely separate from each other?

Like the stick figures, which we might regard as representations of our ancestors, we can draw a line between stars to make a constellation, but can we comprehend the actual distance between them? The ruler that Johns has depicted alongside the poster of the Big Dipper is an inadequate instrument to address the actual distances, though it can be used to tell us the poster's height and width. How do we measure

what cannot be measured? In Hart Crane's poem "Cape Hatteras" — to which Johns has referred in a number of works from the early 1960s — the poet asks:

> Seeing himself an atom in a shroud —
> Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!
>
> " — Recorders ages hence " — ah, syllables of faith!
> Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity
> Be still the same as when you walked the beach
> Near Paumanok — your lone patrol — and heard the wraith
> Through surf, its bird note there a long time falling …

What about the link that Johns establishes between the landscape (mountain) and the human body (lips)? Are the inward-looking eyes pondering our destination, as part of a landscape that is itself a minute speck within something unfathomable (the Milky Way)? Why is the painting's ground largely blue with hints of orange peeking through? Why has the right edge of "poster" of the Milky Way started to curl up? Was the proportion of the older painting — whose dimensions convey landscape — what bothered Johns? Is this why he made his response on a square, or abstract, format?

Regardless of whether the viewer knows about the earlier painting or not, what "Untitled" conveys is a curiosity about looking, both as an outward act and an inward one, in pursuit of some understanding of

Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2017), acrylic over etching with collage on canvas, 19 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic*, February 17, 2019.

our material relationship to time, space, and the world we inhabit. What is the connection between them? How might we see ourselves in the world we must let go of, in the end?

In almost all of the work in this exhibition, we see figures looking at us or looking away. There are the faces in profile, where the negative space between them forms the silhouette of a stemmed vessel; there is a tormented figure derived from a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's "Reclining Nude" (1938), which had printed upside down; and a ripped, crumpled, and stained photograph of Lucian Freud taken by John Deakin.

The photo of Freud shows him perched on the edge of an iron bed, one leg tucked under the other; his right hand clutches his hair as he looks down and away, while the other hand reaches toward the camera, as if to block its gaze. The Larry Burrows photograph of Lance Corporal James Farley in Vietnam shows him covering his face and sobbing into his forearm, one hand held up, shielding his face from the camera's inquisitive persistence. Elsewhere, nimble skeletons look at us, mocking our infirmity.

Despite their differences, these motifs are examples of what Johns defined as "broken[s] representation of the human physique." So while we can track down their diverse origins – and there is a deep and satisfying pleasure in doing so — I don't think that is Johns's main intention. He is not the obscurantist many have accused him of being. Rather, he seems to prefer that viewers open themselves up to the possible meanings evoked by the "broken representation" in front of them. What we must see is the work and the context that Johns has established for it, just as he did for "Flag" (1954–55).

When Johns sections off the image of Freud and his surroundings, taking his lead from the creases and tears in the photograph, or when he echoes and extends the camouflage pattern on Farley's uniform, he is dissolving the boundaries separating figure and ground — something that has interested him since his first alphabet and number paintings in the mid-1950s. Whereas these earlier paintings were seen as grids and all-over compositions — which were favored over all else at the time — what mattered to Johns was the complexity that could be yielded from the figure/ground relationship.

This formal interest in the figure/ground relationship can be traced from his early works right up to the present. Johns's absorption with "broken representations of the human physique" also runs throughout his career, starting at the very beginning, which suggests that those who see a division between his early formally innovative paintings and the work he began doing after 1981, when he said that he "dropped his reserve," miss the point. Moreover, the art world's voyeuristic obsession with whether or not Johns is revealing something of his private life seems to me terribly misguided.

The "broken representations" that we encounter in "Target with Four Faces" (1955); "The Bath" (1977); the paintings and prints from his "Regrets" series; and the works based on the Burrows' photograph are not about the artist in a limited "I confess" sense. They are about loss and unavoidable decline and decay; they are about us in so far as we will grow old and die.

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic,* February 17, 2019.

Jasper Johns, "Farley Breaks Down – after Larry Burrows" (2014), ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

I want to stress that, out of the 20 photographs of Farley that appeared in the LIFE photo-essay, Johns especially chose the photograph of him covering his eyes. When he uses a stencil to spell out the phrase "Farley Breaks Down," Johns is not quoting Burrows, who wrote "The mission over, Farley gives way, from Yankee Papa 13" on the back of the photograph. Johns recognizes that the photograph shows Farley breaking down emotionally, but he also recognizes that he is breaking down physically.

This is where Johns's technique and materials have taken him. In the ink on plastic works depicting Farley, the dried vacuoles are puddle stains tainted with dust. The swirls of dust are evidence of desiccation, of the body dried out — materials that evoke our common physical destination after we die. And yet, looking at the stains, aren't we fascinated by the patterns and configurations their drying makes? But their natural beauty is not all that Johns is inviting us to ponder, is it?

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic,* February 17, 2019.

Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 27 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

In these works, we are looking at a merging of organization and dissipation, an image of our destiny. Johns can imagine this outcome, but the figure in the work has turned his face away and covered his eyes. Is it because he is afraid of what will happen to him? Is it because he cannot actually see himself in this state of disintegration? Or is it because he knows that one of his selves has died and will forever be stuck in this moment? Is life an accumulation of — to cite Johns's title — regrets?

Johns's merging of techniques and materiality — the ink, brush, and sheet of clear plastic — is unrivaled. And yet this is not all that he does. Look at the various densities of his blacks, and consider the range of emotions spreading across a congregation of them. The blacks he gets in the Regrets series are significantly different from those in "Untitled" (2014), a haunting painting of a silhouetted child standing by a ladder, a large dark blue vase (with two faces in profile across from each other) falling in front him. Could this image be an elegy to what has been erased by time?

The new motif of the skeleton is funny and unsettling. The skeleton is leaning to the left in both paintings

in which he is featured, and wearing a porkpie hat painted red. The hat, too small to fit the skull, is perched precariously on his head. Is death cheery because it never dies? Can we look at this and not think of our own past and future — what we might endure until we reach the end?

Is the skeleton standing in an open doorway, with the night outside? On either side of him, we see a broken cart carrying examples of Johns's work and a profile of a snowman — both are motifs used by the artist in "The Seasons," his four-part encaustic from 1985-86 — peering out from behind the skeleton. Among other things, a snowman is an impermanent form and a reminder of childhood. In one of the skeleton paintings, we glimpse parts of a crosshatch painting with images of George Ohr pots floating in front of them — juxtaposing these two motifs together for the first time.

There is so much to look at and think about in these paintings and works on paper that you might never get to the bottom of them. They ask viewers to slow down and consider how they live in time.

This is the space Johns opens up for us. The question is whether or not we can enter it, how long can we stay there, and what deep and real pleasures we might glean from looking at these contemplations of time's ravenous hunger and transformative power.

Johns has given us messengers of aging and mortality. These are not private musings, but intensely introspective works about death's anticipated arrival. They are full of silences, wan light, somber darkness, acerbic humor, and signs of disintegration. Standing before them, we should ask ourselves: are we ready to receive all that they bring to us, go in whatever direction they suggest, no matter how distressing?

Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper *continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 6.*

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic,* February 17, 2019.

The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art

A rock garden in the east courtyard of the new Menil Drawing Institute, billed as the country's first free-standing facility dedicated to the conservation and study of modern and contemporary drawing. Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

By Holland Cotter

Nov. 29, 2018

HOUSTON — Talk with any bunch of art professionals about recently built museums and you're likely to hear kvetch, kvetch, kvetch followed by an admiring reference to the Menil Collection. The Menil is widely regarded as the gold standard in institutional concept and design. And admiration for it tends to shade into devotion. Its 30-acre campus of low-slung buildings in a leafy park in this city has become as much pilgrimage site as cultural destination. Now, with the addition of a building for the Menil

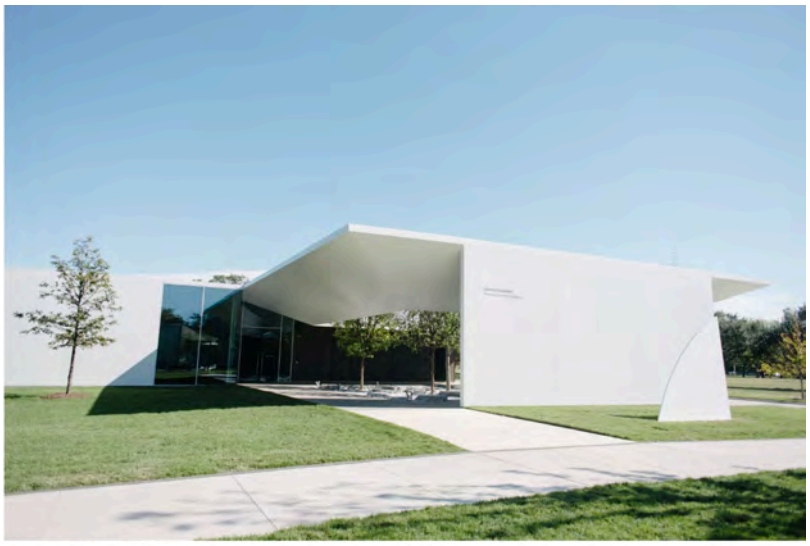
Cotter, Holland. "Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2018.

Drawing Institute, there's more perfection than ever to love.

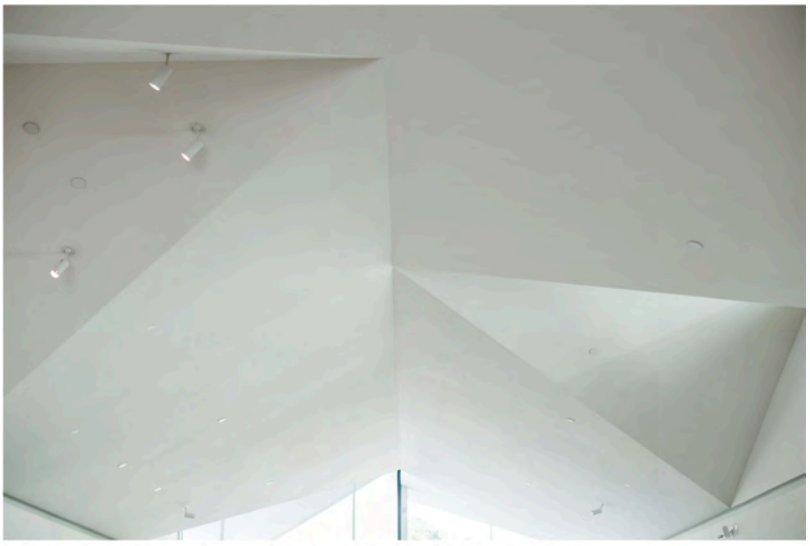
I'm a devotee too, though one with reservations, none of which prevented me from taking delight in the Drawing Institute's new quarters, and in its extraordinary inaugural show, "The Condition of Being Here: Drawings by Jasper Johns." The 30,000-square-foot building, advertised as the country's first free-standing facility dedicated to the conservation and study of modern and contemporary drawing, is surrounded by four other Menil buildings, with the famed Rothko Chapel a short walk away.

And there's something distinctly, if ecumenically, chapel-like about the new $40 million structure that opened in early November. As designed by the Los Angeles architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee in collaboration with landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, its roof is flat but here and there rises in aspirational peaks. With white walls and contoured ceilings that look like creased paper and three spare enclosed gardens, it brings to mind a Shinto shrine, one of the simpler rural kinds of no-nonsense elegance, buildings that seem to both stand apart from and be open to nature.

Plain-style sublime is a very Menil dynamic. The collection's French-born founders, John and Dominique de Menil, were observant Roman Catholics and also observant modernists — twice-born utopians, you might



An exterior view of the Drawing Institute, designed by the Los Angeles architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee. Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times



A detail of the vaulted ceiling of the institute's living room entry area.
Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

Trees cast shadows on the E. Rudge Allen Family Courtyard. Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

Cotter, Holland. "Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2018.

An installation view of "The Condition of Being Here: Drawings by Jasper Johns," the Drawing Institute's inaugural show.
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

say, anti-extravagance, pro-transcendence. Their ideal of faith-infused architecture wasn't Vatican City (or Trump Tower). It was the monastic library, the Shaker meeting houses, places that combined work and meditation, stiff-back chairs and lap rugs.

An exterior view of the Drawing Institute, designed by the Los Angeles architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee.

Practicality was a determining feature in the design of such places, and it was for the Drawing Institute, founded by Menil's curator emerita, Bernice Rose, in 2008. Drawings on paper are degradable things, sensitive to light, humidity, dust. They require controlled surroundings and that's what they have here. In the building's public spaces, where visitors gather, and in nook-like offices reserved for visiting scholars, there are windows onto the world, or at least onto manicured lawns. But in other, nonpublic areas, like the conference rooms where drawings are put out for study — windows are few and filtered, or absent altogether.

The most sealed-off space of all — no windows, no skylights — and where the public will spend most of its time is the exhibition gallery. Architecturally, it's a letdown. A large rectangle with movable walls. It could be anywhere, designed by anyone. The rest of the building, despite its restraint, has all kinds of visual felicities. But in the gallery there are none. Foursquare walls, ceiling, floor, ceiling. It's as if we're being told: Concentrate. Look at the art. Nothing else matters.

Enforced discipline is a Menil trademark. (Most museums now seem to encourage precisely the opposite ethic.) Picture-taking is not permitted in Menil galleries — too distracting — but neither, apparently, is reading. In the museum's main building, the permanent collection display is culturally wide-ranging: Greek classical heads,

Byzantine icons, Luba ancestor figures, Japanese bodhisattvas, Tlingit masks. Identifying labels carry only the most bare-bones data. Of explanatory, contextualizing information, there is little or none. You're left to make what you can of a thing and drift on.

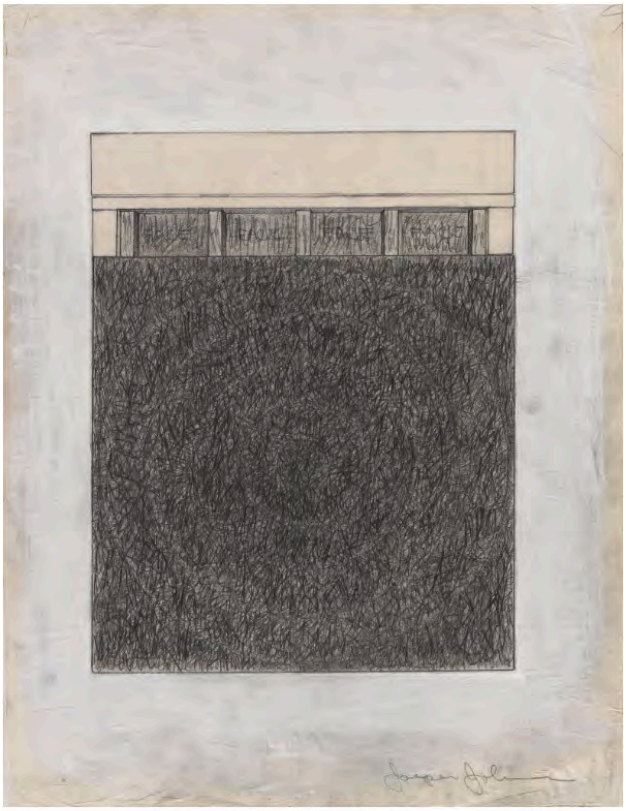
An exception is a gallery of African art. All of the Menil's permanent collection galleries were recently reinstalled, and this one was given a theme: the African-European colonial encounter. Everything in the room relates to it, notably multiple images of Africans depicted by Europeans, and Europeans depicted by Africans. It's a fascinatingly eclectic ensemble and needs — certainly benefits from — some explaining, which visitors get in a handout written by the museum's curator of collections, Paul R. Davis.

The Jasper Johns exhibition at the Drawing Institute also comes with a handout, written by Kelly Montana, an assistant curator there. And general and brief though it is, it's a boon, because people need guidance with this enigmatic art. The Menil has a long history with Mr. Johns, having done two earlier exhibitions. And the current one coincides with the release of the museum's six-volume catalogue raisonné of his drawings.

The show itself — organized by Ms. Montana when the original curator, David Breslin, moved to the Whitney Museum of American Art — begins where the catalogue raisonné does, in 1954, with a small untitled graphite drawing on oil-stained paper. And the enigmas begin here.

At a glance you see a solid black field of tightly drawn vertical graphite lines, with a fringe of stray line-ends at the bottom. Closer scrutiny reveals that the blackness is layered and textured, and the hand-action is not just up and down. It curves and twists across the field. And some of those curves

The Jasper Johns show starts in 1954, with an untitled graphite drawing on oil-stained paper. "The enigmas begin here," our critic says. Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Jasper Johns's "Target With Four Faces," 1958/1967, graphite and gouache on tracing paper mounted on board.
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Cotter, Holland. "Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2018.

form shapes: namely, two side-by-side spheres or balls that seem to lie at some depth behind the field. Suddenly you have a spatial dimension you didn't know was there, and an image, and what a strange one. Abstract? Planetary? Sexual? Now you're in the realm of meaning, and guesswork, and interpretation.

While you're guessing, you might note that the spheres anticipate the target motifs that would become a Johns signature. The earliest example here is a graphite and gouache drawing called "Target With Four Faces," double-dated 1958/1967; the latest is from 1977. From them you can intuit a temporal pattern in the artist's career, a themes-and-variations rhythm, extending over years, in which particular motifs — targets, American flags, maps, stenciled numbers, skulls, body parts — recur with new themes periodically introduced.

The artist's "Study for Regrets," from 2012, watercolor, colored pencil, ink, photocopy collage and acrylic on paper.
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Mr. Johns's "Study for Skin I" (1962), charcoal and oil on drafting paper.
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

The sheer range of media in the show's 41 objects — graphite, watercolor, pastel, oil stick, ink on paper, ink on plastic, collage — is astonishing. So is his technical mastery of each, which has an allure of its own. The effect is to crack drawing, as an art category, wide open and fuse it with painting, sculpture, printmaking and poetry.

But it's the mystery of Mr. Johns's images that lock you in: those uncanny dark spheres from the 1954 piece; the skull imprinted on a paper towel in 1971; the body that looks to be drowning in "Study for Skin I" of 1962; the tilting still life of antique jars in "Study for Fall," from 1986; the moldering stew of gangrenous hands and heads in "Farley Breaks Down," from 2014.

These images feel deeply, privately coded and, depending on your mood, mesmerizing or maddening. In fact, they are almost all elements in an expressive pictorial language of symbols and metaphors that Mr. Johns has developed over a six-decade-and-counting career. Few artists want their work to be pinned down by "meaning." He doesn't. But it's important for viewers, especially new ones, approaching a summing-up show like this one, to have at least the rudiments of that language translated, or some sense of the life and the world that produced it. But neither this show nor its slender catalog make an attempt to render this service.

Cotter, Holland. "Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2018.

An untitled Jasper Johns piece from 1984 mixes motifs from his other works.
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

I know it's the Menil Collection's house style not to accompany art with extended informational labels, but I miss them. They are the layer of learning that follows, and deepens, looking.

They are, or can be, a way to link art to the politics of everyday life, which is what produces art in the first place. John and Dominique de Menil understood politics. They are well known for having been liberal in their thinking and in their charitable giving. (Though mention is seldom made of the fact that their fortune derived primarily from the sale of drilling equipment to the oil industry, which contributes to environmental distress.) Whatever their history, the museum itself, to judge by its galleries, leaves the world, and its realities, outside the door.

I love the place anyway. I love churches — houses of contemplation, spiritual inquiry and ethical information — of almost every kind. Chapels, temples, shrines. I happen to like them buzzy and noisy, like subway cars, warmed by music and prayers and arguments, and visually charged, with images that stimulate and disturb. (Mr. Johns's show fills that bill.) I love that some of them are about community, caretaking, protection, protest, and news of the day. And I also love, sometimes with misgivings, that others are set-aside places where improved, corrected versions of reality can be proposed, which, for me, describes the Menil.

The Condition of Being Here: Drawings by Jasper Johns
Through Jan. 27 at the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston; 713-525-9400, menil.org.

Cotter, Holland. "Menil's New Drawing Institute: A Full-Service Home for Fragile Art." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2018.

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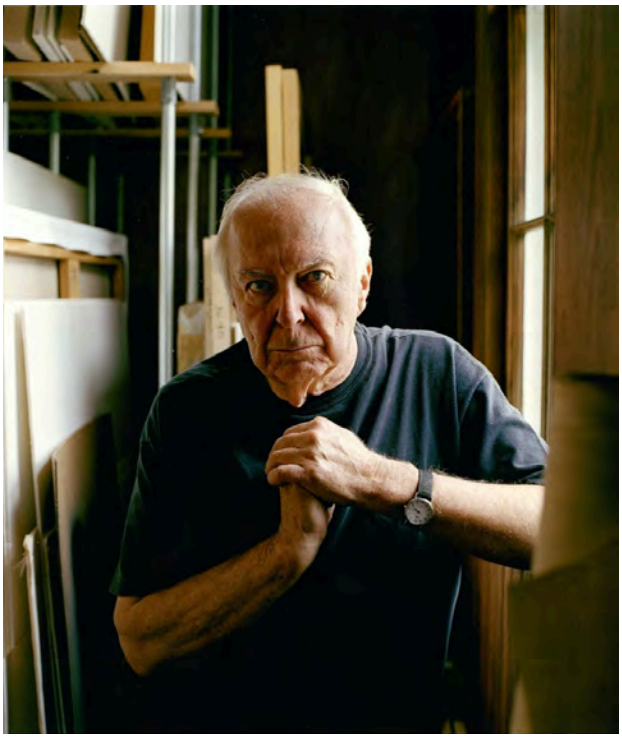


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: EAMONN MCCABE; BEN MARTIN/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES; ©JASPER JOHNS/VAGA,NY/THE MENIL COLLECTION (3)

ART

Jasper Johns Isn't Done Yet

With two coming exhibitions, the 88-year-old American artist discusses inspiration and his plans for the future

BY BRENDA CRONIN

Sharon, Conn.

Jasper Johns is perplexed by the notion of legacy.

"I can't bear the word," he says. "When I hear it on television, I think: What do they mean?"

The artist, whose breakthrough depictions of American flags and targets in the 1950s jolted painting away from abstract expressionism, is focused on new projects, not retrospectives. In February, Matthew Marks Gallery in New York plans a show of his recent work, including 10 paintings never before exhibited.

In November, "The Condition of Being Here: Drawings by Jasper Johns" opens at the Menil Drawing Institute, part of the Menil Collection in Houston. The museum also will publish a six-volume catalogue raisonné, or comprehensive edition, of more than 800 of Mr. Johns's drawings.

In the Connecticut barn that is his studio, Mr. Johns, who turned 88 in May, has just finished an etching and is working on a painting. He finds ideas everywhere, saying, "I doubt that there is any limitation to what can act as a trigger."

Those inspirations "snag on his brain, and he develops them into something that's purely visual," says Edith Devaney, curator at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. The Johns show she co-curated with Roberta Bernsteintraveled to the Broad in Los Angeles this year after opening at the Royal Academy in 2017.

Cronin, Brenda. "Jasper Johns Isn't Done Yet." *The Wall Street Journal,* September 24, 2018, p. A13.

Mr. Johns's paintings, prints and drawings since the 2000s reflect still-dazzling artistic gifts, Ms. Devaney says, but they have been enriched by his years.

"His technical brilliance remains unchanged," she adds. "But there's this additional focus of having lived a long life, a very reflective life, that comes out."

Mr. Johns's studio is surrounded by tidy fields with a manicured woodpile. Elsewhere, his interest in other contemporary artists is evident, with one room featuring sculptures by Bruce Nauman and John Duff, as well as drawings by Jane Logemann.

A courtly and deeply private figure, in conversation he is generous with silence and sparing with words. He is serious at times, erupting into trills of laughter at other moments. He remains neutral about interpretations of his work, leaving it up to viewers to form their own impressions.

"I don't think I'm single-minded in the way I approach things," Mr. Johns says. "So it's hard to then tell people what to do and how to think."

Although his paintings hang in museums around the world and sell for millions, he is "very hard on himself," says Mr. Marks, the New York gallery owner. "If I say, 'How are things going?' he would never say, 'Things are going well.' That's not within his vocabulary."

On one visit, Mr. Marks asked to peek into the studio and recalls Mr. Johns's Eeyore-ish reply. "He said, 'You can, but I don't know what the point is because I'm sure there's nothing for you to see.' And then I went and there were three brand-new paintings."

Mr. Marks says the pieces for the planned February show all have antecedents in earlier creations, no matter how shadowy. "The way he works, everything is built on previous work," Mr. Marks says. "Everything is connected…even if it's not necessarily obvious at first."

Born in Georgia and raised in South Carolina, Mr. Johns rocketed to prominence at age 27 with an exhibit at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. His exploration of motifs—

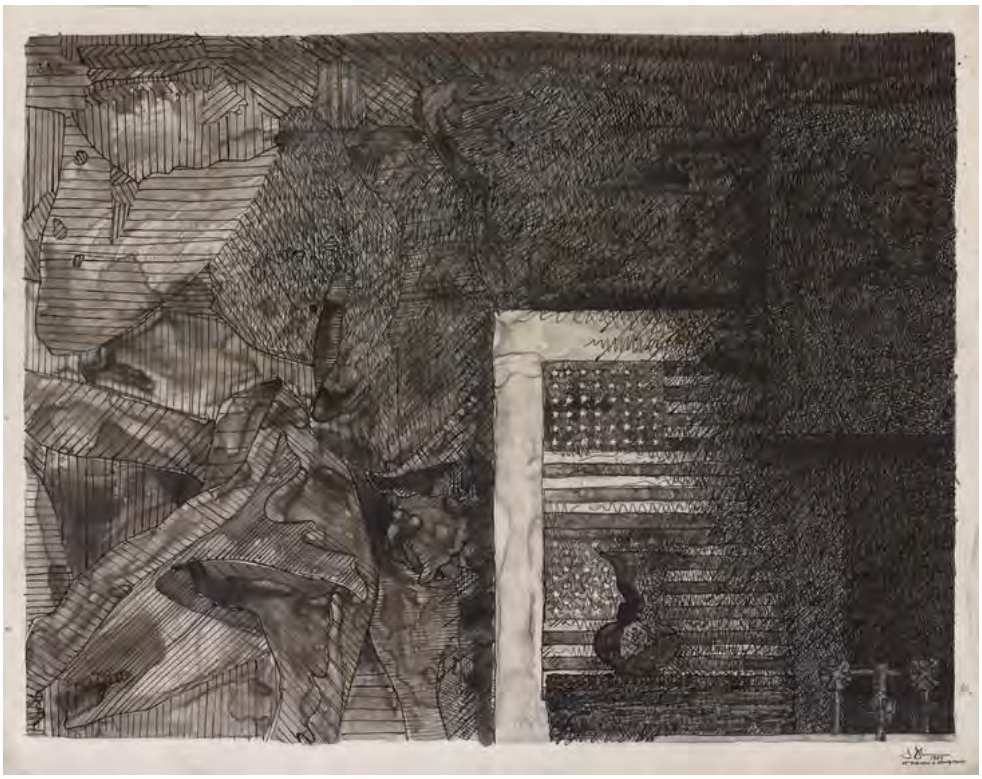
in paintings, prints, drawings and sculpture—propelled 20th-century art into a host of avenues, including pop art, conceptualism and minimalism.

Drawing is "a way of closely observing and learning from his own works," says Kelly Montana, the Menil Drawing Institute's assistant curator, who has overseen the exhibition opening in November. The show's title, she says, quotes a phrase from Mr. Johns's sketchbooks and an observation he made about the late artist Marcel Duchamp: "He has changed the condition of being here."

Other influences Mr. Johns cites are his early friendships with the artist Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage and dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. One of his first studios, Mr. Johns recalls, was over a sandwich shop near the East River, in a Lower Manhattan building where he worked on one floor and Mr. Rauschenberg on another.

For Mr. Johns, drawing often follows painting, rather than the other way around. "I don't think I tend to make sketches for works," he says. "I might scribble something off."Over the years, he has become an expert printmaker. As a student

Cronin, Brenda. "Jasper Johns Isn't Done Yet." *The Wall Street Journal,* September 24, 2018, p. A13.



'I doubt that there is any limitation to what can act as a trigger,' says Jasper Johns, top, in a recent photo and in 1959. Untitled works, clockwise from left, from 1990, 1984 and 2015.

at the University of South Carolina, Mr. Johns made silk-screen posters—"I did it very primitively," he says—for a college production of Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler."

A few years later, after he had moved to New York and was working in a bookstore, he tried again, cutting into a piece of paper, inking it, then printing it onto another piece. He eventually gave it to a friend, but in 2006, it went up for auction, and Mr. Johns found himself in a bidding war with a collector.

The print, about the size of a cocktail napkin, was expected to fetch between $800 and $1,200. "I tried to get it," Mr. Johns recalls, "but I thought it had a much smaller value than the collector thought, so he outbid me."

The collector, Jordan D. Schnitzer, of Portland, Ore., paid almost $16,000. Mr. Schnitzer has one of the largest private collections of prints in the U.S., including 117 by Mr. Johns.

"He is a poet," Mr. Schnitzer says. "His work is so subtle and so powerful."

Joseph Newland, the director of publishing at the Menil, says he felt some trepidation about working with such an exacting printmaker on the catalogue raisonné of his drawings. In printmaking, he adds, "Jasper Johns is himself a technical wizard of sorts."

Last year, Mr. Newland and others working on the catalog visited the artist. "When we walked into the studio, he literally had a brush in his hand and was working on a canvas," Mr. Newland says. "We're not talking about somebody who is resting on his laurels."

With Mr. Newland was Massimo Tonolli, a founder of Trifolio, a Verona, Italy, specialty printer. Mr. Tonolli also recalls feeling intimidated, but was reassured by Mr. Johns's precise manner. "He has a really intense look," Mr. Tonolli says. "You can tell from the beginning if he agrees with you or not."

Mr. Johns's gaze still is piercing, his eyes crowned by bushy white brows. When not working, he likes to spend time gardening or cooking—"neither particularly well," he says.

Growing up in South Carolina, he would help out in the kitchen, which led to some adolescent entrepreneurship. "When I was in high school I ran a snack bar in the teenage canteen and cooked hamburgers and hot dogs and such things," he says. "I don't know that I enjoyed it. I made a little money, which was nice. My burgers got thinner and thinner."

While he appears to be on a roll, Mr. Johns has gone for stretches without working, and he doesn't rule out retirement, he says. "At my age, you certainly think about stopping, whether you're stopping willingly or not."

Mr. Johns never married and has no children. He would like to turn the Connecticut property, after his death, into a retreat that hosts painters, writers and other artists for residencies.

Buildings on the grounds, which span more than 100 acres, might have to be adjusted to create more studio space. As for the details, Mr. Johns shrugs and smiles.

"I don't know," he says. "I won't be here."

Cronin, Brenda. "Jasper Johns Isn't Done Yet." *The Wall Street Journal,* September 24, 2018, p. A13.

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ARTFORUM

View of "Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth," 2018. From left: *Flag on Orange*, 1958; *Flag*, 1958; *Three Flags*, 1958 Photo: Pablo Enriquez. © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Jasper Johns

THE BROAD

AT AGE EIGHTY-EIGHT, Jasper Johns has come to occupy a unique position in American culture. Rivaling Bob Dylan for sheer unrelenting inventiveness, he persists in the form of an enigma, continuing to mine a vein by turns ultra superficial and maddeningly hermetic. Any attempt to summarize Johns's significance runs immediately into contradiction: Indifferent to public attention yet virtuosic in his performance of artistic savoir faire, Johns is at once the iconic face of postwar American art and its most obscure, inward-focused contributor. A touchstone of queer art history—together with Robert Rauschenberg (his partner between 1954 and 1961), Merce Cunningham, and John Cage, Johns pierced the bubble of modernist hetero—sexism during the McCarthyite 1950s—he has nevertheless maintained a strict (some would say a closeted) code of silence about his personal life, flatly refusing to bring sexuality into the discussion of his art. The lone proprietor of a palatial

Marcus, Daniel. "Jasper Johns: The Broad." *Artforum* 56, no. 10, Summer 2018, pp. 300–02.

Connecticut estate, he cuts the figure of the ultimate bourgeois, an artist whose trajectory from penury to plenitude has long since been realized. Yet he is the mirror opposite of old Picasso: Allergic to Bacchic abandon or ejaculatory spontaneity, he prefers stymied self-questioning to ruddy-faced hedonism.

Hence Johns's strange currency at present: Unplaceable in the archnarrative of twentieth-century art, his career appears to transcend any particular moment or movement. Spared from devaluation during the long postmodern winter, Johns now furnishes the prime example of art-historical continuity across the Y2K boundary, singlehandedly bridging the moment of Abstract Expressionism with the aughts. Concatenating the main currents in postwar modernism—gestural abstraction, Duchampian readymade, Conceptualist indexicality, even deadpan self-portraiture (as in *Souvenir*, 1964)—Johns's art holds a key to the art of the present; indeed, we seem to be witnessing his late-in-life coronation. Last year, Roberta Bernstein published her long-awaited catalogue raisonné of his painting and sculpture which was followed by the opening of a major survey, "Something Resembling Truth," at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, for which she served as cocurator. This show then traveled to the Broad in Los Angeles, its only North American venue. An even grander ceremonial is planned for the year 2020, when two separate institutions, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, will simultaneously launch a retrospective of Johns's work, in what is certain to be billed as an apotheosis.

All of which raises the Johnsian query, *According to what*? How should the importance of Johns's work be measured in what is likely to be his final decade? Is he to be celebrated as modernist stalwart or postmodern ironist? As queer hero or epistemologist of the closet? How is history to connect the artist to his art, when Johns has made the connection so difficult to discern? And what perspective on history—what *American* history—does his art invoke, if not simply the atemporal quietude of a new fin de siècle?

Jasper Johns, *Souvenir*, 1964, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 28 3/4 x 21". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Jasper Johns, *Painting Bitten by a Man*, 1961, encaustic on canvas mounted on type plate, 9 1/2 x 6 7/8". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

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Jasper Johns, *Green Angel*, 1990, encaustic and sand on canvas, 75 1/8 x 50 1/4". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

The answers to these questions are certain to confound. Ambivalence has always been fundamental to Johns's art, including, crucially, ambivalence about history itself. *Flag*, 1954–55, one of his first biographically sanctioned (i.e., neither destroyed nor disowned) artworks, made such ambiguous use of the American standard—was it a picture of a flag or the genuine article? a token of patriotism or countercultural subversion?—that the Museum of Modern Art declined to purchase the painting when it was offered in 1958, fearing reprisal from militant nationalists. For art historian Anne M. Wagner, addressing *Flag* in these pages in November 2006, Johns's equivocal usage of the Stars and Stripes registered a deeper uncertainty about public life in twentieth-century America: "What is most instructive about *Flag*," she writes, "is its terrifying, inevitable ambivalence in the face of the kinds of commitment demanded by the United States." Johns's ambivalence is political, in other words: Interpreted one way, *Flag* might project the ultimate mockery of democratic politics, rendering the icon of national community as a lavishly patinated luxury. Read differently, however, *Flag* becomes a testament of naive faith in democracy, handmade with exacting fidelity—with genuine zeal, even—to its prototype. Yet the logic of *Flag* is less both/and than neither/nor. Negative and positive, the democratic and the illiberal are un-resolvable in Johns's art; each performance cancels the other, throwing the whole question of politics—of art's publicness—into doubt.

"SOMETHING RESEMBLING TRUTH" impressed on viewers the depth and complexity of Johns's project in the aftermath of *Flag*. Spanning Johns's first forays of the mid-'50s to his paintings of the present decade, the survey opened with a roomful of flags, followed by other thematic groupings, encompassing his "0 through 9" series, 1958–; his crosshatched paintings, 1973–; his suite *The Seasons* of the mid-'80s; the "Catenaries"series, 1997–; and his most recent series, "Regrets," begun in 2012—and much more besides.

Those who might wish to know who Johns really is, and what sort of a mind (what sort of a man) stands behind the artworks that bear his name, are left in Beckettian darkness.

In spite of the exhibition's blockbuster popularity, at no point did Johns come across as populist; to the contrary, his work remained inscrutable from start to finish, leaving visitors to puzzle over each new motif, never certain what the whole sum amounted to. Toward the end of the show, viewers confronted an unidentifiable ghostly shape—is it the contour of an island? the outline of a prone body?—at the center of Green Angel, 1990, a canvas that would otherwise (were it not for the intervening form) portray a woman's face, with pimiento eyes and suspension-bridge lips. The shape's indecipherability is bizarre, yet typical; even where the sources of Johns's quotations are firmly documented (for example, his tracings of a tangle of limbs from the sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece and of the imprint of Marcel Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950), their semiotic purpose remains elusive. Wanderers through Johns's forest

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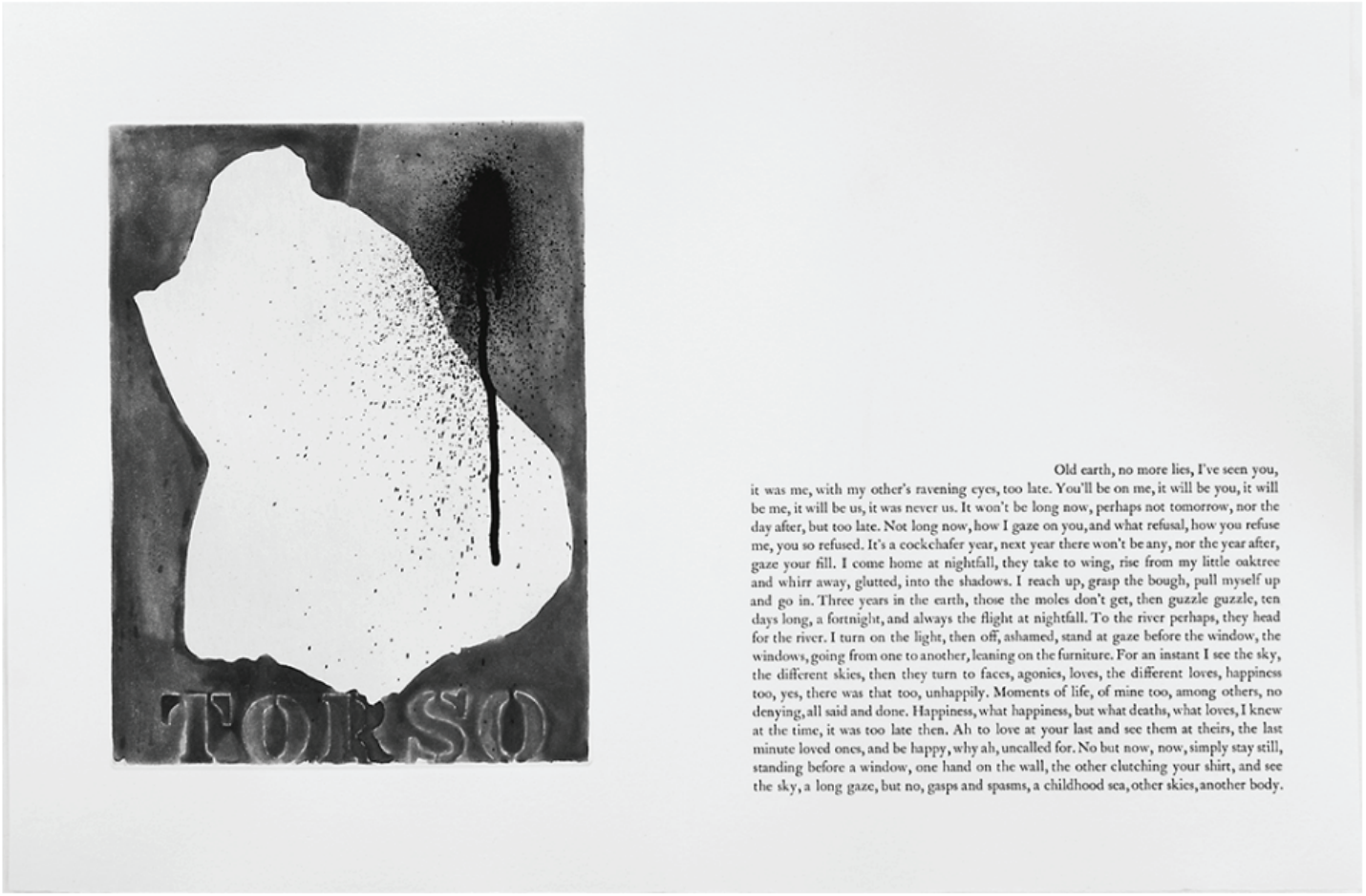

Jasper Johns, *Foirades/Fizzles* (detail), 1976, thirty-three intaglio-and-letterpress prints with five texts by Samuel Beckett in French and English, thirty sheets, each 13 x 19 1/2". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

of signs traverse an essentially closed circuit of meaning-making, in which near-mythic significance accrues to mere happenstance, as with the flagstone-painted wall the artist glimpsed while on a taxi ride through Harlem (the source of a motif used in numerous works, from Within, 1983/2005, to Nines, 2006). The sort of public meaning broached by Rauschenberg and Warhol is largely absent from Johns's corpus; at issue is rather a personal, private history—but a history withheld from inspection, accessible only in the form of illegible detritus.

The hermeticism of Johns's art has been claimed variously as evidence of deconstruction (the artist short-circuiting the conditions of symbolic meaning), as an enactment of closeted homosociability, and as symptomatic of the split subject of poststructuralism. For the curators of "Something Resembling Truth," Johns's oblique perspective is simply empiricist, questing after truth "through the layered and shifting meanings uncovered through the process of perception"—an attitude more Cartesian than Derridean. Implicitly, however, the Broad's survey reinscribed Johns within the canon of modernism, wherein truth and artifice, knowledge and doubt, are ultimately indissociable—including, not least, the truth and artifice of the authorial subject. At the approximate center of the exhibition was a wall-length display of *Foirades/ Fizzles*, 1976, comprising thirty-three intaglios made to accompany five short texts by Samuel Beckett, which together figure Johns as exemplary of the unnamable, an artist who goes on communicating without any hope of being understood. Those who might wish to know who Johns really is, and what sort of a mind (what sort of a *man*) stands behind the artworks that bear his name, are left in Beckettian darkness.

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The reconstitution of Johns as ur-modernist makes good sense. Never fully rejecting the legacies of Picasso and Rimbaud (one thinks of Rimbaud's mantra:"'I' is somebody else"), Johns has always been a painter in the second person, treating every artwork as the document of an absent presence. Yet modernism is made strange in Johns's hands, turning inward on itself: Compare *Painting Bitten by a Man*,1961, a small canvas swathed in pasty gray encaustic that someone—the painter? a jealous spectator?—has visibly gnashed, with the previous year's *Painting with Two Balls*, a picture at once uproarious and ominous, glowering at the viewer with its two beady (ballsy) eyes. Although each artwork departs from the conventions of easel painting in arresting, sardonic ways, neither appears bent on negating the art of painting as such. In spite of its modest dimensions, *Painting Bitten by a Man* conjures both the title and subject of Nicolas Poussin's much larger *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648, in which death and hunger figure as key moments of the human tragicomedy—moments Johns evokes with comparable pathos. Likewise, for all its aping of boys-club humor (and/or AbEx misogyny), *Painting with Two Balls* is not simply, or even primarily, an in-joke. The painting skewers the Cedar Tavern crowd, but it points just as insistently toward Picasso, its titular balls echoing the insectoid eyes of Picasso's Seated Bather of 1930 (the work was acquired by MoMA in 1950; Johns cannot have missed it). Yet Johns's pantomime of sculptural figuration (balls into eyeballs) in *Painting with Two Balls* is at most a half measure, the gesture failing to negate the painting's status as such—as painting. And what a painting! Its balancing of vulgarity with equipoise—its explosive (but climaxless) play of color against color, the constant flickering between flatness and depth, the studied absence of order, the bloodless movement of the hand—takes us back to modernism's primal scenes of the 1870s: to Manet's Boating at Argentenil, 1874, for instance, or Cézanne's Bathers at Rest, 1876–77.

Something of Impressionism's combined anxiety and imperiousness survives in *Painting with Two Balls*, which boasts of virility while lacking, crucially, any hint of a phallus. The same two-sidedness is evident—indeed, is pivotal—in *Painting Bitten by a Man*, which enacts the rites of modernist self-abnegation in Beckett's despairing tone. The picture mimes screaming, but also choking (the painter gumming his throat with encaustic), conjuring bitings far removed from the dinner table. Yet *Painting Bitten by a Man* is equally lighthearted, even wryly comedic. The painting just is what it is, after all: Johns's humor is characteristically deadpan, deriving as much from John Cage as Manet. The bite mark effuses Cagean silence, saying nothing but containing—or rather, permitting—everything.

Jasper Johns, *Painting with Two Balls*, 1960, encaustic and collage on canvas, wooden balls, 65 x 54". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

ANYONE HOPING to resolve the contradictions of Johns's art is bound to fail: The ironist and the agonizer both answer to the name Jasper Johns. Defenders of Johns's oeuvre would do well to keep this ambiguity squarely in view. What Wagner calls the "terrifying, inevitable ambivalence" of national belonging is one part of Johns's legacy; so, too, is the ambivalence born of a guarded privacy—ambivalence about loving, remembering, and forgetting. Using a purpose-made rubber stamp, Johns declines unwanted solicitations with the terse apology REGRETS, JASPER JOHNS. The phrase is pathetic and comedic in equal measure, and meant to be read that way, no doubt.

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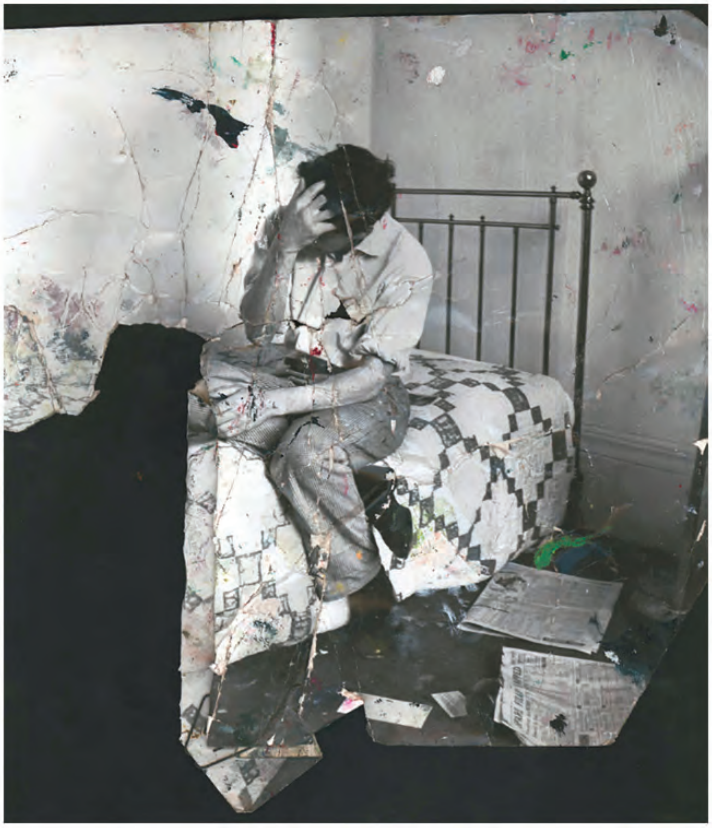
Again, Johns cannot be found in his art, but he haunts it nonetheless. Beyond reproach, he is hardly beyond sorrow: Two photographs recur in Johns's recent bodies of work, one depicting the painter Lucian Freud, alone, tormented, weeping on a bed, the other, taken from a 1965 issue of Life magazine, a young American officer in Vietnam bewailing the death of a comrade in arms. One imagines how both images might be linked in the painter's mind, joined by an ambivalence arising from different circumstances than *Flag*—not a young man's brushing against the grain of politics, but an older man's sounding the depths of his solitude. Yet the linkage is unmistakably Johnsian, connecting (and confusing) the private with the public, memory with history, art with war, emotion with silence. The enduring strangeness of Johns's art, its unsteady place in the American canon, has everything to do with this endless, bottomless equivocation: In a society governed by two contradictory fictions, proclaiming national unity and personal sovereignty with equal fervor, Johns expresses a rare skepticism of both. The last modernist, he has tarried with the negative to the bitter end.



Lucian Freud, 1964. Photo: John Deakin.

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History Museums in Poland

Stories from New Orleans

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Jason Farago on Jasper Johns

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A Flag Is a Flag Is a Flag

Jason Farago

Jasper Johns:
Catalogue Raisonné of
Painting and Sculpture
edited by Roberta Bernstein with Heidi Colsman-Freyberger, Caitlin Sweeney, and Betsy Stepina Zinn.
The Wildenstein Plattner Institute/
Yale University Press,
five volumes, 1,578 pp., $1,500.00

Jasper Johns: Redo an Eye
by Roberta Bernstein.
The Wildenstein Plattner Institute/
Yale University Press, 335 pp., $60.00

Jasper Johns:
"Something Resembling Truth"
an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, September 23–December 10, 2017; and the Broad, Los Angeles, February 10–May 13, 2018.
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Roberta Bernstein.
Royal Academy of Arts/
The Broad, 262 pp., $65.00

Jasper Johns:
Pictures within Pictures, 1980–2015
by Fiona Donovan.
Thames and Hudson, 288 pp., $60.00

A good mythology needs a Genesis story. For Jasper Johns, the dawn of creation came in the late fall of 1954, and was instigated not by divine revelation but something close to it: a vision in a dream. A year out of the army, asleep in a loft in lower Manhattan, Johns closed his eyes and saw the Stars and Stripes in the dark, not fluttering, not flying over a battlefield, but on an easel—and he was there, too, painting it. It's hard enough to remember a dream the next morning, let alone decades on, and Johns recounted his vision of himself painting a flag with slight variations in the decades that followed: he may or may not have told Robert Rauschenberg about it over breakfast. But the next day he was at work, and by the spring of 1955, he had completed the painting he had seen in his vision.

Flag now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art, and it is painting no. 5 in the enormous new catalogue raisonné of Jasper Johns, a five-volume monument to the most inscrutable figure in modern American art. The painting is five feet wide and three-and-a-half feet tall. A canvas of that size would have been too expensive for the young artist, so he took a bedsheet and stretched it across three wooden supports, one for the spangled canton, two for the stripes. He then applied layer after layer of enamel paint, but it took forever to dry, so he picked up a package of beeswax at a store around the corner from his Financial District loft. Melting the wax on his hot plate, stirring in oil paint and varnish, he produced a fast-drying encaustic that would yield a textured surface and would embalm collaged clippings from *The New York Times* and New York *Daily News*, a rag found on the street, and even a certificate of American citizenship. The stars, their points somewhat raggedy, cohered through the collaging of wax-dipped fragments, white or blue, along carefully penciled outlines.

Rachel Rosenthal/Rachel Rosenthal Lifetime Trust

Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Pearl Street, New York, 1954; photograph by Rachel Rosenthal

Johns would go on to paint or draw more than three dozen flags. *White Flag*, painted in the summer of 1955 and now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is larger, ten feet by six and a half, and the flag pattern remains perceptible beneath its whited-out surface thanks to the collaged papers and a subtle use of charcoal. *Gray Flag*, from 1957, is even closer to a monochrome. There were double flags and triple flags, flags with forty-eight stars and flags with fifty, flags made from encaustic and oil paint and pastel and in one case Sculp-Metal, a medium for hobbyists that, as the ads went, "models like clay—hardens into metal!" One flag, drawn in ashy graphite, has sixty-four stars: an error Johns didn't catch until he'd finished the drawing, and decided not to correct.

The painted flags are all accounted for in the Johns catalogue raisonné, which comprises three volumes of documentation of his paintings and sculptures; a one-volume bibliography; and a monograph by the art historian Roberta Bernstein, also available as a single book under the title *Jasper Johns: Redo an Eye*. (Johns's complex, often extraordinary prints are omitted; a catalogue raisonné of those was published in 1994, and a new one of Johns's monotypes was published last year. A multi-volume catalogue raisonné of his drawings is in the works.) Six of the flags were also on view this fall at the Royal Academy in London, where Bernstein and the curator Edith Devaney organized "Jasper Johns: 'Something Resembling Truth,'" a stately recapitulation of sixty years of Johns's sphinx-like signs and symbols. One of the flag paintings on view, a fifty-starred beauty from 1967, belongs to Eli and Edythe Broad; the show is now on view, in an expanded form, at their private museum in Los Angeles. An even more substantial showcase is in the works: the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art will present an unprecedented two-part retrospective of Johns's entire career in 2020.

I saw "Something Resembling Truth" in London this past October, and, especially abroad, the flags were hard to take. Johns's ambivalent American paintings, equipoised between image and object, invention and preexistence, have long confounded art historians and critics—unsure of whether they stand for the United States and what sort of political orientation Johns imagined for them. (Only once, for a 1969 poster for the Moratorium Committee

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to End the War in Vietnam, did Johns produce a flag with a clear partisan aim. It had green and black stripes and an orange canton.) It has also become a commonplace, in the sixty years since Johns painted the first *Flag*, for critics to bewail how much wider the gap has grown between the ideals of America and the country's brutal realities. But no critic until this past year has had to contend with Johns's flags when the very survival of the American republic was in doubt, and when America's economic power, cultural influence, and geopolitical clout were so clearly in decline. The mythology of Jasper Johns, after all, has always been predicated on the primacy of American art as the postwar successor to European modernism—and critics will have to reckon anew with postwar American art if American primacy becomes a thing of the past.

How much has changed, politically, historically, aesthetically, since Johns's dream? And how best to come to grips with him? The Royal Academy show proposed a thematic study, opening with a remarkable trio of paintings—a *Target* from 1961, the crosshatched *Within* from 1983, and the barren, agglutinative interior scene *Racing Thoughts*, from the same year—and then presented about 150 works grouped by themes of time, objects, the seasons, and memory. I suspect, however, that the just-the-facts style of a catalogue raisonné—what was painted, in what order, out of what materials; where was it shown, by whom was it acquired, and where is it now—actually offers a better introduction to his poker-faced art. Johns has been a favorite subject of philosophers of aesthetics, psychoanalytically engaged critics, and queer theorists with a detective streak, but his art resists disentanglement, and his signs and symbols never fully reflect any biographical source or intellectual underpinning. ("I don't know how to have thoughts," he told *The Guardian* in 2004.) Even Johns's disclosure of the dream of *Flag* offers just the barest of revelations. The painting may have sprung from his deepest unconscious, but what does that reveal, other than that even he cannot say what it means?

Johns was born in 1930 in Augusta, Georgia; he had a difficult childhood. His parents divorced when he was two, and he grew up among an extended family in segregated South Carolina. At twelve, months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he won a statewide scrap metal drive, the prize for which was a new American flag for his school.

As a child he had little exposure to art, but he drew incessantly, and before he was out of his teens his teachers encouraged him to go to New York, where he enrolled at Parsons, then dropped out, did odd jobs, and barely got by. He saw the art of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and the other Abstract Expressionists before being drafted in 1951. He served for two years, though never in Korea; most of his service took place back in South Carolina, at Fort Jackson, where he trained in heavy artillery and organized art exhibitions on the base, including of his own (now destroyed) work.

Back in New York, he worked nights as a clerk in a bookstore that specialized in art publications, and he saw countless exhibitions, as well as performances by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The leading galleries were still dominated by Abstract Expressionism. In Willem de Kooning's garish squiggles, Newman's abstemious zips, and the last of Pollock's trickles, advanced American painting took the form of confident, gestural nonobjectivity. Johns has often been misread as the gravedigger of Abstract Expressionism, and he and Rauschenberg were frequently called "neo-Dadaists," a misnomer that stemmed from their interest in everyday objects and a dissolution of the distinction between art and life. In fact, Johns had an only cursory knowledge of Dada in the early 1950s, and would not meet Marcel Duchamp until the end of the decade. He was, however, a keen student of de Kooning, Newman, and particularly Jack Tworkov, whose brushy gestures were more contained and reserved than de Kooning's and Pollock's blasts. Yet Johns found that he couldn't perform Abstract Expressionism's emotional theatrics; he was too reserved for that. "I didn't want my work to be an exposure of my feelings," he explained in 1973. A work of art, for the young Johns, had to have meaning and importance independent of the artist's personality.

A flag is two-dimensional, abstract in most cases, and, unless you are Nepalese, rectangular. But had it not been for the Ab-Exers' practice of decentralizing compositional elements into an all-over pattern, Johns might never have dreamed—literally and metaphorically—of depicting the Stars and Stripes across the entirety of the picture plane, such that *Flag*, as the art historian Fred Orton has written, "both represents its subject and is the subject represented." The breakthrough of the flag, in other words, was not that it depicted a preexisting object as if it were an abstraction. Rather, it vitiated the whole distinction between pictures and objects; the symbol and the materials that constituted it were one and the same. In the catalogue raisonné Bernstein cunningly refers to this first painting as both *Flag* and "the flag," in lowercase and without italics, as if to reaffirm its hybrid status. The same equivocal position would hold with Johns's subsequent targets and maps, all of which, as she writes, "seemed to blatantly renounce the viability of the dominant abstract mode."

"Things the mind already knows," as the artist called them, were Johns's escape routes from the dead end of gestural abstraction, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s he would rely on familiar symbols or everyday objects to dismantle expectations of unitary meaning, and personal expressivity too. The digits 0 through 9, painted in encaustic or stenciled in sequential grids, take on abstract form even as they still express numerical values, though in a few paintings, such as *0 Through 9* (1960), the ten digits are overlaid upon one another, their curves and straight edges just barely intelligible amid red, orange, and light-blue stains.

He also turned to sculpture, casting bronze lightbulbs and flashlights, or molding cans of beer or his own brushes in a coffee can, then painting the surfaces to create uncanny replicas. Like the flags and targets, these were not straight readymades in the manner of Marcel Duchamp's bicycle wheel, bottle rack, or urinal, which Johns saw for the first time around 1958; they were, instead, sculptures that took the *form* of preexisting objects. Johns's anti-illusionism also led him to treat paintings as objects in themselves, either by attaching rulers and dragging them across the surface, or by splitting a composition across multiple canvases and emphasizing the spaces between them. Objects in the real world became art (but works of art remained objects) through a sequence of undefined procedures, as expressed in Johns's most mythologized formulation: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it."

One part of Johns's career that was not mythologized until recently was his relationship with Robert Rauschenberg—his collaborator, his studio mate, his first great critic, and his lover, though even today museums

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and books are sometimes loath to say so. Rauschenberg was nearly five years older, divorced, with a son. When they met he'd already shown at Betty Parsons Gallery, and he had befriended Cunningham and John Cage during his second stint at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which he attended with his first male lover, Cy Twombly. Johns was cerebral, taciturn. Rauschenberg never stopped talking.

The wall text at the Royal Academy primly disclosed that Johns and Rauschenberg "traded ideas and saw each other every day." Yet the love and cooperation of Rauschenberg, as much as anything, catalyzed Johns's whole career. In 1954, Rauschenberg was already somewhat established; Johns was not, and his decision to destroy or disclaim everything he'd made beforehand can't be divorced from his intellectual and emotional intertwining with a man also committed to treating paintings as objects. The first painting in the catalogue raisonné—that is to say, the earliest surviving work Johns claims as his own—is a very Rauschenbergian combine, in which a plaster death mask sits nestled in a box beneath a yellowed newspaper collage.

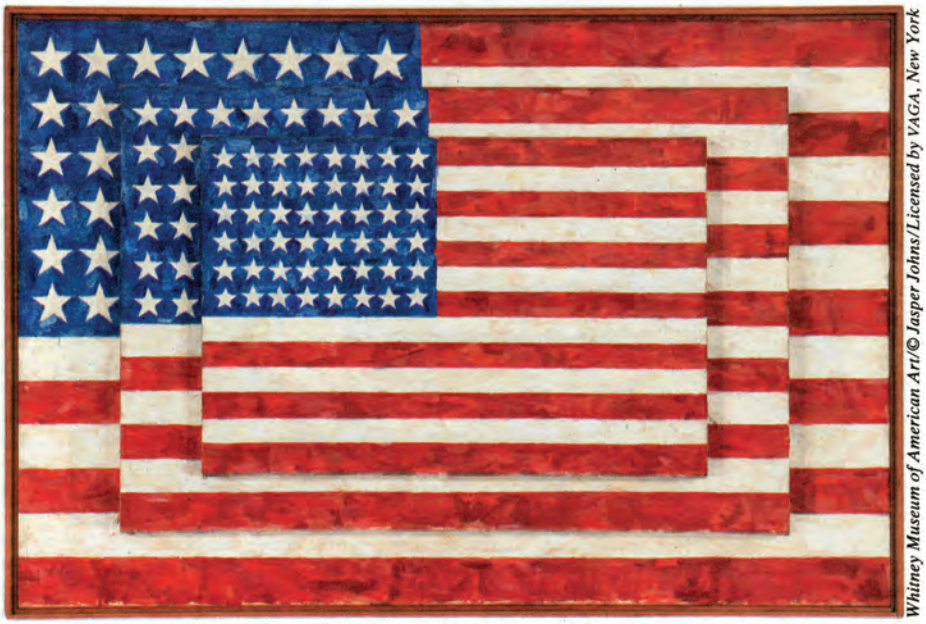
This was fifteen years before Stonewall. To be out was a dangerous thing, and even gossip could ruin you. And yet amid this stifling atmosphere Johns and his lover emerged as the most important artists of the decade, the successors to egoistic Abstract Expressionists whose violent spills and gashes read as performances of extreme masculinity. By 1965, readers of *Esquire* were offered the caustic assessment of the critic Harold Rosenberg that "a feature of the past four or five years has been the banding together of homosexual painters and their nonpainting auxiliaries in music, writing and museum work."

Johns has never enjoyed making public disclosures, in his paintings or in the press, and he has at times bridled when critics have focused on his sexuality. (When Jill Johnston, the *Village Voice* dance critic and one of America's first out gay journalists, published her psychosexual biography *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information* in 1996, he denied her requests to reproduce his work.) His discretion has at times led scholars to treat homosexuality as a skeleton key that unlocks each of his hermetic puzzles. But not every hinge attaches to a closet door, and sometimes a target's bull's-eye is just a bull's-eye.

Surely there's a third way between overreliance on biography and the downright closeting that still sometimes attends Johns, as seen in "Dancing Around the Bride," a Duchamp-themed exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2012, which barely disclosed that Johns, Rauschenberg, Cunningham, and Cage were not just four gay men but two couples. Robert Storr, in a pleasantly hyperbolic essay in the Royal Academy/Broad catalog, reckons with Johns's sexuality while acknowledging that one can be reserved without being unsexed. After all, as Storr writes, "Johns's works include some of the most explicit depictions of male genitalia in contemporary American art." A flaccid green penis appears within one of the hinged boxes of *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), which forced Alfred Barr to pass on acquiring it for MoMA. The crosshatched *Tantric Detail III* (1981), displayed at the Royal Academy, features both a partial skull and a cartoonishly symmetrical scrotum, centered on the painting's vertical axis and stippled with short black and white hairs. (A related drawing is now at the Broad.) That theme is evoked more metaphorically in the naughty *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), in which an all-over, nearly Abstract Expressionist surface of warm-colored camouflage gets gashed apart, the slit held open by a pair of wooden spheres.

"He may be among the most solitary, and often saturnine, artists alive," Storr writes. Yet even this least forthcoming of artists could not restrain his emotions in 1961 when he and Rauschenberg broke up. That December Johns exhibited four paintings at Leo Castelli Gallery, on a single wall. They were all gray monochromes, one of them stenciled with the word LIAR, another affixed with two lead letters that spelled NO. The largest, just about the same size as the 1954–1955 *Flag*, was *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, comprising two canvas panels joined by hinges (a Duchamp quotation), their surfaces masked by mournful, dripping splashes of gray. "My quietness has a man in it," begins O'Hara's poem, its title stenciled at the bottom of the composition. Three quarters of the painting include visible brushstrokes, but one quarter, the top-left canton, is scrubbed almost clean. It is a flag, obliterated.

In one of his very first interviews, Johns proposed that "looking at a painting should not require a special kind of focus like going to church. A picture ought to be looked at the same way you look at a radiator." A painting, both as a picture and as an object, should be comprehensible in itself, and any further explication was just critical onanism—a point he underlined with his obnoxious sculpture *The Critic Sees* (1961), a brick embedded with eyeglasses behind which we discover not scrutinizing eyes but jabbering mouths. Yet even by 1961, with *In Memory of My Feelings* (on view at the Broad; the Royal Academy made do with a study), Johns was embedding within his compositions literary references, symbolic riddles (a fork and a spoon nuzzled into each other), citations of his own earlier works, and discreet personal disclosures. The flags continued into the 1960s; the numbers have ticked



Jasper Johns: Three Flags, *1958*

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along into this millennium. But as both the catalogue raisonné and "Something Resembling Truth" confirmed, by the 1960s Johns's painting, sculpture, and printmaking had shifted into another key, and its principal concern was no longer art's ontological status (*what is it?*) but its elaboration through symbols and within history (*what does it mean?*).

The crosshatched paintings of the 1970s are fugues played on the ruins of modernism, their homogenous scores and nicks repeating and shifting across the canvas, and often obscuring designs beneath. Bernstein notes that the crosshatchings are the first Johns paintings that can be properly called abstract, though they are more like drawings than the gestural abstractions of Pollock or Tworkov, and they bristle with citations from Matisse, Picasso, the Surrealists, and other early-twentieth-century figures. Later he found a surprising resonance in an artist he loved: Edvard Munch, whose late *Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed* includes a bedspread articulated through abstract hatches of red and black. A suite of paintings titled *Between the Clock and the Bed* begun in 1981 (two of which were in the Royal Academy) retains the all-over crosshatching of the 1970s works, but the thin parallel lines, picked out with haloes of ghostly white, are cast in a more anxious, Nordic register.

Mortality was not a new theme for Johns—*In Memory of My Feelings* was initially titled *A Dead Man*, and *Arrive/Depart* (1963–1964) includes an imprint of a skull. Munch, however, seems to have led Johns to a new engagement with death, one that deepened amid the first awful years of the AIDS epidemic. Strictly representational elements start to appear in the 1980s, first in the skulls and scrota of the *Tantric Details*, and then in newly representational tableaux that incorporated Surrealist symbolism and spatial organization, as well as source materials or quotations from his earlier work painted as trompe-l'oeil clippings or posters. *Racing Thoughts* (1983), which opened the Royal Academy show but is absent from the Broad, is a prime example: it features a jigsaw puzzle of Leo Castelli, a lithograph by Barnett Newman, a cheap poster of the Mona Lisa (Duchamp again), a vase by the "mad potter" George Ohr, and a skull and crossbones from a Swiss poster warning of avalanches—all of which are integrated into a half-representational, half-abstract composition tied together with an obscure outline of a detail from Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece.

Hard to interpret, fiendish to translate into words, these later paintings present an introverted formality that makes them tough to love. The art historian Fiona Donovan, in her new book, *Jasper Johns: Pictures within Pictures, 1980–2015*, makes a valiant effort to elevate the last three decades of Johns's career, which she presents in humanistic terms far removed from the ontological games he played in the 1950s and 1960s. "His art of the 1980s and 1990s," she writes, "has a dignified, timeless, interior character that suggests a corrective to the political moralizing and self-exposure rampant in the United States at that time." Possibly so. But I don't think the problem with late Johns is his *froideur* so much as the bluntness of his citations, whether in googly eyes borrowed from Picasso or in his own flags and coffee cans, and their easy equation to an interiority Johns doesn't really divulge.

The best of Johns's later works are his *Catenary* paintings, begun in 1997, in which strings hang in front of principally gray compositions framed with trompe-l'oeil wood and enlivened with astronomical imagery; the catenaries, suspended from two points and shaped by gravity, continue a Duchampian concern with measurement that harkens to Johns's ruler-scraped canvases of the early 1960s. Too often, though, his recent art falls into pastiche, and occasions only an undemanding hunt for the greatest hits of his back catalog. The newest work in "Something Resembling Truth," an untitled blue composition from 2016, has a painted ruler rather than a real one; the astronomical clippings from the *Catenaries* are back; and the Picasso googly eyes have been rounded and simplified so that they look like zeros. Johns's tropes have themselves become, this late in the game, "things the mind already knows." And yet still there is invention, as in his cheerless, Apollonian series *Regrets*, begun in 2012, which transmutes an old photograph of Lucian Freud into slabs of black and hidden skulls.

In 2008, on the occasion of his all-gray retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Johns told *The New York Times* that "artists today know more. They are aware of the market more than they once were. There seems to be something in the air that art is commerce itself." And he was right. Young artists, thrust into an art world richer than ever (and a New York where studios, indeed where studio apartments, are now largely out of reach), have had no choice but to get smart about the economics of art. The result has been that any remaining formalist commitment to the autonomy of painting or sculpture is now well and truly dead; these days, the white cube offers no escape from the world outside.

Johns was himself one of the undertakers of an autonomous sphere of art, so central to the development of modernism. He invited you to salute his flags or shoot arrows at his targets when most of New York still defended art for art's sake. Art's use value and exchange value were also on his mind when he made his painted sculptures of beer cans, after de Kooning snapped, apropos Castelli, that "you could give that son-of-a-bitch two beer cans and he could sell them." But there are relative degrees of autonomy and contingency, and as Johns himself admits, the artists that have followed him work amid commercial conditions he never had to face. To anyone under forty, the autonomy he disclaimed looks more and more like a lost privilege, a luxury we would give anything to regain.

Is it a painting or is it a flag? The question sounds practically quaint sixty years on—when art is encountered more and more on touchscreens and in social feeds, and when the market and other art institutions have more power than any philosopher to answer that question. Johns found a way to make a painting both a picture and an object. Today every single painting has that double role, and must function, as the art historian David Joselit has argued, as "a dynamic form that arises out of circulation." It was that, more than any heartsickness for lost American ideals, that hit me hardest when I stared down Johns's painting of a fifty-starred flag in London, and then peeked at the label to see which billionaire owned it. Anything in an art gallery is an object, an image, but an asset above all—those are things the mind already knows. □

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Arts&Leisure

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2018

Jasper Johns in his studio in Sharon, Conn. He is famously elusive, and his humor tends toward the sardonic.

ANDREW WHITE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Circling Jasper Johns

At 87, the artist still refuses to discuss the meaning of his work, now the focus of 'Something Resembling Truth,' a retrospective at the Broad museum in Los Angeles.

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

LOS ANGELES — Not long ago, Jasper Johns, who is now 87 and widely regarded as America's foremost living artist, was reminiscing about his childhood in small-town South Carolina. One day when he was in the second grade, a classmate named Lottie Lou Oswald misbehaved and was summoned to the front of the room. As the teacher reached for a wooden ruler and prepared to paddle her, Lottie Lou grabbed the ruler from the teacher's hand and broke it in

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half. Her classmates were stunned.

"It was absolutely wonderful," Mr. Johns told me, appearing to relish the memory of the girl's defiance. A ruler, an instrument of the measured life, had become an accessory to rebellion.

I thought of the anecdote the other day in Los Angeles, at the Broad museum's beautiful retrospective, "Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth." Coincidentally or not, several of the paintings in the show happen to have rulers affixed to their surfaces. It would be foolish, of course, to view Mr. Johns's story about the brazen schoolgirl and the broken ruler as the source for those paintings. But is it fair to describe the anecdote as a haunting, an experience that lodged deeply in his brain while a thousand others were promptly forgotten?

Mr. Johns himself is loath to offer biographical interpretations of his work — or any interpretations, for that matter. He is famously elusive, and his humor tends toward the sardonic. He once joked that, of the dozens of books that have been written about his art, his favorite one was written in Japanese. What he liked is that he could not understand it.

The Broad show, which remains on view through May 13 and covers six decades, offers a relatively intimate glimpse at his work. In a welcome departure from curatorial convention, the exhibition is organized

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thematically rather than chronologically. You come to see how the American flags and targets that remain Mr. Johns's most acclaimed motifs are no more persistent than other motifs and themes, including forks and spoons, unsettling images of the human body broken into fragments and the drama of a muted self unable to express its needs.

He says outright that he does not have faith in the process of memory, insisting it is less likely to disclose truths than to twist them. One of his frequent rejoinders is, "Interesting, if true," in response to statements of incontestable fact.

On the other hand, he seems to enjoy the process of weighing facts and evidence, even while acknowledging their limitations. Or, as he put it: "I've always said I would like to be a judge."

One thing that Mr. Johns understood at an early age is that language and truth are not the same. Growing up in the South, at a time when its citizens saw no contradiction between the cultivation of perfect table manners and the barbarism of segregation, he was well aware that people were not always logical. Born in 1930, Mr. Johns was the only son of an alcoholic farmer and a mother accustomed to hardship. His parents divorced in 1933, by which time he had been sent to live with his paternal grandfather, the first of many painful dislocations in his childhood. "I was a good guest," he said, without rancor. "I was always a guest."

Asked if he plans to travel to Los Angeles to see his new show, Mr. Johns replied solemnly, "I am not going anywhere." This is not entirely surprising. He has no great passion for travel. His friends say that he prefers to wake up in his own bed in Sharon, Conn., amid the familiarity of his rambling country estate, to eat tomatoes and lettuce he picks from his garden, to know that he is no longer a guest.

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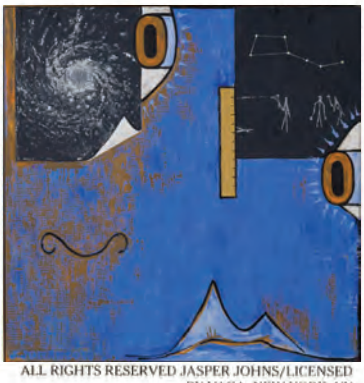

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Jasper Johns in his studio, a converted barn in Sharon, Conn. Above, a beloved Johns work, "Three Flags" (1958), one of his many American flag paintings. Right, "Painting with Ruler and 'Gray'" (1960), top, and a 2016 untitled work. "Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth," a retrospective at the Broad museum in Los Angeles, also includes "Between the Clock and the Bed" (1981), center left.

THE IDEA FOR the current show originated with Roberta Bernstein, an art historian whose scholarship on Mr. Johns assumed magisterial proportions last year, with the publication of a five-volume catalogue raisonné of his paintings and sculptures. She was joined in assembling the Broad show by Joanne Heyler, the museum's founding director; and Ed Schad, a curator and critic. The threesome visited Mr. Johns at his home in November, after sending him an elaborate Gatorfoam-board model of their installation. They wanted to ensure that he was happy or at least not miserable about the show's accents and emphases, which include the flashy and rather L.A. idea of opening with as many flag paintings as they could gather.

Happily, the idea works. The show gets off to an ebullient start in a gallery ringed by 10 works that relate to American flags but differ in ways that are fun to observe. Masterpieces abound, including a 1958 "Flag" done in Mr. Johns's signature wax-based pigment; "Ventriloquist" (1983), whose double flags give primacy to the secondary colors of green and orange; and the Whitney Museum's beloved "Three Flags" (1958), with its successively smaller painted panels stacked like the layers of a cake. As you move through the gallery, you start to think less about flags than about Mr. Johns's precise and patient process, the way he savors mark-making, constructing his images with the tactile lushness that Cézanne brought to his scenes of French bathers a century earlier. Perhaps Mr. Johns painted the American flag because he wanted to Americanize Cézanne, or conversely, to Cézanne-ify America.

Of course, back in the McCarthy-shadowed 1950s, Mr. Johns's flags were often assumed to be freighted with political innuendo. I recently looked up the minutes from a Museum of Modern Art acquisitions committee meeting in 1958. It was surprising to see how much curators fretted over whether to purchase the painting "Flag" (1954-5) for the museum's collection. According to the minutes, the museum's curator, William Lieberman, worried that the painting "might expose MoMA to attack from the American Legion or other chauvinistic groups."

The artist does not have faith in the process of memory. 'Interesting, if true' is a frequent rejoinder.

Alfred Barr, MoMA's founding director, tried to reassure him that the painting was not anti-American. Mr. Johns, he insisted, was an "elegantly-dressed Southerner who disclaimed any unpatriotic intentions, and

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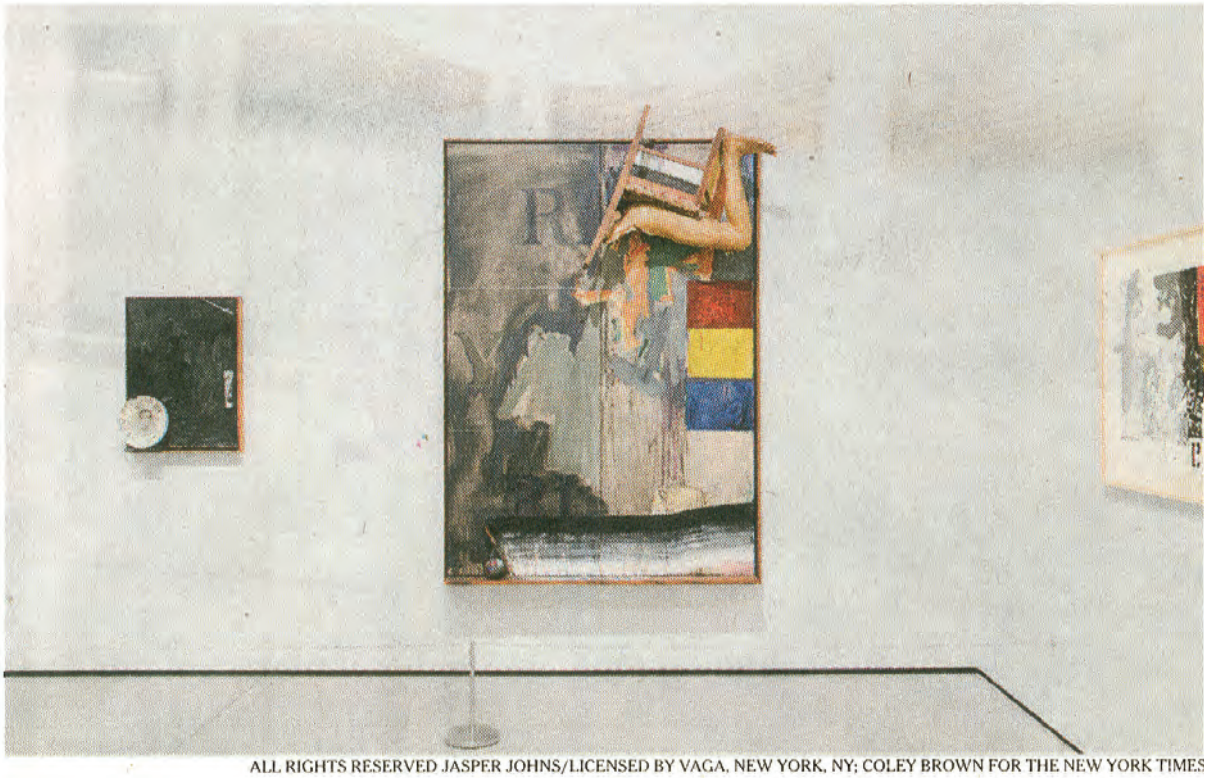

in fact, insisted he had only the warmest feelings toward the American flag." Nevertheless, Mr. Barr postponed acquiring the painting, opting to purchase three others that he viewed as politically safer choices (two targets and a numerals painting).

In explaining the source for his flag paintings, Mr. Johns has always said the same thing. The idea came to him in a dream. He does not care to elaborate, or to indulge in dream analysis.

Certainly, it is relevant that he came of age at a time when Abstract Expressionism, the house style of the New York avant-garde, was running out of steam. Younger artists who claimed to be embarked on a quest for spiritual authenticity were turning out gestural abstractions that looked more like imitation de Koonings.

Mr. Johns's early flags and targets, as everyone now knows, rewrote postwar American art by repudiating most everything about Ab Ex — the splashy emotionalism, the metaphysical longings, the well-rehearsed enactments of agony and ecstasy played out against the quaint bohemian backdrop of 10th Street and the Cedar Tavern.

Mr. Johns's early flags were radical because they did just the opposite. Instead of turning private feelings into bland public statements, he claimed public symbols for the realm of inwardness and private experience. Viewers were puzzled by his apparent lack of interest in communicating a higher truth in the usual sense. His goal, it seemed, was less to convey a message than to circle cryptically around it.

The sculptor Richard Serra put it as well as anyone when he recently told me: "What Johns did was he presented a new model. There was an abrupt shift. It was sort of like the Beatles kicking out Elvis."

The Broad show, a version of which was first seen at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in the fall, freely mixes work from different decades, sometimes on the same wall. It implicitly argues that Mr. Johns's later paintings and occasional sculptures can hold their own beside the dazzle of his early works. The paintings in his "Catenary" series, which date from the late 1990s, look especially strong. Most are large, horizontal, gray-hued works that vaguely resemble a blackboard, with an actual string suspended in a U-shape from their top corners. The paintings feel both intimate and vast. Their trademark curved string evokes the anatomical (a breast); the architectural (the span of a bridge); and the cosmic. They have a calm, summing-up feeling, and the slight movements of the string somehow add to their sense of enveloping stillness.

Mr. Johns is a formidable presence, six feet tall, with a large, craggy face and watchful eyes. He describes his health as moderate to fair, and you can tell that his knees torment him when he stands up from a chair. On most days, he can be found in his studio, tailed by his dog, Dougal, a wiry mutt who might have some greyhound in him, and who arrived from the Caribbean islands two years ago, as a gift from a friend.

Indeed, Mr. Johns has no shortage of devoted friends who have known him for decades. Nonetheless, his friends — much like his viewers — can be kept on edge by his remove. Nearly everyone agrees that certain topics reliably engage him, such as gardening and cooking, but that attempts to discuss the meaning of his work with him will bring on instantaneous silence.

Mr. Johns, who lives alone and has no apparent heirs, made news last fall when it was revealed that his house and property will eventually serve as an artist's retreat. The Sharon zoning commission voted unanimously in September to approve the request. It is hardly Mr. Johns's first philan-

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Mr. Johns with his dog, Dougal, in Connecticut. Three Johns works, top, from left, "Souvenir" (1964), "Watchman" (1964) and "Passage I" (1966) at the Broad retrospective. Left, "Spring" (1986).

thropic undertaking. In 1963, he and the musician John Cage founded the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in Manhattan. Just last month, the organization announced its latest raft of grant recipients, some 19 artists who will each receive $40,000. Mr. Johns's planned residency program in Connecticut, by contrast, will provide up to 24 artists at a time with three-month stays in rustic barns and outbuildings on Mr. Johns's property. Meals will be communal, in the main house.

Mr. Johns is predictably tight-lipped about his philanthropy, which has always focused on supporting younger artists. The main reason he agreed to cooperate with the Broad on the exhibition, he said, is the chance it represents to reach young viewers. "I like that the show is free," he told me.

I was sorry to have to break the news to him. An adult ticket for "Something Resembling Truth" costs $25. There is no discount for students at all. To be sure, the Broad continues to offer free access to its third-floor galleries, which house the permanent collection. But there is a charge for so-called special exhibitions.

"I don't think I knew that," Mr. Johns said, appearing perturbed. "I didn't register that, because I was told that it was a free museum. I have always loved that idea. Haven't you seen my 'Free Leonardo' button? I sometimes wear it. I think it was designed by Richard Hamilton when they were arguing in London."

Realizing at an early age that language and truth are not the same.

Indeed, Mr. Hamilton, the ingenious British artist, designed the button in 1998. It was part of a campaign against museum entry fees held during London's "museum week" in May of that year. It seemed a little puzzling that Mr. Johns would want to wear the button so many years after the protest had ended.

But then Leonardo da Vinci was one of the first masters that Mr. Johns admired. He was especially captivated by the "Deluge" drawings, their swirling eddies of black chalk giving form to natural disasters. Leonardo drew them toward the end of his life, when his head was filled with apocalyptic visions of torrential floods destroying whole towns and even mountains.

When he was in his mid-30s, Mr. Johns had a chance to actually see the drawings. They're housed at the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. Kenneth Clark, the art historian, helped him gain access to the queen's collection.

Was it an exciting experience? "Yes," he replied with typical terseness, and a little laugh, "except that they looked exactly like the reproductions."

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Los Angeles Times

Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC | FEB 09, 2018 | 11:35 AM

Jasper Johns is an iconic iconoclast. Working at cross-purposes has certainly been productive: At 87, he is among our greatest living artists.

Jasper Johns, "Target," 1961, encaustic and collage on canvas (The Broad)

In graphics, sculptures and especially paintings made over the course of more than 60 years, his work has doggedly torn apart cherished artistic assumptions while managing at the same time to convey profound, often tender regard for them. Death, the specter of mortality, is here essential to making art that lives.

The much-anticipated survey of Johns' career at the Broad in downtown Los Angeles opens with a marvelous example — one of his best-known. "Painting With Two Balls" (1960) is a gleeful Neo-Dada joke.

Johns inserted two golf-ball-size spheres into a space pried open between two of its three colorful, vigorously brushed abstract panels. Mocking Abstract Expressionism, for a decade art's dominant language, the painting takes literally the macho New York School demand for a "ballsy" art.

You want a painting with balls? Here's one.

It's also much more than that. Whether in his images of the American flag, the map of the United States, targets, numbers or letters of the alphabet, Johns never just paints one-liners. The gap where the balls are inserted reveals what lurks behind painted gestures — which is to say: nothing, save for the mundane wall on which the painted object hangs.

Knight, Christopher. "Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close." *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 2018.

Jasper Johns, "Painting With Two Balls," 1961, encaustic (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times)

"Painting With Two Balls" began with a layer of torn newspaper pages, physically shredding topicality as the painting's foundation. On top of the collage element, brushwork is applied edge to edge with what could be called "delicate energy." A flurry of ragged, peppy strokes in rainbow hues — plus black, white and gray — is rendered through evident gestures of the wrist and forearm but without the action of the entire body.

Johns doesn't put his entire body into the action of painting for a simple reason: The painting is the body.

At just over 5 feet high and 4 feet wide, the object corresponds to the physical presence of a viewer standing before it. Mixing pigment into wax — an encaustic technique traced to ancient Egypt, though rarely employed in contemporary art — creates a lumpy, optically veiled surface. All the tropes of Abstract Expressionism seem to be embalmed, like something from Madame Tussauds. No wonder those North African ancients chose encaustic specifically for mummy portraits.

The painting's title and the artist's signature hug the breadth of the bottom edge, spelled out in machine-stenciled letters that negate this most intimately tailored sign of the artist's hand. As if to emphasize the distinction, the only hand-rendered element is the date, 1960 — a personalized marker in time. Like the two balls squeezed into the painting, the year is wedged in between the title and the signature.

It's thrilling to watch the thoroughness with which Johns works his way through the conventions of then-dominant Abstract Expressionist painting, dismantling them one by one and remaking them into something new and unforeseen. What the critic Clement Greenberg championed as "American-type painting" to distinguish it from European abstraction before World War II, Johns proceeded to create as U.S. flags and national maps.

What's the difference between a painting of a flag or map and an actual flag or map? Nothing, really. Together with Robert Rauschenberg, his romantic partner at the time, Johns launched a critique of pure abstraction that changed art's direction.

A flag and a map are abstractions — but not exactly in the way critics or artists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman might mean. So is a target, which in Johns' hands fused the competing wings of Abstract Expressionism with "gestural geometry." And if avant-garde art downgraded figurative painting to a minor rank below abstract art, what was one to do with paintings of numbers — which is to say, figures — that epitomize abstraction?

These and other wry aspects of Johns' remarkable work unfold throughout the exhibition.

Knight, Christopher. "Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close." *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 2018.

Jasper Johns, "Three Flags (detail)," 1958, encaustic on canvas (The Broad)

Jasper Johns, "Flashlight III," 1958 (cast 1987), bronze (The Broad)

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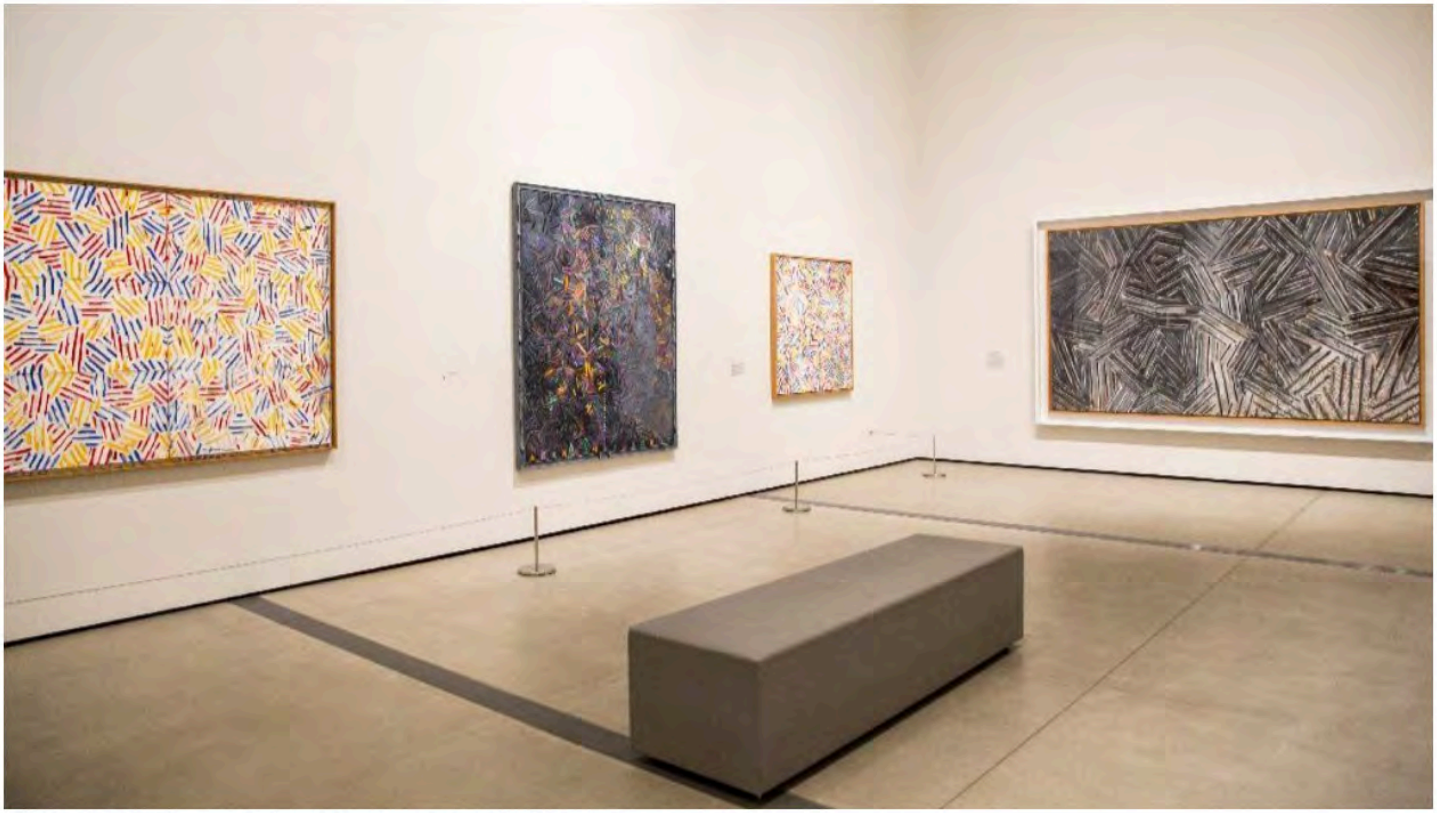

Eight "crosshatch" paintings are in the Jasper Johns survey at the Broad. (Kent Nishimura /Los Angeles Times)

Initially organized for London's Royal Academy of Art last fall by curator Edith Devaney and art historian Roberta Bernstein, whose five-volume catalogue raisonné of the artist's work was published last year by Yale, it is presented here by Joanne Heyler and Ed Schad, the Broad's director and curator, respectively. It's slightly trimmed — more than 120 works, rather than 150 or so in London — and sometimes a bit crowded in galleries not as ample as those at the Royal Academy. Regardless, it's not to be missed.

The show is not a retrospective. (The Philadelphia Museum of Art and New York's Whitney Museum are jointly organizing a retrospective for 2020.) Too many major examples are missing for that.

Among them are the big, color "Map," which would have been great to see paired with the darkly magnificent gray version loaned by the Broad's downtown neighbor, the Museum of Contemporary Art; "Diver," a poetic eulogy to writer Hart Crane, with the artist's hands literally diving into a blackened sea of charcoal and pigment; and "Target With Four Faces," a mixed-media work that juxtaposes a red-yellow-blue bull's-eye with four three-dimensional casts of an eyeless face. All are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Also absent is "Painted Bronze/Ale Cans," the tabletop sculpture of two cans of Ballantine Ale, one sealed (and presumably full) and the other opened (and visibly empty). The sculpture, an intoxicating conundrum, presents identical imitations of an actual beer can that also copy each other — except, of course, for that minor problem of whether an industrially mass-produced copy is empty or full.

Ancient Greek sculptures were also painted, and it was Plato and Aristotle who first argued over the relative merits of art as imitation. (I like thinking of the philosophers as disputatious beer cans.) In an exquisite group of Johns' small, densely modeled and darkly patinated bronze sculptures of light bulbs and flashlights, vaporous ideas

Knight, Christopher. "Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close." *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 2018.

Jasper Johns, "Untitled, " 1975. Oil and encaustic on canvas (The Broad)

pretending to illuminate the darkness are batted down.

"No ideas but in things," as poet William Carlos Williams put it. Another sculpture of painted bronze paintbrushes stuffed into a painted bronze coffee can seals the deal, exalting ordinary stuff in an artist's studio.

So there is plenty here to like — including individual stunners like "False Start" and "Fool's House," which embody the anxiety of an artist in the studio faced with a blank canvas, plus a roomful of eight so-called "crosshatch" paintings and drawings. Their obsessive patterning of parallel lines is typically used by graphic artists to represent light and space, which actually shimmers in Johns' paintings.

Knight, Christopher. "Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close." *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 2018.

Jasper Johns, "Fool's House, " 1961-62. Oil on canvas with broom, sculptural towel, stretcher and cup (The Broad)

The survey is thematic, which is also illuminating. Eight sections examine such topics as "Painting as Object" and "Time and Transience." Works from different decades and in various media are assembled to demonstrate career-long preoccupations. By the last gallery you'll have a pretty good handle on a famously inscrutable body of work.

The highlight of a section on art and language, for example, is the 1976 artists' book, "Foirades / Fizzles," featuring five enigmatic text fragments in French and English by Samuel Beckett and 33 prints by Johns. Beckett's writing alludes to people and places in earlier books and plays, while Johns does something similar with fragments of other art a viewer will likely have encountered elsewhere in the show. Art's world lives outside conventional time and space.

Johns' work went through a bit of a rough patch in the decade between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, when the paintings took a deeply inward, almost claustrophobic turn. Paintings that borrow fragments from Picasso or center on an eccentric puzzle- shape seem obscure for no productive reason.

In the wake of his compelling 1996 MoMA retrospective, however, he pulled out of the slump by starting over. In large, elegant, uncluttered canvases that feature a simple length of string, Johns cleared his paintings' decks.

The suspended string, attached at either end to wooden slats leaning out into space from the framing edge, forms a graceful catenary arch in front of the painted surface. Shadows of the curved line traverse the painting, establishing a gentle tension between the flatness of a canvas and the reality of curved space in Einstein's universe.

Knight, Christopher. "Does the Broad's new Jasper Johns exhibition hit the bull's-eye? It gets darn close." *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 2018.

Johns repeats the line in quietly agitated paint, a gesture that lodges art between object and ghost. Many also have a diamond pattern painted along one edge, invoking Harlequin — the mute joker in traditional pantomime. In "Catenary (I Call to the Grave)," everything is in shades of gray — scores of them, so that fading light seems to flicker through.

Almost inexplicably, the gentle catenary sag feels at once valedictory, melancholic, utterly confident and wholly natural. The masterful catenary paintings, still under-sung in Johns' copious repertoire, are a powerful conclusion to a blissful show.

Jasper Johns, "Catenary (I Call to the Grave)," 1998, encaustic, string, wood (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times)

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Art
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American Original

By Carter Ratcliff

Jasper Johns' subtle, enigmatic art has influenced many but can be practiced by no one but its creator.

In the only dream he has ever recounted, Jasper Johns saw himself painting the American flag. Having dreamt it, he did it. *Flag* (1954–55) is five feet wide, its stars and stripes meticulously rendered in encaustic, a medium consisting of beeswax melted and mixed with pigment. After the mid-1950s, Johns usually worked in oil paint or acrylics, and yet he returned to encaustic now and then, most notably in the *Crosshatch* paintings that preoccupied him during the 1970s. Quizzed about his preference for a medium that has been employed by very few painters since medieval times, Johns said he likes it because it makes a precise record of each touch of the brush. "It drips so far and stops," he added. "Each discrete moment remains discrete." This desire for control was remarkable in a time when Willem de Kooning's brushwork and Jackson Pollock's drip method were merging colors in surging, improvisatory currents. Their imagery was hot. Johns' was cool. More than that, his paintings had a disquieting air of pensiveness. And they still do, as is evident at "Something Resembling Truth," the Johns retrospective now on view at The Broad in Los Angeles (through May 13), presented last year by London's Royal Academy.

In his early work, Johns did not impose a strict order on the rambunctious energy of the Abstract Expressionists so much as confine it to the linear patterns he found readymade in the American flag, the concentric circles of his Targets, and the repetitive angles of the grids through which he sent numbers and letters marching, zero to nine and A to Z. Traditionally a sign of sincerity, painterly painting acquired from Johns a tone of skepticism. The AbEx claim to heroic self-revelation vanished under a patina of irony. Yet we are not put off by Johns' elusiveness. On the contrary, his sphinxlike presence in his art has exercised a persistent fascination, in part because it conveys a peculiarly American way of being—one of which certain artists and writers have long been aware, if only intuitively.

In Henry James' case, of course, this awareness was hyper-conscious. James' lengthy appreciation of Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1879, makes the point that the earlier novelist's milieu was not as rich, not as dense with historical and social complexity, as that of his French or English counterparts. In America, wrote James, "The very air looks new and young; the light of the sun seems fresh and innocent, as if it knew as yet but few of the secrets of the world and none of

Ratcliffe, Carter. "American Original." *Art & Antiques,* March 2018, pp. 66–71.

the weariness of shining." Like his friend, the painter John Singer Sargent, James was more at home in the labyrinthine subtleties of European society than in the improvised openness of American life. By contrast—and this is a contrast as consequential as the one that sets the agrarian Thomas Jefferson at odds with the mercantile Alexander Hamilton—Hawthorne felt at one with that openness, rife as it was with possibilities traceable to early American roots. Viewing the Old World with bemused detachment, he was a model of tolerance in comparison to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who expressed irritation at what he saw as the impacted stasis of Europe. The Grand Tour of its cultural monuments, he felt, is only superficially interesting; one's time would be better spent by staying at home and cultivating one's unique and inimitable self. The goal is to find "an original relation to the universe," as Emerson put it in the introduction to *Nature*, his still-daunting essay from 1836.

Accepting no mediation from history or tradition, indifferent to cultural norms and social expectations, one creates one's place in the world from insights prompted by the flow of personal experience. In the process, one creates oneself. Viewed soberly, this is dubious. We cannot, after all, step outside the culture to which we

Previous spread: Jasper Johns, *Target*, 1961, encaustic and collage on canvas, 167.6 x 167.6 cm. This page: *Untitled*, 1975, oil and encaustic on canvas (four panels), 50.125 x 50.125 in. (127.32 x 127.32 cm).

owe the ideas of self and originality. Illogical as it may be, Emerson's exhortation is still stirring, especially in America, where belief in the possibility of thoroughgoing self-invention remains strong. Call it the Gatsby Syndrome. Turning to postwar American art, we see Jackson Pollock revising utterly the very act of painting. Removing what he called "the eyeglasses of history," Barnett Newman saw his way to a radically new concept of geometric abstraction—one that extricated painting from the constraints placed on it by Piet Mondrian, who played in Newman's scenario the part of an Old-World oppressor. To be American is to be free. By painting the American flag, Johns claimed that free-

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Untitled, 1992–4, encaustic on canvas, 199.4 x 300.7 cm.

dom for himself. Moreover, he joined Pollock and Newman and a few others in the small band of artists who can be said to have achieved an Emersonian degree of originality.

In 1958, Leo Castelli gave Johns his first solo exhibition. With its encaustic *Flag*s and plaster body parts lurking in compartments above deadpan *Target*s, the show was that year's sensation. Johns became the artist about whom it was necessary to have an opinion. Detractors saw him as an upstart bent on undermining everything passionate and authentic. Admirers were enchanted by all that surprised them in his paintings—the unapologetic banality of their motifs, the geometric rigidity of their structures, the rubbery elegance of their surfaces. Casting about for a label to apply, Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art came up with "Neo-Dada." Like Man Ray, Francis Picabia, and other Dadas, Johns introduced the mundane into the realm of high art. Like them, he devised odd juxtapositions. But the label didn't stick. The spirit of Dada was antic. Johns was calm, disquietingly so. The Dadas were in revolt against the past, bourgeois respectability, even art itself. Immersed in his own subtleties, Johns could not have been less militant. Turning inward, he had achieved at the age of 28 a full measure of self-reliance, that Emersonian virtue; and this gave him an "original relation" not to nature but to art. In the six decades since then, no one has tried to corral him in a stylistic category. Johns stands alone, distant even from the many artists who have borrowed and revised his strategies.

Among the most salient examples are Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and other Pop artists who learned from Johns that art has a place for the readymade iconography of the supermarket. Before there was a *Campbell's Soup Can* by Warhol there were Johns' three-dimensional renderings of a Savarin Coffee can and two Ballantine Ale cans, both from 1960. Lichtenstein's comic-book images of love and war were preceded by Johns's *Alley Oop* (1958), which deploys a field of orange paint as a backdrop for a multipaneled page from the comic strip by that name. Alley Oop and the other characters are masked by touches of paint that set them adrift in a border region between the abstract and the figurative. Dispensing with these ambiguities, the Pop artists opted for sharp edges and inflected patches of color. So did the Minimalists, whose further borrowings from Johns included grids, symmetries, and the literalism of his early sculptures.

The quasi-Minimalist patterns of Frank Stella's black stripe paintings evolved directly from the red and white stripes of the Johnsian *Flag*. And Brice Marden's early monochromes reprise, with slight shifts in hue, the blank passages in Johns's early gray paintings. By the end of the 1960s, Johns was recognized as the era's most influential painter, for he had established for that moment the look of serious art. This authority was unsought and of course many resisted it, yet the New York art scene of the following decade was crowded with newcomers performing ham-fisted variations on Johns's sooty, ruminative brushwork. His influ-

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From top: *Flag*, 1967, encaustic and collage on canvas (three panels), 33.5 x 56.25 in. (85.09 x 142.88 cm); Exterior of The Broad, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro in collaboration with Gensler.

ence did not, however, make him a *chef d'école*. Though there has always been much for other artists to learn from Johns, he has never displayed a teacher's approachability. Artists must borrow from a distance, across the immense gap that separates his sensibility from theirs. It is possible to paint a Picassoid painting or de Kooningesque painting, but only Johns can paint a Johnsian painting.

Presiding over a landscape we cannot imagine sharing with him, a *Flag* by Johns is the symbol of an America of his own devising, a New World populated solely by him and built in part from old-fashioned objects and logos and typefaces recalled from his childhood in South Carolina. Thus, Johns takes his place in our imaginations by occupying a place far from the rest of us but very near our ideals of self-sufficiency. He exemplifies independence, his solitude moderated only by his use of motifs borrowed from other artists.

The first of these was Marcel Duchamp. Never officially a Dada, Duchamp was nonetheless sympathetic to the spirit of Dadaism, and his use of readymade objects and images seemed to find an echo in Johns's *Flag*s and *Alphabet*s. Hence the attempt to attach the "Neo-Dada" label to these paintings. The "Neo" prefix implies a conscious development of an earlier style, as in Neoimpressionism or Neo-Geo. Yet Johns was unaware of Duchamp and his work until the 1958 exhibition at Castelli suggested a connection to artworld denizens on the look-out for historical patterns. "Everyone said my work was Dada," Johns recalled in 1970, "so I read up on it, went to Philadelphia to see the Arensberg Duchamp collection, was delighted by it." Soon afterward, the artists met and liked one another.

Duchampian devices began to appear in the young painter's work—color charts, painted shadows, real objects in place of representations. A note in Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934) describes a hinged painting. Johns used hinges to affix a small canvas to the surface of a big painting called *According to What* (1964). Swing the small canvas outward and one sees a Johnsian version of Duchamp's *Self Portrait in Profile* (1958). Yet this homage did not make him Duchamp's acolyte any more than his paintings of the stars and stripes made him a flag-waving patriot. Johns claimed the Duchamp portrait for himself by giving it a

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From left: *Fool's House,* 1961-62, oil on canvas with broom, sculptural towel, stretcher and cup, 182.9 x 92.5 x 11.4 cm; *Summer,* 1985, encaustic on canvas. 190.5 x 127 cm

modest place amid the carefully deployed clutter of *According to What*—the alphabetical fragments, rendered here in raised aluminum; the wax cast of a leg seated on an upside-down chair; the photo-silkscreen of a newspaper page; the coat hanger; the gray scale; the emotionally reserved variations on Abstract Expressionist brushwork.

An incomplete list of Johns's other sources might include Pablo Picasso, the 16th-century German painter Matthias Grunewald, Leonardo da Vinci, the illustrator Barry Moser, and an eccentric early 20th-century American potter named George Ohr. *Regrets*, a series of paintings and prints from 2013–14, takes a complex shape from a John Deakin photograph of the young Lucian Freud seated on a bed with an anguished hand pressed against his forehead. Identifiable only after Johns provided a clue, this form is anything but photographic now that he has subjected it to a multicolored revision. Whatever Johns touches becomes his own, an emblem of him, whether it is an obscure borrowing or one of the body-imprints he transferred to paper in 1962. Fully present in his art, he is nonetheless its principal enigma. And his commentaries raise more questions than they answer.

Asked about the origins of his *Crosshatch* paintings, Johns said that he first glimpsed this pattern on a passing car, adding, "I only saw it for a second, but knew immediately that I was going to use it. It had all the qualities that interest me—literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning." Of course, that is only one possibility offered by Johns's art. Another is an overwhelming plethora of meaning, an abundance all the more formidable because it is up to us to generate it from an immersion in his world. Johns is of course nearby. His shadow falls across all four panels of *The Seasons* (1987). Yet he is not about to step forward with any definitive explanations.

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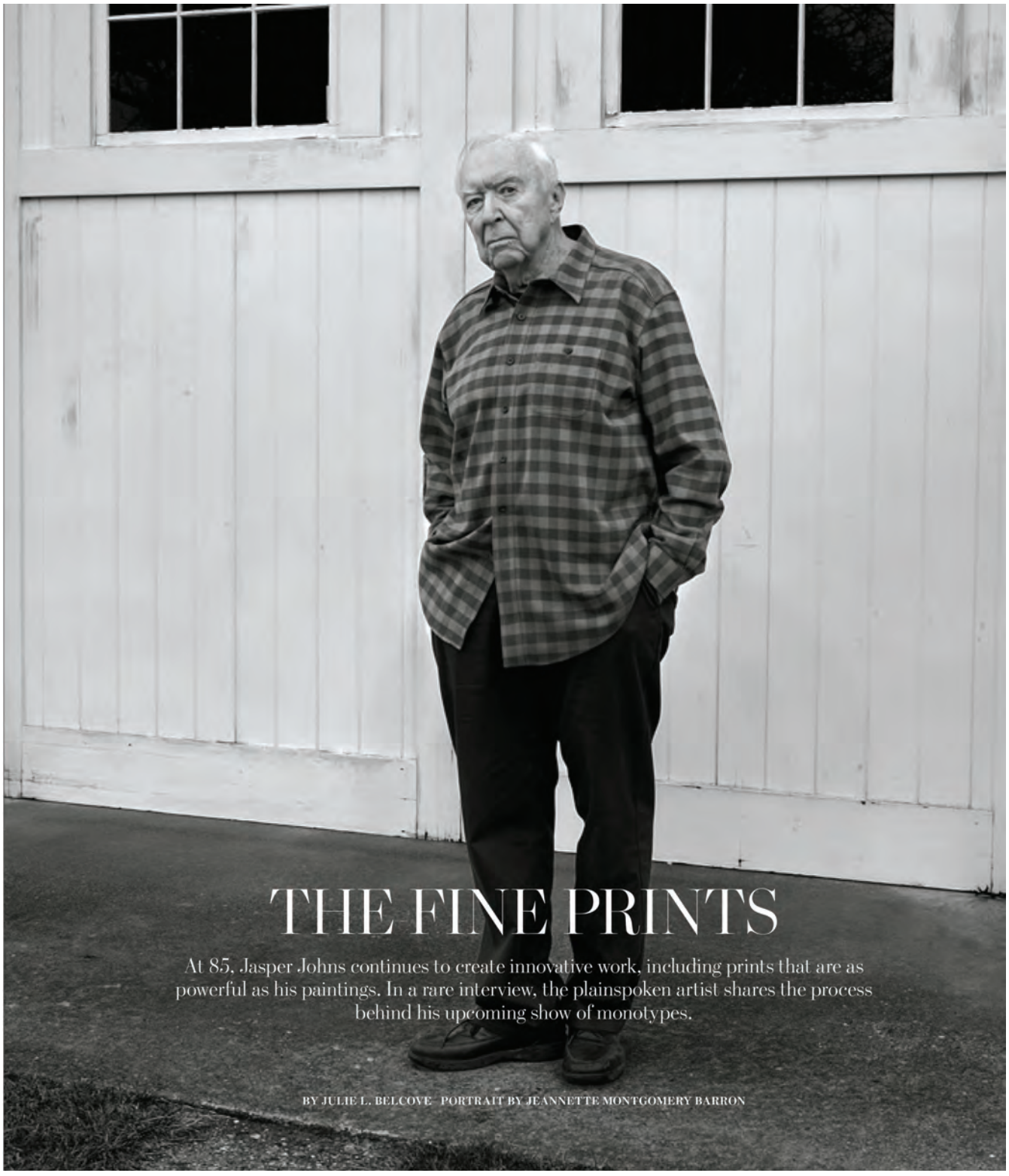

THE FINE PRINTS

At 85, Jasper Johns continues to create innovative work, including prints that are as powerful as his paintings. In a rare interview, the plainspoken artist shares the process behind his upcoming show of monotypes.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE PORTRAIT BY JEANNETTE MONTGOMERY BARRON

Belcove, Julie. "The Fine Prints." *WSJ Magazine*, March 2016, pp. 176–79.

PRINT BY NUMBERS
This 2013 work by Johns, *0-9*, a monotype on hand-torn Japanese paper, will be in the upcoming show at Matthew Marks Gallery.

Belcove, Julie. "The Fine Prints." *WSJ Magazine*, March 2016, pp. 176–79.





BY 1954, Jasper Johns had left his boyhood in rural South Carolina behind for New York City, where, by his own account, he spent several years yearning to be an artist rather than actually being one. That year, however, proved pivotal in his career. As art history has documented, in 1954 his fumbling efforts finally found their form: He began his seminal painting *Flag*, a cocksure rendering of the Stars and Stripes that brashly signaled an escape route from the dominant abstract expressionism. But a quieter experiment the same year helped set him on a parallel—and no less inventive or influential—path as a printmaker. "While working as a clerk in a bookstore, I folded a small piece of paper, made parallel cuts into it," then applied ink, Johns recalls, "and pressed it against another sheet of paper, leaving an impression of the ink."

That small artwork is the earliest surviving Johns monotype, a style of printmaking that typically results in just one impression, rather than editions numbering in the tens, hundreds or even thousands as with lithography and etching. Over the course of his printmaking practice, Johns returned to monotypes sporadically but compellingly, eventually completing more than 200 works. Now 41 works from five decades of Johns's output in the medium, including images made in the past year, are the subject of a new solo exhibition, *Jasper Johns Monotypes*. On view at New York's Matthew Marks Gallery beginning May 6, they offer a rare window into Johns's fecund imagination.

Johns, who turns 86 in May, abandoned Manhattan for Sharon, Connecticut, two decades ago. There, in a private compound enclosed by a stone wall and hidden from the road, he lives with his dog in a grand house and works in studios elegantly created by his friend, the designer Bill Katz. In a shingled barn, with warm wood paneling and well-placed windows framing pastoral New England views, there is one immaculate studio for painting and another dedicated to printmaking. For the past 20 years, Johns has even employed a full-time master printer, John Lund, to oversee its operations.

In 1960, Johns began collaborating with Universal Limited Art Editions, shortly after being introduced to Tatyana Grosman, its plucky, Russian émigré founder. It was two years after his breakthrough show at Leo Castelli's gallery in New York City, which had featured *Flag* as well as other paintings of instantly identifiable symbols, such as targets and letters of the alphabet. The Museum of Modern Art bought three of the paintings. Art connoisseurs at the time turned up their noses at prints, which were generally just reproductions, but Grosman was intent on making them artworks in their own right, and she was seeking young artists with revolutionary ideas to be her accomplices. She had recently seen Johns's canvas of a coat hanger at MoMA and admired the chutzpah it took to paint such a mundane subject. In short order, Johns made lithographs for ULAE of a coat hanger, a flag, a target and some of his other favorite motifs, the numerals 0 through 9. The numbers project, in which he altered a single lithographic stone for each print, took three years to execute. "He'd never drawn on a lithographic stone before," says Bill Goldston, who now runs ULAE and makes regular pilgrimages to Sharon from his Long Island complex to confer on prints. "If Mozart was a child genius in music, Jasper was a child genius in printmaking." And the art market caught up. Johns set an auction record for postwar or contemporary prints with a piece going for $1,314,500 at Christie's in 2010. (By comparison, the top auction price for a Johns painting was $36 million in 2014 for his 1983 *Flag*.)

It has become cliché to append "the greatest living American artist" to Johns's name, so long has he reigned and so deeply have his contributions infused contemporary art. Pop, minimalism and conceptualism all owe him more than a tip of the hat. His prints are as virtuoso as his canvases. "He is the greatest living printmaker. No doubt about that," says Jennifer L. Roberts, a professor of art history at Harvard University who is co-writing a *catalogue raïsonné* of Johns's monotypes. "He turns the many different essences of printmaking into the technique of his work and also the subject of his work. Printmakers have to think backwards—they have to be able to imagine things in reverse. With Johns's work, it's thematized into the work itself," with frequent doubling, or mirroring, and folding of images. "He's able to take the process and turn it into a sophisticated meditation on all the ideas that are part of that process." Moreover, his paintings and prints, as well as his drawings and sculptures, are in constant dialogue.

Goldston began working with Johns in 1970, when they experimented together with an offset printer designed for posters and art books but deemed far too pedestrian for artists. It nevertheless got Johns's creative juices flowing. "The way he thinks is so interesting to me," Goldston says, noting Johns's mastery not just of aesthetics but of the technical demands of printmaking. "He has such insight into the principle of transferring ink from one surface to another."

Monotypes are a peculiarly immediate and intimate form of printmaking. Unlike, say, an etching, which once created allows a printer to apply ink at a later time and repeatedly produce multiples, for a monotype the artist in one sitting paints directly onto a smooth surface, or matrix, such as a sheet of Plexiglas. Then, before the ink has a chance to dry, the matrix is run through a press, transferring the image to a piece of paper. "They're uncategorizable. They are prints, but you could just as easily argue they are drawings or paintings," says Roberts. "It's a space for rapid, intense experimentation. The matrix is essentially destroyed in the process of creation. It's like life. There's no fantasy you can keep creating this image. There's something haunting."

Like many inventions, some of Johns's monotypes were born of a series of happy accidents across media. Take his 17 monotypes entitled *Savarin*. Johns's motif of the Savarin brand coffee can, its name emblazoned in large type across the label, dates to 1960, when he made *Painted Bronze*, a life-size sculpture of the commonplace tin in which he often stored paintbrushes. In the late 1970s, he returned to the image, depicting the can against a backdrop of his crosshatches—fields of short diagonal lines that are another frequently mined Johns concept—for a lithograph. He made the resulting image both the poster and the catalog cover for his 1977 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The next year, when Johns was preparing to leave New York for his winter house on St. Martin, Goldston cut about half a dozen small plates for him to pack in his suitcase to stave off boredom. Johns returned with more riffs on that can of brushes. He has a habit of employing nontraditional materials, and for one plate, he used an island cookie to make his marks. "When I unwrapped the plate, there were still cookie crumbs all over it," Goldston says. It became the lithograph *Savarin 1 (Cookie)*; Johns experimented with other effects for *Savarin 2* through *5*.

Then one day in 1981, he revisited the concept with a new idea, making a lithograph of the Savarin in gray, with a red impression of his own arm and handprint running along the bottom of the page. "Jasper was happy with it," Goldston says. As he remembers it, they began running the press, but the paper roll soon ran out. The new roll wasn't the same shade of white as the original, so they set aside the batch they'd already

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OEUVRE AND ABOVE
"He is the greatest living printmaker. No doubt about that," says Harvard University professor Jennifer L. Roberts. Johns's prints include, from far left: *Ale Cans*, 1964; *Decoy*, 1971; *Flags I*, 1973; *Four Panels from Untitled 1972*, *Savarin*, 1982; and *Shrinky Dink 3*, 2011.

produced and started fresh. The following year, when Johns was signing the edition, Goldston says, they realized they had 27 sheets of the original paper. "What were we going to do with them?"

It was almost too enticing for Johns. In fealty to perhaps his most famous quote, in actuality a note to himself—"Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it"—he couldn't resist toying with the sheets somehow. Over the course of four days, Johns proceeded to paint on a piece of Plexiglas, lay it face down on the lithograph and run them through a press, then repeat the process, thereby turning each lithograph into a monotype. "Working directly over the original matrix is one way of experimenting or playing with differences—different kinds of refinement, accent, tone, playful variations," Johns says by email. One outcome is reminiscent of a heroic product shot, with the can in bold red, the brushes outlined in black and the background a primary-color field of hatch marks. Another variation proclaims *Hallelujah!* in stenciled letters arching over the brushes, along with the date *21 Jan. 1982* running across the bottom. Yet another rendition substitutes Johns's closely clustered handprints in red, purple and green for the hatches, while a fourth version casts a dramatic black veil over the image, highlighting the brushes in white as if by moonlight. While stopping short of calling monotypes fun to make, Johns says, "They may invite a playfulness, or a light touch with the materials."

> "EACH MEDIUM OR TECHNIQUE OFFERS AN APPEAL OF ITS OWN.... ONE JUMPS IN AND, IF LUCKY, FINDS WAYS TO PROCEED."
> —JASPER JOHNS

Roberts is struck by the complex, almost labyrinthine trajectory of Johns's prints. "You can see the way a monotype is about not just the artist creating images, but images begetting images," she says. "Johns would paint one, then print the print. There would still be a little material left. He would add to that, print again. You really see this evolution."

Johns finds it difficult to articulate exactly how he makes his choices. "Monoprints sometimes come as afterthoughts following some project," he says. "I suppose that each medium or technique offers an appeal of its own.... One jumps in and, if lucky, finds ways to proceed."

JOHNS IS A MAN of few words, and he tends toward the literal. I once asked him why he uses encaustic, the pigmented hot wax that is a signature material in his paintings. "It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity," he replied. Whether this was a stab at humor was hard to assess. He is also an exceedingly private man, whose manners are especially decorous in this age of oversharing. His old-school ways were ingrained in his strict Southern upbringing. After his parents divorced when he was a toddler, he was promptly left with his paternal grandfather, a prosperous landowner, and his wife. Following his grandfather's death, Johns moved around between his mother, who by this time had a new family, and his aunt, who taught her nephew in a rural school of only a few students. He quit the University of South Carolina after three semesters to come north to New York City, where he lasted all of one semester at Parsons School of Design. As he flailed in his attempts at making art—he eventually destroyed nearly all of his early work—he befriended three other creative forces: artist Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham.

They were four of the most inventive minds of the 20th century. Johns is the last surviving member of the quartet, and he continues to innovate in the 21st. Among the most powerful images in the monotypes exhibition are some of Johns's most recent: a series that takes as a jumping-off point a black-and-white image by acclaimed photojournalist Larry Burrows originally published in a 1965 issue of *Life* magazine. The photograph captures Marine Lance Corporal James C. Farley, a 21-year-old helicopter crew chief, breaking down after a disastrous mission near Da Nang, Vietnam. The rawness of the moment is palpable as Farley, crumpled on a trunk in a supply shed, hides most of his face in his hands. Johns abstracts the image and doubles it, fading the mirrored version like a specter.

Susan Dackerman, a scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, who is co-writing the *catalogue raisonné*, was bowled over by the luminosity of the new monotypes and the way "the figure of the soldier is sometimes foregrounded and sometimes disintegrates. The ink bleeds and pools."

The new prints build on Johns's recent *Regrets* series, though not in an entirely linear fashion. Those works, begun in 2012, experimented with an old photograph of the British figurative painter Lucian Freud commissioned by Francis Bacon. Freud is seen sitting on a small bed, hunched over in apparent sorrow or torment, and Johns went on a tour de force in paint, charcoal, watercolor and ink. He explored not only the subject's anguish but the formal qualities of the photograph, down to a rip in the surviving print, and how, when he reproduced the picture alongside its mirror image, a skull appeared.

When I visited Johns before *Regrets* made its public debut at MoMA in 2014, he told me he'd made an earlier attempt at a similar subject. He was characteristically loath to reveal anything. "I don't know if I want to tell you about this," he began. "I have another photograph from a completely different source, which I have tried to use as the basis of drawings, none of which has come off to my satisfaction. A similar mood is conveyed, and it also has to do with the face being buried, I think in the arm, but nothing to do with the art world." He broke into one of his rare but hearty laughs. "I had to put the other away as a failure."

It now seems clear that the Burrows image was his initial muse. "A relationship between the two photographs seems obvious but is not something that I have analyzed," Johns says. "I believe the work that an artist makes in relation to a subject is expressive in a way that cannot necessarily be broken down into logical parts." After making *Regrets*, he asked his assistant to find the Burrows drawings, which he had made around 2002, and set to work again. This time he found the solution in monotypes. Using Mylar as the matrix, instead of metal or Plexiglas, he applied ink and watercolor but, unusually, allowed them to dry. Then he wet the paper and pressed it to the Mylar, reawakening the color. Asked if he chose this process for practical reasons—the ink was drying before he could finish—or for aesthetic effect, Johns replies, "I don't believe there is a separation." In any case, he notes, "Often, even usually, the various ways of working blend and become, to varying degrees, unconscious."

The late best-selling author and producer Michael Crichton, a good friend of Johns's, once described him as "the intellectual who will not explain himself in intellectual terms." To be sure, Johns presents himself as an artist who doesn't overthink it. True to form, he says of making a monotype, "At its simplest, it is as easy as leaving a fingerprint." ●

Belcove, Julie. "The Fine Prints." *WSJ Magazine*, March 2016, pp. 176–79.

The New York Times

YANA PASKOVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jasper Johns: Regrets *A new show at the Museum of Modern Art features two dozen paintings and other artworks based on a photo of Lucian Freud.*

A Lens Catches; a Painter Converts

HOLLAND COTTER

ART REVIEW

What do you do if you're a busy museum, and an eminent and famously enigmatic artist in late career tells you he's prepared to go public with new work? You shake up your schedule, clear out some space and move the stuff in, pronto.

That's more or less what the Museum of Modern Art did for its straight-from-the studio show called "Jasper Johns. Regrets." Haste can make waste. It can also make magic. And magic, of a peculiarly somber, meditative kind, is what we have here.

A little over a year and a half ago, Mr. Johns, 83, was looking through a Christie's London sales catalog of work by the British artist Francis Bacon and came across photographs of the painter Lucian Freud. They had been taken in 1964 by the photographer John Deakin at the request of Bacon, who was planning to do a portrait of Freud but didn't like working with live models. (Bacon's triptych "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" sold for $142 million last year.)

One photo in particular caught Mr. Johns's eye. In it, Freud is sitting on a quilt-covered brass bed in the corner of a room with soiled walls. He has one leg folded under the other; his head is bowed, his face obscured by a raised hand. His stoop-shouldered, folded-in pose suggests exhaustion, despair. He could be weeping.

The sense of abjection was compounded by the distressed condition of the photographic print, found in Bacon's cluttered studio after his death in 1992. It had seen hard use. It had been creased and stained with paint, a large, roughly rectangular section of its lower left corner had been torn and folded back, and secured with a paper clip. (The original print, on loan from the Bacon estate, is in the MoMA show.)

It is on this photograph not just the image of Freud, but the beat-up print itself — that Mr. Johns has based a cohesive group of nearly two dozen painting, drawings and prints. The

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precise appeal the picture held for him is hard to pin down. But then, the impulses behind much of his work have been complicated and elusive: a childhood memory, a dream, a detail from an old master painting, or from his own work. His choices of subjects have felt both arbitrary and deliberate, prosaic and loaded, like Duchamp ready-mades.

More important than the images he chooses, though, is what he does with them, the formal and conceptual changes he puts them through. And to the "Regrets" series he has brought a full arsenal of transforming maneuvers used in the past.

As always, in developing a series, he juggles several media, including oil paint, acrylic, watercolor, charcoal, graphite, colored pencil, ink on paper, ink on plastic, printing ink and photocopying. And his idea of doing variations on a theme is close to dissection: cutting an image open, picking apart its essence, moving bits around, throwing some out, squeezing others into new shapes, in the end restoring wholeness, but not in its initial form.

The show — organized by the MoMA curators Christophe Cherix and Ann Temkin, with Ingrid Langston, a curatorial assistant — is a record of such a process, and its value, as such, is far greater than that of any single work in it, painting or otherwise.

One of the earliest pieces is a small, unemphatic pencil sketch of the Bacon print, with Freud's figure simplified, and the missing lower corner rendered as a solid dark shape. Three words written in ink below the drawing — "Goya? Bats? Dreams?" — suggest at least one feature that drew Mr. Johns to the picture, an association with art history. Freud's face-hiding pose somewhat resembles that of the artist who sits dozing away, swarmed by owls and bats, in "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," the renowned etching by Francisco Goya, an artist Mr. Johns has long admired.

With a second early piece, "Study for Regrets," an intense manipulation of material begins. Here, Freud's figure has been doubled into facing mirror images, with the one on the right painted as a kind of jigsaw puzzle of colored fragments. And new elements have been added: the word "Regrets" and a scribbled signature, both looking handwritten, but, in reality, produced with an inked stamp that Mr. Johns designed to reply to social invitations.

At this point, we're on familiar Johns turf, defined by a mix of high and low, serious and humorous, its essence distilled in a gloomster Freud decked out in harlequin colors. But the tone soon shifts, darkens. In other

Cotter, Holland. "A Lens Catches; a Painter Converts." *The New York Times*, March 21, 2014, pp. C1–C2.

drawings, Freud's figures recede in prominence, and, again in mirror reflection, the dark shapes representing the torn section of the print merge into a Rorschach-like whole, a large rectangle that sits at the center of the composition.

A shape that was once an indicator of emptiness is now, suddenly, a monument, somewhat architectural, with its two pronglike turrets, but also, increasingly, funereal. As the series grows, moving from drawings into paintings, and then into prints, Freud's figures become mere tangles of line, and from those tangles another image emerges: a human skull with big, empty eyes. It rests on top of the dark rectangle, which now might be read as the door of a tomb, opened onto blackness, oblivion.

Skulls have turned up in Mr. Johns's work since the early 1960s. Some scholars say they've been inspired by the skulls that frequently appear in the still lifes of one his favorite artists, Cézanne. Another explanation may simply be that Mr. Johns is one of the few contemporary artists who has persisted, over a long career, in taking mortality seriously as a subject. And he has become more forthright in concentrating on it, and personalizing it, over time.

In this regard, his art can feel almost Victorian, a sensibility America still doesn't understand, which may explain arguments that Mr. Johns's work is obscurant and repressed. When I think "Victorian," I think Melville and Dickinson: passionate, sardonic moral thinkers, too in love with beauty to be morbid. I see Mr. Johns in that light. Much of "Regrets" is really beautiful, with half-hidden rainbow colors, tonal subtleties and a mesmerizing diversity of line.

Because of the title of the series, and the fact that an octogenarian produced it, there's a tendency to view the show as a valedictory gesture, the end of something. But it doesn't feel that way at all. It feels assured and centered, quiet but with lots of give, sagely alive.

Cotter, Holland. "A Lens Catches; a Painter Converts." *The New York Times*, March 21, 2014, pp. C1–C2.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Portrait of an Artist's Friend

New Jasper Johns Show Features Works Based on a Photo of Lucian Freud

By JENNIFER MALONEY

March 14, 2014 7:33 p.m. ET

'Untitled' by Jasper Johns (2012) *Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY*

Last summer, two chief curators from the Museum of Modern Art paid a friendly visit to Jasper Johns ' Connecticut studio.

What they found was thrilling: a new series of paintings, sketches, drawings and prints, all based on a single photograph of his friend, British artist Lucian Freud.

"We decided upon the spot," said Ann Temkin, chief curator of painting and sculpture. "We just blurted out: 'Will you debut these at MoMA?'"

The resulting show, pulled together unusually quickly, reveals the artist's playful process as he made variation after variation of the image, pushing it past the point of recognition.

Maloney, Jennifer. "Portrait of an Artist's Friend." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2014.

The show, which opens Saturday, is titled "Jasper Johns: Regrets."

The word reflects the weary pose in which Lucian Freud holds his head, sitting on a bed, in a torn, creased photograph from about 1964. Mr. Johns encountered the image in 2012, while thumbing through an auction catalog.

But the title and signature inscribed on most of the works—"Regrets/Jasper Johns"—also carries more than a hint of irony: The words are an enlargement of a rubber stamp Mr. Johns made several years ago to decline the requests and invitations that stream across his desk.

"It's certainly a tease," said Ms. Temkin, who organized the show with Christophe Cherix, chief curator of drawings and prints.

The 'Jasper Johns: Regrets' show opens on Saturday at the Museum of Modern Art. *European Pressphoto Agency*

Mr. Johns, now 83 years old, emerged as a force in American art in the late 1950s with paintings of flags, targets and numbers.

In 1964, he wrote in a sketchbook: "Take an object/ Do something to it/Do something else to it [Repeat]."

His latest series includes two paintings, 10 drawings and two prints made over the past 18 months—a few finished just in January.

The large, centerpiece painting—67 inches by 96 inches—is titled "Regrets," as are many works in the series.

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At its center is a skull-like shape.

A study from 2012 shows how that shape emerged. Mr. Johns took a reproduction of the torn photograph, blocked it out in units and filled them in with colored pencils like a paint-by-numbers drawing.

Then he mirrored it, so that the reflecting images sat side-by-side. The photograph's jagged edge created a void in the center of the new double-wide image, and above the void emerged the image of a skull.

As the image becomes more abstract in later permutations, the mirrored human figure all but disappears, but the skull figure remains.

The permutations include a set of four ink-on-plastic drawings, a soft-hued watercolor obscured with charcoal, and another oil painting that evokes a map.

MoMA's exhibitions often take three or four years of planning. But the curators said they jumped at the chance to present the complete series together before the works were broken up and sent around the world to the private collectors and institutions who already have purchased them.

Ms. Temkin said that eight of the works, including the show's centerpiece painting, have been promised by their owners to MoMA.

A commitment to showing contemporary art, the curators said, means sometimes stepping more nimbly.

"We wanted to share our own great surprise as quickly as we could," Ms. Temkin said.

Maloney, Jennifer. "Portrait of an Artist's Friend." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2014.

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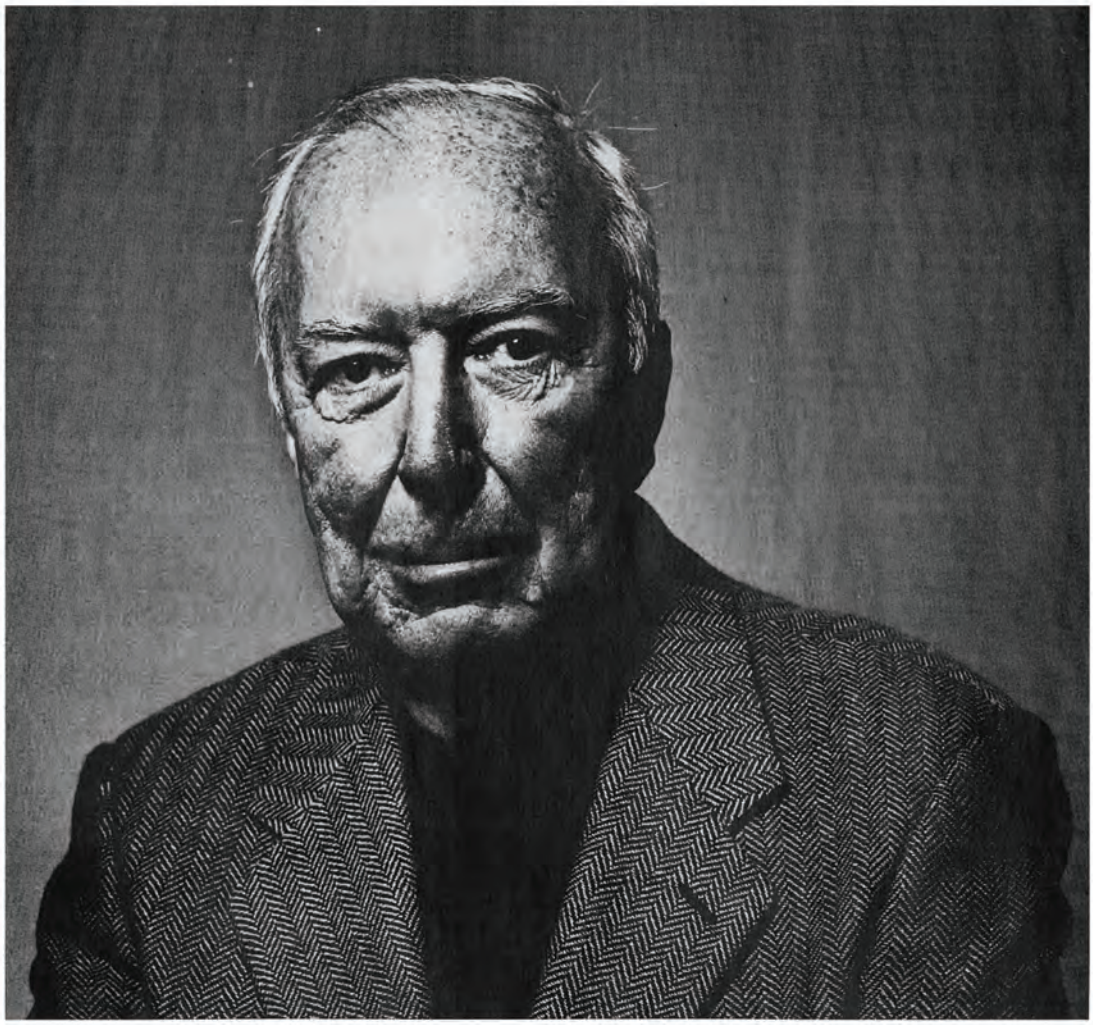
FINANCIAL TIMES

'Regrets belong to everybody'

Aged 83, Jasper Johns remains a towering figure of American art and his latest work is among his most personal and accomplished. *Julie L Belcove* talked to him



On a bright but raw January day in Sharon, Connecticut, Jasper Johns turns the ignition key in his green Gator golf cart, enclosed in Plexiglas for the winter. Nothing. "Frozen again," he says in his deep, commanding voice. We climb out and, rather than trudging through the snow, drive a car from the Coach Barn, which houses his painting and printmaking studios, a short distance on his sprawling estate to the Blue Barn.

Before he converted it into an elegant private gallery a couple of years ago so that he wouldn't have to up-end his studios every time a curator came by, the barn sheltered his collection of guinea fowl. The birds, he explains, had "disappeared. One was run over. A few were eaten by fox or coyote or whatever we have up here." They're particularly stupid, in his view, but he was fond of them nonetheless. "They made horrible sounds, which I love. They were beautiful birds."

Today the New England hills, white under a fresh coat of snow, contrast sharply with the artworks lining the gallery walls: paintings and works on paper, predominantly in greys and blacks, all riffing on the same image of a man sitting, with one leg tucked under him, on an old-fashioned iron bed, clutching his head in his hand as if in despair. If there were any question as to the mental anguish portrayed here, Johns has stamped an emphatic "Regrets, Jasper Johns" on each piece. The series, the latest from the renowned but elusive artist, is also

Belcove, Julie. "Regrets belong to everybody." *Financial Times*, February 15 – 16, 2014, Leisure & Arts, p. 17.

titled "Regrets".

There is an introspective poignanc to the work, a declarative statement i the artist's late period – he turns 84 i May. It may be viewed as a windo into his own state of mind, a vigorou confrontation with the waning of lif by a virtuoso painter and draughts man. The impact is so potent tha when two curators from New York' Museum of Modern Art paid separat studio visits last summer, both pro posed putting it directly into a sol exhibition at the museum, bypassin the typical introductory show at Mat thew Marks Gallery. "I hadn't planne

The rubber stamp of the word 'Regrets' in his own handwriting was an ironic reply to autograph-seekers

a showing," says Johns, leading me to two black leather chairs in another room, opposite an enormous Bruce Nauman sculpture hanging from the ceiling. "I was just making new work."

Regrets will have its public debut at MoMA on March 15 and is likely to spark the kind of debate that has long engulfed Johns. Since his breakthrough first solo show, at the Castelli Gallery in 1958, when he put forth a nervy rebuke to the ubiquitous Abstract Expressionism, he has never failed to command the art world's attention, even when his idiosyncratic iconography felt to some like a wild-goose chase. These latest works hold enough potential allusions to a web of art world names – late great masters Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, one-time Johns intimate and peer Robert Rauschenberg, and Johns' erstwhile assistant James Meyer – to keep post-grad students mired in dissertations for years to come.

Silver-haired, with rosy cheeks, Johns has perfected the trick of being simultaneously dour and disarmingly self-deprecating. Asked if he reads art criticism about himself, he replies with a subtle smile: "Has there been any lately?" Notoriously laconic, he is circumspect about any autobiographical component to *Regrets*; he has always subscribed to the Duchampian notion that viewers complete an artwork by bringing their own meaning.

Still, it is impossible to ignore the starting point for the series: early 2012, not long after he learnt that Meyer, who had served as his studio assistant for 27 years, had allegedly been stealing unfinished works and covertly selling them through a New York gallery. Johns was reportedly shaken by the betrayal. "Certainly not a pleasure," he says of the ordeal. "But I can't talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to define it in any way."

He is cagey about the new artworks' connection to Meyer: "For me [the meaning] is within the picture. The word is in the picture. I think you'll have to interpret that for yourself. It's certainly in the painting, but so is the rest of the painting in the painting, and the image that's in the painting. It's not meant to be a sign of something not in the painting. Regrets belong to everybody, don't they?"

Johns began his *Regrets* series after he came across an old photograph in a 2012 auction catalogue from Christie's – though he seems little concerned with the image's provenance. "It was a sale of – who's the other artist? Francis Bacon."

On the block was Bacon's "Study for Self-Portrait" (1964), and the catalogue had published the source material, a portfolio of photographs found in Bacon's studio after his death in 1992. Taken by photographer John Deakin, the pictures were of Bacon's friend and fellow artist Lucian Freud. Bacon had married Freud's body with his own face in "Self-Portrait".

"This is the one that struck me," Johns says, pointing to the image of Freud perched on the quilt-covered bed and hiding his face in his hand, newspapers at his feet. The photograph was paint-splattered and torn, with a large chunk of the lower left side missing altogether, and the creases and voids – the photograph as object – were as interesting to Johns as the image itself. "Bacon mistreated the photographs physically, is what it looks like," Johns says. "I just saw that and it caught my eye."

He began toying with the page from the catalogue almost immediately, ripping it out, tracing the silhouette, then copying that drawing on a photocopier. After filling in the space with coloured pencil, he glued it to a larger sheet of paper, making an abstract watercolour opposite the drawing. Explaining the reasons behind his methodology is difficult for him. "I saw it and wanted to do something," he says, taking a sip of tea. "I don't know how you go from there. You start thinking."

The way he makes it sound, the faint stamp of "Regrets" in the upper right corner was almost a lark. He ordered the rubber stamp of his own handwriting years ago to use as an ironic reply to autograph-seekers, among others – invoking the word's other meaning, polite refusal. "When people ask me to do things I don't want to do, I stamp that," he says with a big smile. "I don't use it very often, but occasionally."

He'd never before used it to make an artwork. Why now? "Well, it was right there in front of me," near the copy machine, he says. "I assume I associated it with the image of [Freud]." On another drawing Johns wrote in pencil at the bottom, "Goya? Bats? Dreams?" The words are not a title, he says, "just notes of mine, association".

It may be simply another coincidence that Bacon and Freud were once close friends but had a bitter break, mirroring the rupture between Johns and Rauschenberg more than half a century ago. But Johns insists that any similarity is accidental: "I don't know anything about their lives, so that wouldn't be important to me."

Johns also claims never to have met either artist, although his friend Bill Katz, who was also close to Bacon (and who renovated the barns and Johns' grand, stone house), recalls with a chuckle: "I remember introducing [Bacon and Johns] at lunch. When I tell Jasper things he thinks he doesn't remember, he says, 'Interesting if true'."

The photograph of Lucian Freud by John Deakin that inspired Jasper Johns' latest artworks

Although Johns owns a small Freud painting, he denies especially admiring either artist: "I don't think it had anything to do with either of them." He then concedes: "You don't know what happens in your unconscious."

While Johns tends to lay plenty on his subconscious – an amusing irony, given that Lucian's grandfather was Sigmund Freud – his long-time print collaborator Bill Goldston says: "Jasper never does anything idly. There's nothing in his work that isn't considered." At Johns' behest, Goldston made silkscreens of the "Regrets" stamp, complete with the artist's written instruction, "Enlarge," which also appears in the works. Although they have worked together for more than 40 years, Goldston knows better than to assume that he comprehends the meaning behind Johns' gestures. "It's impossible to understand his motivation," he says. "How can you possibly understand what he was thinking about Bacon in relation to Freud? I'm still working on the image and trying to understand how it's broken up. The real fun is looking at the work and

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getting what you get."

Whether using charcoal, painting with watercolour and dabbing pastel on heavily textured paper, or applying India ink on Mylar (polyester film) for a set of four drawings that break up the image in varying degrees, Johns offers a masterclass in technique. Despite the same starting point, each work is emphatically unique, a *tour de force* of experimentation.

One of the paintings – in oil, not his signature encaustic made of pigmented hot wax – obscures Freud in a brooding palette of greys; in another, Freud is a jigsaw of cascading red, blue and yellow against a grey backdrop. Next to him is a small empty rectangle. Asked what it's doing there, Johns shrugs his shoulders, smiles and takes a bite of a cookie. For all hid influence in contemporary art, he is also known, quite simply, as a first-rate paint handler. But Johns isn't so sure. "I think it's something I don't know how to do," he says with a laugh. "I don't know what my limitations are and what the opposites of that are. I don't know what my virtues and faults are."

Showing the series in full, says Ann Temkin, MoMA's chief curator of painting and sculpture, opens a window into Johns' creative process. "[It] gives viewers the opportunity to feel you are there in the studio and in the artist's imagination," she says. "He seems to have an urgency, which is thrilling to encounter."

Many of the works play with mirror images of the Freud portrait. "I don't know why I decided to double it," Johns says. "It's curious because there's one with it doubled one on top of the other – a completely different use of space. The others [opposite each other], I found it interesting – the forms, the negative space where he'd torn the picture." Where the twin images adjoin, they form a skull, a reference to mortality that Johns claims is accidental.

As with most people who make it to their mid-eighties, many of Johns' close friends from his formative years have died: the radical composer John Cage and his partner, the equally inventive choreographer Merce Cunningham; Leo Castelli, Johns' dealer of 40 years; and Rauschenberg, the artist with whom Johns is inextricably linked. Together, the group formed a hub of creativity in 1950s New York.

Johns had endured a painful childhood bouncing from one relative to another in South Carolina. "It had no stability at all," he says. After his parents divorced when he was two, he was sent to his paternal grandfather. When I inquire if he grew up on a farm, Johns laughs uproariously. "My grandfather didn't live on a farm," he says. "He had farms. He lived in town." The farms, plural, were still set up like antebellum plantations, Johns recalls, each with a big house and a group of small structures where the black labourers lived. "I assume they had been slave quarters," he says. "My best friend was a black boy who was the son of my grandfather's overseer. That family lived in town, only about a block or two away from our house. His mother, I think, did our laundry."

The disparities of the racially segregated South seeped into his consciousness over time. "I have one odd memory: we had a cook, a black woman named Donie, and I remember one afternoon going home with her to her house," Johns recalls. "Donie made a cake when we got there, a coarse cake. When it was out of the oven, she cut it, gave me a piece. She had two children, and she gave them [a piece]. When I finished I asked for another piece. She said no, she had made it for her children; I had so much at home and she wasn't going to give her children's cake to me." At the time, he felt wounded, since "she was somebody I trusted with my wellbeing. Only later I saw how touching her feelings were."

'I saw [the Freud image] and wanted to do something. I don't know how you go from there. You start thinking'

When Johns was in third grade, his grandfather died. Johns stayed briefly with his mother and her new family before being sent to his paternal aunt, a schoolteacher who taught in a "two-room schoolhouse, but only one room was used. There were 12 to 13 children at most." In high school he returned to his mother yet again.

In 1949, when he was 19, Johns dropped out of the University of South Carolina to move to New York, where he tried studying commercial art at Parsons School of Design. "When I came to New York, I was not adventurous. I had a kind of formless existence of always wanting to be an artist, but I had not much training," he says. "I had no contact with people who were artists. That's why meeting Bob Rauschenberg and John Cage and Merce Cunningham was so important to me. In my past I had no artists."

He and Rauschenberg became exceptionally close, taking studios in the same building, making money by designing window displays together for Tiffany's, and pushing one another artistically. They are frequently described as lovers. As recently as 2013, some critics scorned them (as did MoMA on the occasion of its show *Johns and Rauschenberg* – for not being blunt about the nature of their relationship. When I asked him several years ago if he and Rauschenberg had been romantically involved, he retorted, "How is it relevant?" For Johns, who once said that while growing up he always felt like a guest in someone else's house, what mattered was that he'd finally found "kin".

One night during that period in the 1950s, Johns dreamt he was painting a flag. That dream led to "Flag", a seminal painting of the Stars and Stripes that conflated image and object: was it a flag or a representation of a flag? "It was radical for me," he says. "I had no interest or knowledge of what I was doing relative to anything else." "Flag" helped confirm in his own mind that he was an artist. He destroyed his earlier work. "I did lots of other stuff, but it was done in a different spirit. It was done with the spirit that I wanted to be an artist, not that I was an artist."

Next came paintings of other universally recognised symbols: numbers, letters and, later, maps. One day when Castelli was visiting Rauschenberg, he saw Johns' work and offered him a show there and then. It was an auspicious debut: MoMA bought an astounding three pieces. "For me it was unbelievable," Johns recalls. "It was my first experience having a show. It was my first contact with people important in the art world." Alfred Barr, MoMA's influential first director, made the selections himself. "Alfred thought they might not last very long the way they were made" – with ephemeral materials such as newspaper encrusted in the paint – "but then he said something like, 'We might not last very long either.'"

In 1961, after seven years, Johns and Rauschenberg had a falling-out. Even after all this time, Johns does not have a neat explanation as to why. "I wonder if I know," he says, before adding: "But I certainly don't want to talk about it if I do." He stretches in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head and crossing his legs at the ankles, defiantly silent.

Their split has repeatedly been described as bitter and total, with critics speculating that Johns' painting "Liar" was in reference to Rauschenberg. But Johns' version of the aftermath is less dramatic. "Bob and I were not unfriendly," he says. Neither were they friendly – he told me nine years ago that they saw each other "only by chance". Perhaps they both mellowed with age. Johns did attend Rauschenberg's memorial service in 2008. "Myths develop. I think people make things up," he says. "There's nothing I want to set straight about the record." When he chooses to reveal something, one friend says, it's in his art.

Johns retreated from New York to bucolic Sharon in the 1990s. Meyer, a painter whom Johns had hired in 1985 after he knocked on the door of Johns' Manhattan studio, moved to the nearby town of Salisbury, where he lived with his family. Sometime between 2006 and 2012, according to an indictment handed down last August, Meyer allegedly removed at least 22 unfinished artworks from Johns' studio, where he was responsible for their safekeeping, and transported them to New York, where he sold them through an unnamed gallery, falsely claiming they were gifts. To prove their authenticity, he allegedly went so far as to create fictitious inventory numbers and produce fake pages for Johns' ledger of completed artworks. The gallery sold the works for roughly $6.5m, $3.4m of which allegedly went to Meyer.

If convicted of interstate transport of stolen property and wire fraud, Meyer could be sentenced to a maximum of 30 years in prison. Neither Meyer nor his lawyer responded to requests for comment. While friends of Johns say he was devastated by the alleged deception – one of them likens it to his parents' virtual abandonment of him – they also hesitate to draw a straight line from the incident to "Regrets", calling this too linear for such a complicated man.

For decades Johns also spent a lot of time at his house on the Caribbean island of St Martin, but he has mostly stayed in Connecticut for the past few winters. "For some reason, the last time I worked there and finished something, I cleaned out the studio," he says. "The only reason to go is to sit in the sunshine for a few days. That's not very interesting to me." He's comfortable here, in the big stone house.

Even after 60 years of making art, though, Johns is still not entirely at ease with his practice. "I laboured over these a lot," he says of "Regrets". "Somehow what you end up with seems to be something you should have known was there to begin with, even though you had to work so hard to find it." That being an artist is still so arduous perplexes him. "I worry about the difficulty of making things, or the difficulty of knowing what to do," he admits. "I may think, having been working at this all these years, why don't I find it easy? Since it's a relatively simple activity."

'Jasper Johns, Regrets' opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on March 15. moma.org

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Belcove, Julie. "Regrets belong to everybody." *Financial Times*, February 15 – 16, 2014, Leisure & Arts, p. 17.

ARTNEWS

reviews: national

Jasper Johns

Matthew Marks Gallery
Los Angeles

This small but deeply satisfying exhibition was an auspicious event that reverberated well beyond its size. Simply titled "Recent Prints," it united 16 recent linoleum cuts, intaglios, lithographs, and etchings by the venerable artist Jasper Johns to inaugurate the gallery's second exhibition space. Pristine and serene, the new 5,000-square-foot facility is just around the corner from the original building, which concurrently offered a selection of the artist's bronze wall pieces, paintings, and works on paper—an extraordinary companion piece to the presentation of Johns's prints.

The print show was packed with visual and conceptual delights. Throughout the artist's long, fruitful engagement with printmaking, he has continued to come up with new ideas and fresh variations on familiar themes, and this lineup of works made from 2000 to 2011 did not disappoint. The earliest pieces, two boldly delineated linoleum cuts on handmade paper, appear to depict a white vase sitting on a ledge in front of an American flag. But on a second look, the vase shape also becomes the negative space between two human profiles facing each other. This optical illusion is a classic example of the shifting figure-ground relationships Johns has often incorporated into his work. In this case, however, a third profile—echoing the face on the left and emerging from the red-and-white stripes of the flag—adds yet another perceptual twist.

Jasper Johns, *Bushbaby*, 2004, intaglio on paper, 42¾" x 29¾".

Jasper Johns, *Shrinky Dink 2*, 2011, intaglio on Revere Standard White, 28¾" x 31¾".

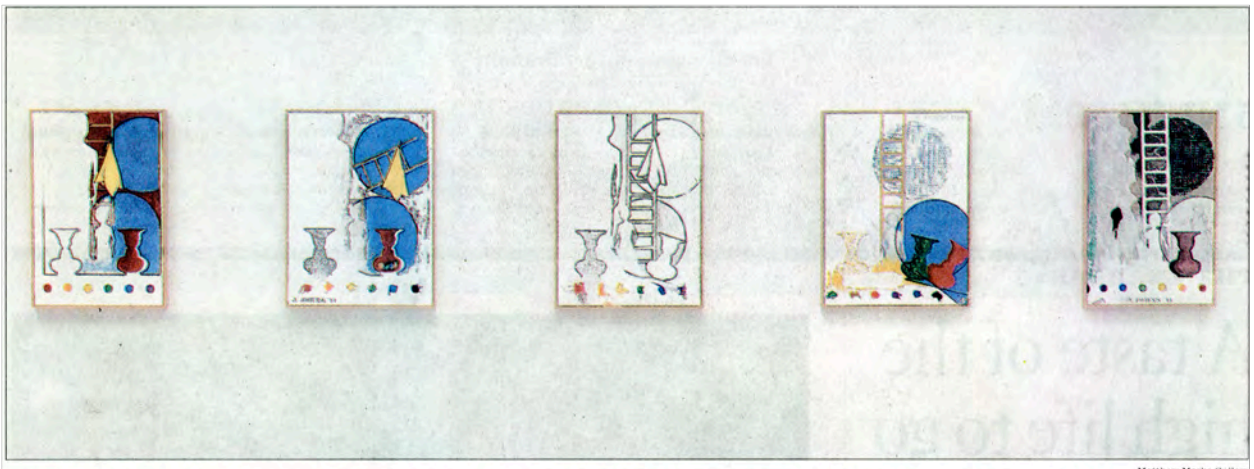
The interplay of faces and vases recurs in Johns's "Shrinky Dink" series of black-and-white intaglios, made in 2011. But in these works, the figure-ground tension is woven into a rich mix of the artist's favorite motifs, including figural silhouettes, flags, letters of the alphabet, gestures from American sign language, and an anguished Picasso-like figure. Viewing these prints all at once is rather like hearing the artist carry on a spirited conversation with old friends.

When it comes to his work's meaning, Johns has always welcomed audience participation. Three softly nuanced intaglios, collectively titled "Bushbaby" and made between 2004 and 2006, combine bright colored dots and diamond shapes with ghostly spaces, leaving much to interpretation. *Fragment of a Letter* (2010) is more straightforward but no less intriguing. Relatively orderly and formal in its arrangement of large, geometric shapes, it's a lovely homage to human communication as well as a masterful print, executed as a diptych. In the two adjacent sheets, Johns draws viewers into overlays of signing hands, printed text, sweeping circular strokes, and the print of an inked open palm. It's possible to translate the hand gestures and read the text, but that isn't the point. As always, Johns uses an eclectic and even recycled vocabulary to create something original.

—Suzanne Muchnic

Muchnic, Suzanne. "Jasper Johns." *ARTnews*, February 2013, p. 96.

Los Angeles Times



Matthew Marks Gallery

JASPER JOHNS' "5 Postcards" is among a large body of recent work, including prints, paintings and bronze relief sculptures, on display at Matthew Marks Gallery.

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Johns offers a rare treat

By Holly Myers

It is with a duly momentous air that Matthew Marks Gallery declares its current Jasper Johns exhibition to be "the first time in Johns's more than 50-year career that he has chosen to debut a major body of work in Los Angeles."

One cannot help but feel that some cosmic tide must surely have turned for so iconic a member of the New York school to turn his attentions thus westward with a gallery that is itself a recent high-profile transplant — though the advantageous proximity to Johns' recently opened retrospective in San Francisco couldn't have hurt.

Whatever the cosmic implications, the show itself is a rare treat, offering unmediated access to the workings of a truly robust creative intelligence. With nearly three dozen prints, paintings and bronze relief sculptures, all recent, spread across the gallery's two adjacent spaces, it presents the artist from multiple angles and finds him complacent in none. Indeed, there is scarcely a slack square inch in the show.

Working primarily with a handful of repeated motifs, many of which have appeared in his works for years — numbers, the outline of a boy, a vase that is formed by two faces in profile — Johns approaches composition in a manner that feels continually exploratory, shuffling and reshuffling familiar elements into ever more surprising configurations.

The number motif is an illuminating case in point. In the show's one large (9 by 7 feet) and 12 midsized (20 by 38 inches) cast bronze relief works, Johns presents rows of digits like blocks of type in a printing press, much as he has in countless past paintings. Though structurally identical, each work is utterly unique in effect, distinguished by lush variations in the color and the texture of the bronze, in the relative agitation and placidity of the surface.

Some are marked with stray bits of newspaper print; one bears the unmistakable imprint of a foot (Merce Cunningham's, apparently). In a particularly absorbing bit of visual trickery, the numbers tip sporadically from a positive to a negative imprint, giving the surface a rippling buoyancy.

The avidity that characterizes Johns' approach to the numbers, a motif that might well have become a cliché by now, is equally palpable in the show's paintings and prints. Indeed, Johns' apparently tireless capacity for shifting between media — his talent for bringing the lessons of one to bear upon the other while remaining somehow true to the material integrity of each — is one of the most remarkable aspects of the show.

None of this will be surprising to anyone familiar with Johns' work over the years. What is surprising is how fresh it remains — how unflaggingly energetic and filled with curiosity. Johns reminds us — as Cezanne a century earlier reminded us — that it doesn't take much: a row of numbers, bowl of fruit. What matters is the quality of attention paid.

Myers, Holly. "Johns offers a rare treat." *Los Angeles Times,* December 7, 2012, p. D19.

Art in America

Jasper Johns: *Fragment of a Letter*, 2010, intaglio on handmade paper, two sheets, each 44⅞ by 30½ inches; at Matthew Marks.

JASPER JOHNS
MATTHEW MARKS

At the age of 81, Jasper Johns continues to invent visual forms and modes of representation. A sizeable recent show of new sculpture and works on paper at Matthew Marks confirmed his tenacity through a pleasing combination (apprehension of which improved with subsequent visits) of the familiar and the unexpected. Ambiguity of meaning abounded as mediums, representations and works themselves were obscured, beginning with three small-scale ink drawings that Johns delicately executed on the flexible plastic of the children's craft material Shrinky Dinks.

The gallery's main room offered seven reliefs from 2007 to '09 that revisit Johns's exploration of gridded numerals, a subject he introduced (and became well-known for) in the late 1950s. The largest example, *Numbers* (2007), hung on the wall and dominated the space. Cast in aluminum, it measures approximately 107 by 83 inches. Despite its size, one was immediately drawn to the complex, coarse surface containing readable, transferred newspaper fragments of classified ads and headlines. Six smaller cast reliefs (each about 10 by 38 inches) in different metals and patinas, also of gridded numbers, stood on wooden pedestals. (Despite the similarities in works' format and content, the patinas allow for markedly unique effects.) Unexpectedly, the display lent a contemplative somberness to the space as viewers circled the works and considered them more wholly. In addition, the backs of the reliefs were cast with devices for hanging them on the wall, countering a straightforward reading of the works as either freestanding or wall-hung.

Quietly, *0-9 (with Merce's Footprint)*, 2009, refers to Johns's old friend Merce Cunningham, who died the year the work was made. This wall-hung relief in bronze includes an impression of Cunningham's footprint—perhaps a reminder of the indelible mark Cunningham made on Johns. But overall, throughout the show, Johns provided only ambiguous clues, leaving us, as usual, to decode the signs and symbols.

The back gallery had a significant group of new works on paper that reengage and rework longstanding motifs as well as introduce new ones, such as images of gourds with painted faces. However, perhaps the most notable works were three on paper and a sculpture, in a side gallery, all based on a letter from Vincent van Gogh to Émile Bernard. The intaglio diptych *Fragment of a Letter* (2010) has on the left a sign language translation of part of the letter and, on the right, the printed text. The letter in sign language becomes a kind of visual puzzle. The use of this alternate alphabet represents a new engagement on the part of the artist—a reworking of his recurring handprint (which appears in the diptych) and a testament to his continued experimentation at this phase of his career. Johns has appropriated these hand signs as a new, malleable vocabulary with which to again challenge expected and straightforward meaning within his work.

—*Jane Panetta*

Panetta, Jane. "Jasper Johns." *Art in America*, September 2011, pp. 131–32.

ARTNEWS

reviews

Jasper Johns

Matthew Marks

Jasper Johns continues to dazzle with this rich show of nine sculptures and 20 works on paper. Although there was great variation among the pieces, all seem magically linked by encoded messages and allegorical reverberations.

The sculptures are rectangular plaques made of bronze, white bronze, aluminum, or silver marked with Johns's signature numbers, usually laid out in two sequences: 0 to 4 on the upper level, 5 to 9 on the lower. Johns's conceit is to treat 0 as an integer, in effect turning 9 into 10. In this way, he plays the idea of 3, traditional symbol of spiritual unity, off against 10, Aristotle's perfect number, an image of spiritual achievement.

These esoteric numerical elements are linked to other occult ideas, all of which suggest a code, a means to transmit secret messages. This notion of secrets hidden where anyone can see them continues in Johns's incorporation of sign-language hand gestures, a visual mystery for those who can hear.

Johns thickens the mystery with details, some autobiographical and some so personal as to be unfathomable: Merce Cunningham's footprint appears on the bronze plaque *0–9 (with Merce's Footprint)*, 2009. The footprint could allude to a birth certificate, which in bronze, becomes an elegiac commemoration of a lost friend, a death certificate. In *0–9* (2008), house keys are inscribed on a silver plaque. Might the noble metal imply they are mystical keys to knowledge or an inner reality? The plaques, evoking those once bolted to locomotive steam engines, are charged with mystical energy, and tell something of the locomotive's history. By extension, Johns's plaques can be viewed as self-portraits.

Jasper Johns, *Numbers*, 2007, aluminum, 107⅝" x 83" x 2¼".

In the aluminum *Numbers* (2007), about 108 by 83 by 2 inches, Johns extends his obsession with the 0-to-9 pattern to eleven rows of numbers. This commemoration is personal: Johns is courting his own immortality.

The drawings, which contrast with the plaques, fall into three categories. In one, Johns revives the picture puzzle of the vase that might be two faces in profile. In *Shrinky Dink 2* (2011), the vase occupies the center of the image while the two faces in profile stare at a human figure within the vase. Inside that encased figure is another humanoid image, perhaps Johns's secret self.

Installed in a separate room was a fascinating combination of works on paper and sculpture, including four works, all dealing with a fragment of a letter from van Gogh to the artist Émile Bernard (ca. December 1887). Johns printed the quoted section backward, thus turning van Gogh's friendly words into a Leonardoesque mystery. Van Gogh talks about the need to transcend the ego: "I believe that the first condition for success is to put aside petty jealousies; it's only unity that makes strength. It's well worth sacrificing selfishness, the 'each man for himself,' in the common interest." These ideas, incorporated into the small collage *Fragment of a Letter* (2009), provide clues to Johns's relationship to tradition and the language of art. He quotes, in translation, another artist, taking his words, that is, his art, out of context and transforming them into something new, whose meaning we long to understand but which remains tantalizingly out of reach.

—Alfred Mac Adam

Mac Adam, Alfred. "Jasper Johns." *ARTnews*, Summer 2011, p. 116.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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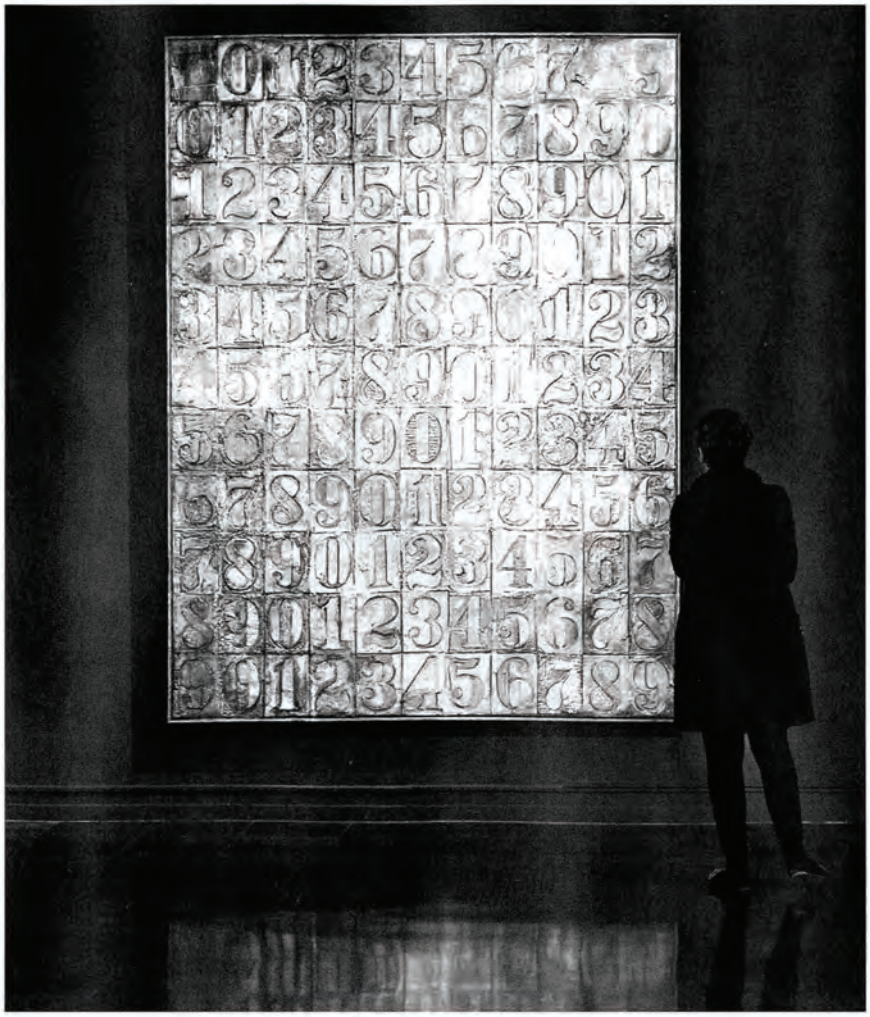
FINANCIAL TIMES

Meaning in the making

His paintings changed the course of art history in the 1950s. Now, at 80, Jasper Johns is preoccupied by sculpture. In a rare interview, he tells Julie Belcove why



Numerology Jasper Johns' 'Numbers', on show in Valencia earlier this month;

the artist receives the Medal of Freedom from President Obama in February 2011; Johns in 1968, in front of his print edition 'Numerals'

Photoshot, AP, Corbis

Belcove, Julie. "Meaning in the making." *Financial Times,* April 30 – May 1, 2011, p. 13.

Jasper Johns is standing in his handsome, wood-panelled studio, housed in a shingled barn with wide-open views of rolling New England hills, looking at two pencil drawings propped against a wall. Made last year, each includes an image of a ladder – one broken – along with two figures in outline, a boy and a man. The man is but partly rendered; the line stops abruptly and, in contrast to the rest of the picture, which is shaded in grey, there is a haunting white void where his body ought to be.

The implication of absence is all the more poignant considering a remark Johns made a few minutes earlier. I'd asked how he thought he'd evolved in his more than 60 years as an artist, to which he replied, "It's very difficult to know, because it's a bit like ageing. In many ways you don't feel you've changed at all, and yet you're perfectly aware you have, and if you examine yourself in the mirror, you can point to the details." He laughed and added, "There's a little bit of Gertrude Stein: 'What's the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man?'"

A few weeks shy of 81, Johns says he's pretty much the same person he's always been, beginning with his bleak childhood in South Carolina, where he was shunted from relative to relative, and his arrival in New York City at the age of 19, determined to become an artist. "There was a lot of desire," he says, "and a lot of ineptitude."

That last bit has surely changed. One of contemporary art's great masters, he remains a vital practitioner. The past decade has proved an unusually fruitful late period. First came his "Catenary" series of paintings, grey canvases with strings slung between points, and on May 6 he will debut

> Johns would have one believe his choice of imagery can be the result of something as banal as cleaning a studio

a batch of new sculptures at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York's Chelsea.

His hair is white now, his hands perhaps a little swollen. But his voice has not lost its rich, deep timbre and, even after a hard winter, his first here in Sharon, Connecticut – he has always fled to the Caribbean island of St Martin when the cold sets in – he does not seem frail. He is warm and courtly, true to his Southern roots, but he is also intensely private and notoriously elusive. At times it can be hard to tell whether he's being unnervingly straightforward or just ironic. Asked why, for example, he favours working in wax – his most famous paintings are encaustic, which is pigment in heated wax – he replies, "It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity."

Johns, who in the 1950s showed a way out of Abstract Expressionism and changed the course of art history with his startlingly brash canvases of flags and targets, hasn't been painting much in the last couple of years. Instead, he's been preoccupied with sculpture.

He has laboured on and off in metal in his career, but just why he turned his attention back to it so resolutely is a story that unravels like, well, a Johns artwork – that is, slowly, in layers, and with the distinct sense that there is more to the mystery. The way Johns tells it – though not necessarily in the order – the architect Philip Johnson, a friend, commissioned him to make a piece for what is now the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center. "I did it probably because I needed the money," Johns says, sipping tea in a comfortable sitting room above his studio, lined with, among other treasures, a powerful grouping of de Kooning drawings.

Presiding over the theatre's lobby, "Numbers" (1964), an enormous grid of numerals – one of Johns' signature motifs – became iconic in its own right. Then, in 1999, 35 years after he made it, Lincoln Center decided to sell it for a reported $15m. Johns, Johnson and a host of the cultural elite objected vociferously, in large part because the piece was made specifically for the site. It is also the artist's only public work. The performing arts centre backed down, shamefaced, but, Johns says, "When they found out it was worth a lot of money, they decided it needed protecting. The last time I saw it, it had Plexiglas in front of it and ropes in front of the Plexiglas." Johns was aghast at the display. "I thought if the work could be turned into metal, all this protection wouldn't be necessary."

He started experimenting and concluded he could safely cast the original, but the owners refused to give him the go-ahead. So, Johns says, "I just decided I would make a new piece since I knew how."

The result is "Numbers" (2007), a grid of numerals nought to nine repeating, like the original, in sequence. Carved in wax and then cast in aluminium, the wall sculpture, also like its antecedent, includes snatches of newspaper, a classic Johns touch, as well as a set of keys — perhaps a gentle chiding of the platoons of Johns watchers who would attempt to unlock his art's meaning. Near the upper right corner is a foot. It is an impression of Merce Cunningham's. Johns says he wanted to create a "clear reference" to the Lincoln Center piece, which also bears a subtle stamp of the avant-garde choreographer's appendage. (It was an inside joke: long ago, Johns wanted to get Cunningham's foot in the door there.)

Cunningham, who died in 2009, was a friend of Johns' for more than 50 years. He and his partner, the late composer John Cage, joined with Johns and artist Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s to form a foursome of mind-boggling creativity. Frequent collaborators, they bonded, Johns says, "through the sharing of ideas. The complexity of that grew over time." Once intensely close, Johns and Rauschenberg, who died in 2008, parted ways years ago.

Johns' economy of words is matched by an artistic thriftiness. It's as if he had an aversion to waste of any kind. His recycling of symbols has spawned countless doctorates and dissertations. Viewing his repetition as a possible "limitation", he would have one believe his choice of imagery can be the result of something as banal as cleaning a messy studio.

When he was straightening up in St Martin last year, he came across scraps of paper – shapes, sketches – which he then referenced for the new drawings. In what Johns describes as "fallout" from "Numbers", he literally pulled the original wax apart in sections to cast smaller sculptures. While most are darkly subdued bronze or aluminium, a shiny silver variation is hard to miss on a studio table. "It's so glamorous," Johns says, sounding almost embarrassed and quickly noting that he made only one. "You don't want to do too many. They're quite showy."

Johns had to job-out the metal casting to a foundry, but he handled the polishing and patina himself back in the studio. Although he bucked the ever-growing trend to just phone it in, he is hesitant to preach the glories of the handmade. "I don't know if it's important or unimportant. It's just the way I behave," he says. He laughs and admits one reason is that often he doesn't know what he wants until he gets there. "There's always an aspect of uncertainty and something unknown that you're dealing with."

Delving into the unknown still seems to be the primary source of inspiration for

> Asked why he favours working in wax, he replies: 'It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity'

Johns. Take another group of works in the Marks exhibition, made, no joke, from Shrinky Dinks, the children's craft material that contracts to one-third of its original size when baked in an oven. His, just a few inches tall, are unusually flat and symmetrical; in amateurs' hands they tend to curl, distorting the image. "There were a few failures," he insists.

For another series of prints, he mined the sign-language alphabet. After ordering a set of sign-language rubber stamps online, he redrew the hand symbols and e-mailed his version to the company, which made him a new set to his specifications. Known to sign his canvases by stencilling his name, Johns chose to spell it in sign language this time around. The prints, like much of Johns' oeuvre, could be read as a meditation on communication.

But don't bother asking Johns. He much prefers viewers come up with their own conclusions.

"So much of the meaning to me is in the making," he explains. "While that's going on, there's shifts of thought and associations and paths of development you want to follow and you want to avoid. Somehow the viewer can have a somewhat similar experience of determining. It sounds corny, but you have a sense of being alive when you encounter the thing."

When I ask if has given thought to his legacy, he replies, "What does legacy mean?" I throw out a standard definition. He pauses in his deliberate manner, staring out a window, and finally answers, "No.

"I think about what I'm doing. I sometimes think about what I have done. I don't have any real sense of what the world needs or what it will be," he continues. "No, I'm just here."

'Jasper Johns: New Sculpture and Works on Paper', Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, May 7-July 1. www.matthewmarks.com

Belcove, Julie. "Meaning in the making." *Financial Times,* April 30 – May 1, 2011, p. 13.

The New York Times

A Painter of Flags Unfurls His Emotions, Slowly

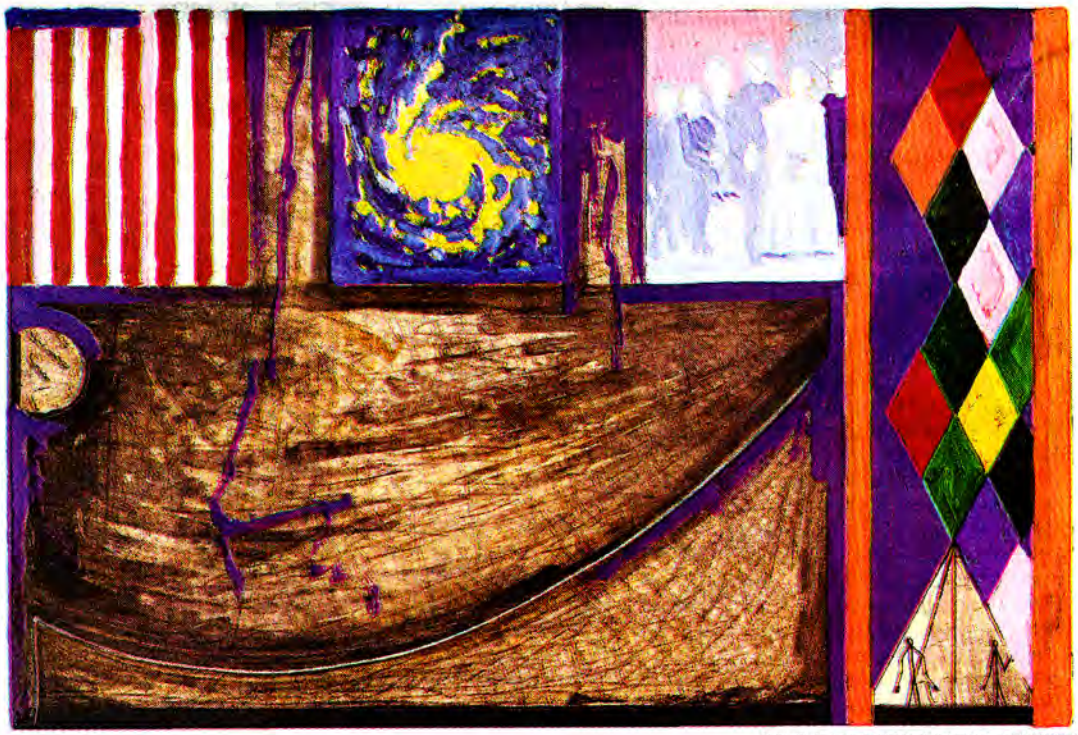
ART REVIEW

KEN JOHNSON

Jasper Johns is a famously reticent artist. So it may strike some visitors to the Museum of Modern Art as comical when they read his words quoted in a wall label next to his 1985 painting "Summer": "In my early work I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions, but eventually it seemed like a losing battle. Finally one must simply drop the reserve." Funny that Mr. Johns would view his later work, which is not much less enigmatic than his early work, as unreserved.

The quotation appears in "Focus: Jasper Johns," an exhibition of 87 paintings, drawings and prints from the permanent collection organized by Deborah Wye, the museum's chief curator of prints and illustrated books. The show focuses on a handful of motifs that Mr. Johns has recycled over the years, including the target, the numbers, the flag, the can of brushes and the so-called crosshatchings. Ranging in time from his first painting of the American flag in 1954-55 to a recently acquired series of works on paper from 2001, it would make an excellent introduction for anyone just getting to know Mr. Johns's work.

The exhibition also affords an occasion to ponder its possible deeper currents of meaning. Consider, for starters, "Target with Four Faces" (1955), in which four orange plaster casts of the lower part of a person's face occupy a row of cubbyholes above a painting of a blue and yellow target on a red background. There is the slyly punning relationship between the eyeless faces and the single bull's eye, which might be construed as representing the limits of individual perception versus the completeness of transcendental vision. Also there is



JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

An untitled painting from 2001 includes a flag and other images that recur in Mr. Johns's works.

Focus: Jasper Johns
Museum of Modern Art

tension between fragmentation and wholeness, which, embodied as it is in the style of an old carnival game, generates feelings of nostalgic melancholy.

"Flag" (1954-55) intimates similar preoccupations. Art historians and critics have observed how neatly this painting of the American flag collapses representation, abstraction and objecthood into an indissoluble yet paradoxical union. Less often mentioned is what the flag represents: united states, multiplicity and oneness.

When Mr. Johns created "Flag" and "Target with Four Faces," he was in his mid-20s, a time of life when many people struggle to reconcile their contradictions and conflicts and try to arrive at a unified sense of self. The beauty of those early works is in how such seemingly impersonal images can convey such plaintive urgency.

It has commonly been supposed that Mr. Johns picked motifs that were relatively empty of meaning so that he could focus without distraction on abstract forms and technical processes. So, in many prints in the exhibition representing the numbers 0 through 9, we study the exquisite sensitivity with which Mr. Johns makes lines, washes and colors cohere into chunky, rounded numerals.

In many cases he layers all 10 numbers in one rectangle. Again, as in the many prints representing maps of the United States, he shows the parts and the whole.

A less obvious instance, perhaps, is the image of the Savarin coffee can loaded with brushes, which Mr. Johns first made as a painted, cast bronze sculpture. The sculpture is not in the show, but ink drawings and prints of it are. It is always depicted centrally on a shelf like an ecclesiastical symbol.

Why is this image so compelling for Mr. Johns that he returns to it over and over? You could say he's just practicing the art of self-branding, which he has been enormously successful at. But you may also note that it's an image of many different things contained by one thing — another metaphor, perhaps, of the multiple self contained by one psyche.

Mr. Johns's later work lacks the sense of psychological compression that animates his early paintings and sculptures. Drawings, paintings and prints based

Johnson, Ken. "A Painter of Flags Unfurls His Emotions, Slowly." *The New York Times,* January 9, 2009, p. C32.

on the theme of the four seasons from the mid-80s are like scrapbooks or bulletin boards where souvenirs of his long career have accumulated in the form of miniature versions of the flag, the

'Finally one must simply drop the reserve.'

hatchwork pattern, the handprint that puns on the hand of a clock and other images from his repertory of signs and symbols. The painter's own shadow, cast on a green wall, adds an oblique autobiographical dimension; it is a blank, ghostly form, as though he were an enigma to himself.

In his most recent works Mr. Johns has been meditating on a geometric entity called the catenary: the curve of a loose length of string suspended from two points. In a series of works on paper from 2001 the catenary line is accompanied by other compartmentalized images: a spiraling galaxy, a copy of an antique family portrait photograph and the stripes of the American flag. The curved line implies, maybe, the ultimate extensions of time: the beginning and the end, birth and death.

Dryly abstract as it is, the catenary is not the most vivid of Mr. Johns's metaphors, but it is a good example of the tension between reserve and self-revelation that has fueled his art for more than five decades.

"Focus: Jasper Johns" is at the Museum of Modern Art, (212) 708-9400, moma.org, through Feb. 16.

Johnson, Ken. "A Painter of Flags Unfurls His Emotions, Slowly." *The New York Times,* January 9, 2009, p. C32.

The New York Times

Consummate Recycler Meets a Pointillist

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW

Jasper Johns has never rested on his laurels. He may hold title to a commodious niche in the history of art, but he works as if nothing is guaranteed. Forward motion is the thing: the next idea, the next painting, the next drawing. Especially the next drawing, as proved by two outstanding gallery exhibitions (through Saturday) timed to coincide with the lavishly engaging "Jasper Johns: Gray" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"Jasper Johns: Drawings 1997-2007" at Matthew Marks in Chelsea conveys a heady sense of his constant momentum. A second exhibition, at the Craig F. Starr Gallery uptown, counters this pell-mell energy with stasis and calm: "Jasper Johns/Georges Seurat Drawings" is small, tightly focused and displayed in a Wunderkammer-like gallery not much larger than a Matthew Marks storage bin. Each show has a catalog commensurate with its footprint, with pithy essays by the art historians Thomas Crow (Marks) and Richard Shiff (Starr).

The Starr show celebrates the Met's Johns show and the Museum of Modern Art's recent retrospective of Seurat's drawings by bringing together seven works by Mr. Johns from the 1950s and '60s and six by Seurat from the 1880s. Executed in shades of gray and black, they vie for atmospheric effect, like an oasis at twilight.

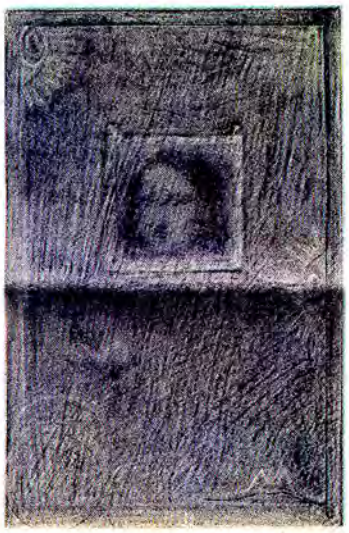
The 40 drawings at Marks skim over 20 different motifs, and reveal how many kinds of representation Mr. Johns has on the table at any one time. He is always quietly sifting through his past works or those of artists he admires; he is, in his measured way, as cannibalistic as the profligate Robert Rauschenberg, his doppelgänger in art history. Nothing Mr. Johns has ever used in his art is beyond reuse, and everything else is up for grabs — especially if it is by Duchamp, Picasso or a few others. The materials are almost as various: different combinations of ink, graphite, graphite pencil, graphite wash, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, oil stick, colored pencil and collage on paper or vellumlike plastic.

The Marks show is one of Mr. Johns's infrequent updates. It lets you in on some recent developments and indicates paintings to come. A version of his breakthrough flag images from the mid-1950s is on hand, in a dour black-on-black drawing made in 1998 over a proof of a 1968 lithograph. A 2005 reprise of a map of the United States, which Mr. Johns first painted in the early 1960s, depicts the nation with a steady downpour of delicate graphite diagonals, as if it were dissolving in the mist.

In several graphite drawings and brightly colored oil-stick works he returns to the flagstone pattern of his near-abstract paintings of the 1970s, depicting them in red, yellow and blue for the first time. He also revisits his recent "Catenary" paintings, with their frail curves of string.

At least one very compelling work is not a Johns staple. This is the dark and splintery "Untitled" (1986-2002), a photogravure and collage on paper based very closely on Duchamp's 1912 "Bride," with which he bade farewell to Cubism and started to edge away from painting. As Mr. Johns's works sometimes can, it makes a pretzel of perception and thought.

Among eight tightly regimented images, what seems to repeat doesn't; what seems made by hand, isn't — but then, is. You are looking at eight altered copies of eight drawings of a photograph of an original, the Duchamp; and the inky shifting planes have a strobe-light, stop-action effect.



COLLECTION JASPER JOHNS

COLLECTION JASPER JOHNS

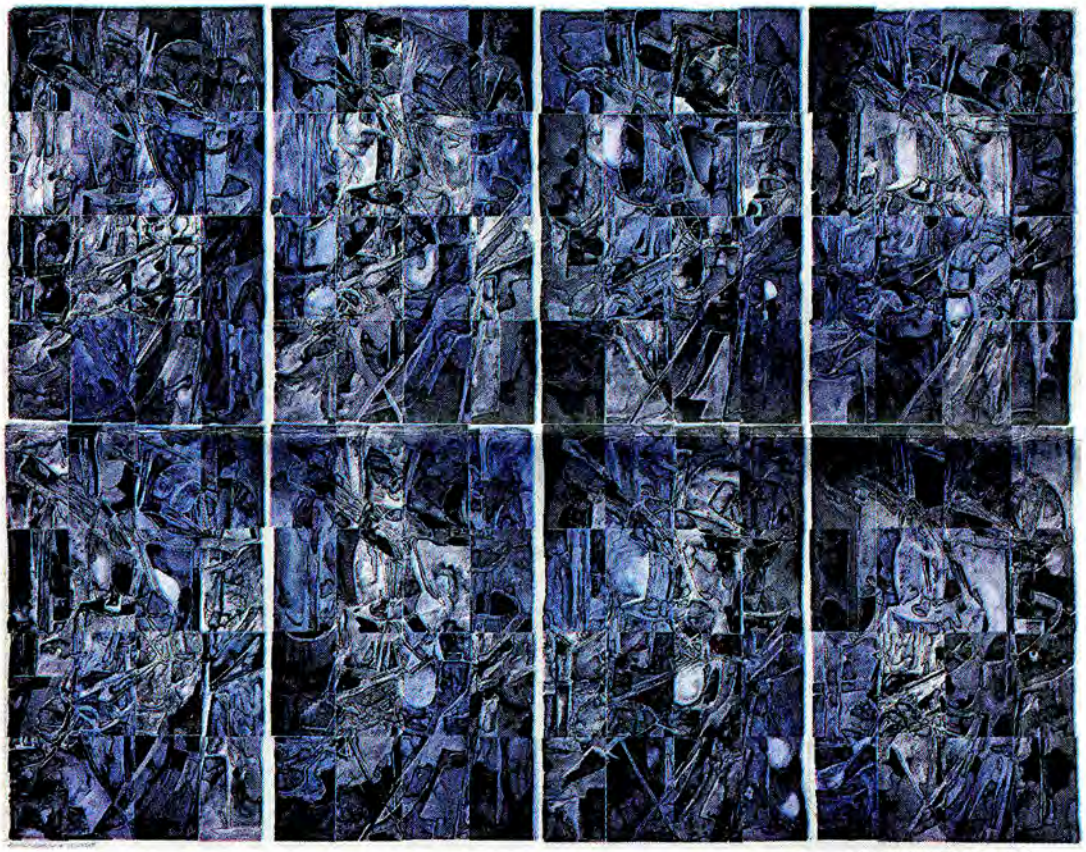
Top, "Untitled" (1996), by Jasper Johns. Above, "Torse de Femme" (around 1884), by Georges Seurat.

Jasper Johns: Drawings 1997-2007
Matthew Marks

Jasper Johns/ Georges Seurat Drawings
Craig F. Starr Gallery

"Jasper Johns: Drawings 1997-2007" at Matthew Marks, 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 243-0200, matthewmarks.com, and "Jasper Johns/Georges Seurat Drawings" at Craig F. Starr Gallery, 5 East 73rd Street; (212) 570-1739, starr-art.com. Both continue through Saturday.

Smith, Roberta. "Consummate Recycler Meets a Pointillist." *The New York Times,* April 10, 2008, p. E5.



JASPER JOHNS/VAGA, NEW YORK

Mr. Johns's "Untitled" (1986-2002) bears Seurat's soft focus, and throws in Picassoesque eyes.

ONLINE: JASPER JOHNS

More images from the gallery shows in Manhattan:

nytimes.com/design

There are other anomalies, like the two rather formal studies in which a large cartoonish eye is actively wrestled toward new meanings, with more than a bit of Saul Steinberg. The eye comes from the croissantlike truncation of a woman's head in Picasso's 1936 "Straw Hat With Blue Leaves," a form Mr. Johns has worked with for years. But here the eye has its day, especially in the second drawing. Its iris repeatedly thickens and extends into cylinders resembling smokestacks, cannon muzzles and wishing wells. The eyelashes mutate into spikes, nails, rays of light and curling flames.

These configurations culminate, around the corner, in a spacious drawing in which the iris-cylinders flare out, like comic-strip bug eyes that can't believe what they see.

The Marks show devotes a room to nine large elaborate drawings, primarily in watercolor or ink, that date from 2003 to 2006. Featuring colorful harlequin patterns and clownish polka dots, several carry the title "Bushbaby" and relate to paintings that have yet to be exhibited. The harlequin pattern also occurs in two unusually pale graphite drawings that are dominated by diamonds rendered in exquisitely fine-grained textures — as if Ingres were trying to figure out how to make a Seurat.

At Starr, Seurat makes the Seurats, and Mr. Johns musters a similar kind of silence and soft, dark atmosphere. Both artists understand the expressive splendors of black and gray, as well as the cumulative effects of repeating, methodical techniques. As Mr. Shiff points out in an essay aptly titled "Screens," these methods create a distance between artwork and artist while pulling the viewer in close.

But while Seurat carved out his blacks to create muted yet almost photographically accurate forms, Mr. Johns closes off the surface with dense planes whose delicate textures barely hint at alphabets, numbers and, in the earliest drawing here, from 1954, a pair of oranges. But Seurat lightens up in a drawing of a nude seen from the side. With a few touches and hazes of conté crayon, he turns the white paper into atmosphere.

This drawing, which is owned by Mr. Johns, hangs next to a stunning 1996 Johns drawing, in which the cartoon eyes from the Picasso hug the edge of the paper. At its center, hanging from trompe l'oeil nails, is a framed close-up of the Mona Lisa's face shown in Seurat-like soft focus. And raining over the whole sheet are torrents of lines, long and quick, and adding a third layer of technique and mood.

CORRECTION: APRIL 12, 2008
THE ARTS

A CAPTION ON THURSDAY WITH AN ART REVIEW OF DRAWINGS BY JASPER JOHNS AT THE MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, IN CHELSEA, AND OF DRAWINGS BY MR. JOHNS AND GEORGES SEURAT AT THE CRAIG F. STARR GALLERY, ON EAST 73RD STREET, DESCRIBED ONE DRAWING INCORRECTLY. "UNTITLED" (1996), BY MR. JOHNS, IS THE WORK THAT "BEARS SEURAT'S SOFT FOCUS, AND THROWS IN PICASSOESQUE EYES" — NOT "UNTITLED" (1986-2002) BY MR. JOHNS.

Smith, Roberta. "Consummate Recycler Meets a Pointillist." *The New York Times,* April 10, 2008, p. E5.

WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE
The New York Times

Jasper Johns Shows His True Color

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW

The art of Jasper Johns has been a cultural fact for about as long as most people can remember. A half century ago his deadpan paintings of flags and targets helped derail second- and third-generation Abstract Expressionism and changed the way we think about art. Since then he has been praised far and wide, his every artistic move doggedly studied and parsed. Meanwhile, he has done little but work, restlessly pushing forward and then circling back, still and ever driven by whatever brought him here in the first place.

Mr. Johns once told an interviewer, "I started drawing when I was 3, and I've never stopped." His desire to be an artist helped him survive a lonely childhood shaped by abandonment by his parents. In 1948, when he was 18, it propelled him from South Carolina to New York, where he saw his first Modern paintings at places like the Museum of Modern Art and where, 10 years later, he made his groundbreaking debut at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

Since then, scores of museum exhibitions have visited and revisited Mr. Johns's prolific and complex career. But "Jasper Johns: Gray" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is among the best. Moody, opulent and eloquent, it examines his many encounters with shades of gray and discovers a veritable shadow career. It also offers a supremely clear account of Mr. Johns's maturation from brilliant, methodical young artist to a deeper, more lyrical, less predictable one.

Mr. Johns is undoubtedly better known for his efforts in bright colors: the red, blue and white flags and the red, blue and yellow targets. In keeping with his found images, he has tended to use colors straight from the tube, arranged in primary and tertiary triads. But gray is the color at the core of his sensibility. It is the hue most natural to his art's fundamental reserve and persistent ambiguities, as well as its solitary stance and intellectual rigor. And gray is, or at least seems, more open-ended, more capable of being stretched further while remaining recognizably itself.

"Jasper Johns: Gray" was organized by James Rondeau and Douglas Druick of the Art Institute of Chicago, where it originated last fall, working with Nan Rosenthal of the Met. It brings together nearly 120 works, mostly paintings, drawings and prints, and a few sculptures.

It ranges from Mr. Johns's earliest chalkboardlike gray paintings of the late 1950s, with their morose, isolated objects, to his latest "Catenary" paintings, which actually depict chalkboards hung with fragile curves of white string that, some suggest, represent the human life span. Not everything is here, just enough to convey his art's main ideas in useful, take-away templates. And, frankly, it is almost a relief to survey the sweep of his career free of the noisier living-color masterpieces.

The opening gallery presents a dazzling confrontation: "False Start" and "Jubilee," both from 1959, both bristling with exclamatory mock-Abstract Expressionist brushwork randomly tangled

Continued on Page 40

JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Jasper Johns: Gray
"Céline" (1978), left, oil on canvas, is part of this show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Smith, Roberta. "Jasper Johns Shows His True Colors." *The New York Times*, February 8, 2008, pp. E33, E40.

Jasper Johns Shows His True Color

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with the names of colors. "False Start" is a riot of these very colors — red, yellow and blue, with white. "Jubilee," with its welcome-home title and slightly smaller size, reiterates them no less explosively, but as starkly as Whistler's Mother, in black, white and gray.

After this, we hear only from the gray side of the aisle, where there are plenty of subtle exchanges and contrasts. For one thing, the show divides into two halves. Its first four galleries form a tutorial in Johnsian motifs and techniques. Flags and targets abound, along with alphabets, numbers and maps; all are more or less exclusively gray. There are hints of the color triads behind the gray, which will increase. In the nearly black 1978 painting "Céline," after the French writer who chronicled the insanity of war, crosshatchings of orange, green and purple (the tertiaries) further agitate a frenzy of handprints. It suggests a frantic crawl across a flagstone floor in darkness, with a bullet slicing the terror like a surge of adrenaline.

The show's second half steps off a cliff into a free fall of emotions and memories, evocations of poetry and other art and shifting ratios of abstraction and representation. Death, signaled by various skulls, is under consideration.

Mr. Johns has often described himself as "a very literal artist" while also claiming that he is not a great colorist. But this show's early galleries suggest that his attention to the literal enabled him to become his own kind of colorist. He was drawn to the intrinsic colors of materials, and proceeded to explore them with a reflexive, almost animal curiosity. His need to see the same motif in different materials has been called repetitious, but these repetitions also keep his motifs unfixed and suspended in doubt, eroding the sacredness of his masterpieces.

"Jasper Johns: Gray" runs through May 4 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.

JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Jasper Johns's "Between the Clock and the Bed" (1982-83), encaustic on canvas, was partly inspired by a late self-portrait by Munch.

In one corner three small reliefs of flags are the same, only different. The first, from 1960, is painted in thick sculpmetal and collage. The second is also the first, embossed into soft lead (1969), as is the third, cast in silver after some delay (1960-1987). They form a philosophy of material that stresses diversity, equality and careful attention.

Some transpositions center on mark-making, as in the small drawing titled "Flag," from 1958, that is covered with short, cursive scribbles, as if the flag were a lined tablet on which pencils were being tested. These scribbles echo in a double flag painting from 1959, mixed with more flat-footed brushwork. This work is then painstakingly translated back into a large drawing.

The lyricism to come is foreshadowed by the mysterious "Tennyson," a shrouded charcoal painting from 1958 that Mr. Rondeau interprets, possibly for the first time, as a double bed. A piece of canvas covers its surface like a blanket except for portions at the bottom, where Tennyson's name appears in murky stenciled letters, and the top is vertically bisected, suggesting two pillows. Mr. Rondeau sees the work as a response to "Bed," which Mr. Johns's close friend at the time, Robert Rauschenberg, painted three years earlier on the quilt and sheets of his actual single bed.

The second-half plunge begins with a long gallery where dark paintings from the early 1960s are so densely hung that they seem to be lined up for inspection. Grays tending toward black are plentiful, and titles like "Liar," "No," "Good Time Charley" and "In Memory of My Feelings — Frank O'Hara" reflect a period of despondency. But the ambition and ideas about painting expand.

The grids and the symmetry often fade. Images drop out. The glowering "Disappearance II," with its corners of canvas folded into the center like the top of a box, might be a painting that has just eaten its target.

Instead of being respectfully depicted or showcased, objects are pressed into service as painting tools, evoking the artist in his studio while parodying painterly gesture and touch. In "Device," "Fool's House," "Good Time Charley" and "Voice," rulers, sticks and brooms scrape paint into abrupt, semicircular blurs and are then left nailed or wired in position.

JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, FROM THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

"Device" (1962), oil on canvas with semicircles made by the attached rulers.

JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Mr. Johns's "Flag," (1958), in pencil and graphite wash on paper.

ONLINE: MORE JASPER JOHNS

Additional images from the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: **nytimes.com/design**

And the artist becomes more present. In "Periscope (Hart Crane)," a wheeling, spectral blur seems to have been made by the stiff hand and forearm imprinted on it. In a related work, "Diver," hand- and footprints imply a sweeping semaphore of farewell, again evoking the poet Hart Crane, who committed suicide by throwing himself from a ship in the Gulf of Mexico in 1932.

In a small gallery behind "Diver," "Skin," a large work on paper, presents something like the whole body. Its freakish oil imprint of Mr. Johns's face and torso has been interpreted as a body floating in water. But the imprint's grotesque snout of a face and the extreme décolletage of its chest and shoulders, dictated by the body's lack of total flatness, may also bring to mind Willem de Kooning's women.

There is so much more here: the abstraction crosshatch paintings like "Between the Clock and the Bed" (1982-83), partly inspired by a late self-portrait by Munch; and the trompe l'oeil, mostly grisaille painting "Racing Thoughts" (1984-85), which enters the artist's bathroom, where a bath is being run while Mr. Castelli, Duchamp, Leonardo and Barnett Newman are remembered. There is the large and brittle "Untitled," from 1992-1995, one of Mr. Johns's busiest, weakest, most obscurely autobiographical works, redeemed by a painting-within-a-painting full of rich colors, leaded with gray, front and center.

This is a marvelous show, a shadow retrospective of a career within a career. It amplifies gray into a color spectrum all its own. And it illuminates 50 years of a life saved by, and lived for, the incessant pursuit of art.

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The New York Times

The Gray Areas Of Jasper Johns

Met Show Considers A Long Career: Easy to Recognize, Hard to Pin Down

By CAROL VOGEL

ST. MARTIN

ONLY one artwork hangs in Jasper Johns's all-white Caribbean home here. It's a nearly nine-foot-tall canvas in three sections: a harlequin pattern that cascades down on the right, a series of colored circles on the left, and a montage of gray encaustic brush strokes in the center. Two overlapping wooden slats are attached to the painting.

"You can't really have art down here because of the weather," said Mr. Johns, 77, who keeps most of his art collection — works by Degas, Picasso and Duchamp as well as old friends like Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg — in the Connecticut farmhouse and studio where he lives for most of the year. "Somehow," he said, inspecting the painting, "encaustic is impervious to the climate."

Completed in 2005, the work, "Bushbaby," encapsulates many of Mr. Johns's familiar themes. There's the encaustic, an ancient technique in which pigment is suspended in wax, giving each brush stroke a distinct materiality; the harlequin pattern, a nod to early Modern masters like Cézanne and Picasso; the strips of wood, introducing a three-dimensional element to an otherwise flat canvas; a string hanging from one slat, a suggestion of movement; and the color gray, which Mr. Johns has explored off and on throughout his nearly six-decade career.

To hear it from curators, gray is not just a familiar color for Mr. Johns but the essence of a long metaphysical journey, an exploration of "the condition of gray itself." At least that's the premise of a sprawling exhibition of his work that opens Tuesday at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

But when pressed on the show's focus, he said simply: "Yes, gray has been important to me. But I don't tend to think of it as separate from the rest of my work."

The response is classic Johns. In a parallel to his mysterious grays, suggesting both effacement and a resolute ambiguity, Mr. Johns seems to have perfected the art of talking about his work without ever revealing too much. Always courtly, he answers questions in a measured, seemingly straightforward manner that leaves a listener wanting to know far more. It's as if

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JOHN LUND

Jasper Johns outside his Connecticut studio. Left, his painting "False Start" (1959), part of the new Johns show at the Met. "False Start" is the most expensive painting by a living artist.

Vogel, Carol. "The Gray Areas of Jasper Johns." *The New York Times*, February 3, 2008, Arts, pp. 1, 32.

JASPER JOHNS WORKS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

From Page 1

he is aware that a myth surrounds him that he must be careful not to dispel.

For decades now his interpretation of flags and targets, numbers and letters — things, as he has often said, "the mind already knows," "things that were seen and not looked at, not examined" — have become as embedded in the contemporary American art psyche as Andy Warhol's soup cans or Jackson Pollock's drips.

Yet until this exhibition was organized, his use of gray — as a pigment, a stenciled word, a section of crosshatching — had not been singled out for sustained attention. The show, which began at the Art Institute of Chicago, insists that attention must finally be paid to what Mr. Johns once said was his "favorite color."

Sipping lemongrass iced tea on a recent 80-degree afternoon in a shaded pavilion on his property here, he spoke briefly about his early experiments with gray. "At first I had some idea that the absence of color made the work more physical," he explained. "Early on I was very involved with the notion of the painting as an object and tended to attack that idea from different directions."

Although monochrome paintings have existed throughout history, Mr. Johns said he wasn't trying to be part of any tradition. "I was trying to do something else."

Throughout this career he has relentlessly pushed his work to new places, from the flags of the 1950s to the maps of the '60s to the "Seasons" cycle of the '80s, in which he seems to appear as a vulnerable phantom figure. His explorations, in which the literal and conceptual can overlap in provocative ways, have served as inspirations to younger artists.

"Without question he's one of the most important painters of his generation," said Robert Storr, who is the dean of Yale University's School of Art and has known Mr. Johns since the late 1960s. "He put bits and pieces of painting and conceptual practice together in a way that nobody has done."

The artist Richard Prince said that he remembers viewing Mr. Johns's crosshatch paintings for the first time. "I was bowled over," he said. "He made me look at abstraction in a new way."

Yet not all artists have been so adoring. His Abstract Expressionist predecessor Mark Rothko impatiently dismissed Mr. Johns's targets and flags, saying, "We worked for years to get rid of all that." In decades since, critics have often been eager to puncture Mr. Johns's legend, deriding him as "self-mythologizing" or "undernourished and overthought."

Mr. Johns said he tries not to pay attention to negative commentary. He lives very much in his own universe, working every day and generally juggling several projects at once: paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints. He is a voracious reader (then in the middle of the third volume of John Richardson's Picasso biography), frequents his local movie theater in Connecticut (and relies on Netflix in St. Martin) and recently attended a performance at Dia:Beacon by the dance company of his friend Merce Cunningham. But keeping to himself has drawbacks. "For the last decade he's been in a capsule all his own," Mr. Storr said. "It's a problem because he seems to have a very remote relationship with young artists."

None of this seems to have had any effect on his commercial success. In 1980 the Whitney Museum of American Art spent $1 million for "Three Flags," then the highest price ever paid for the work of a living artist. In 1988 his painting "False Start" (1959) brought $17 million at an auction at Sotheby's. In 2006 the Hollywood mogul David Geffen sold "False Start" to the Chicago hedge-fund manager Kenneth C. Griffin for $80 million.

"False Start" thus holds the title of most expensive painting by a living artist and is a star in the Met's show. A riot of blues, reds and oranges with stenciled letters spelling out the names of colors (including gray), it plays neatly off the exhibition's premise — it has a grisaille counterpart in the show, "Jubilee" — and harks back to Mr. Johns's storied collaboration with Mr. Rauschenberg in the 1950s.

While Mr. Rauschenberg was glorying in incorporating objects like taxidermied animals into what became known as combines, Mr. Johns was painting maps, targets, numbers and alphabets that, like Mr. Rauschenberg's inventions, made viewers rethink the nature of art itself. Long viewed as a mere interregnum between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, their collaboration is now sometimes compared to that of Picasso and Braque.

Mr. Johns's early story is well known. Born in 1930 in Augusta, Ga., and raised in Allendale, S.C., he received his early education in a one-room schoolhouse in rural South Carolina, where he was sent to live with an aunt who did the teaching.

He said he had wanted to be an artist for as long as he can remember. "I don't know why," he said. "The only logical thing I can think of is that I knew there were such things as artists, and I knew there were none where I lived. So I knew that to be an artist you had to be somewhere else. And I very much wanted to be somewhere else."

He studied briefly at the University of

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He studied briefly at the University of South Carolina before coming in the late 1940s to New York, where he supported himself working odd jobs. It was there that he met the composer John Cage, Mr. Cunningham and Mr. Rauschenberg. Mr. Rauschenberg in turn introduced Mr. Johns to the dealer Leo Castelli, who gave him his first one-man show in 1958.

About 60 years after he first arrived in New York, Mr. Johns is still very much the Southern gentleman. He retains his accent and his soft-spokenness. Yet his quiet demeanor and his six-foot frame make him intimidating at first; he chooses his words with such care that a questioner is tempted to do likewise.

Each year, as soon as the temperature begins to plummet in Connecticut, he decamps to his house here, joining his two resident dogs, Pepper and Pumpkin — both were found abandoned on the island — to work, garden, read, cook and do crossword puzzles.

He first began visiting St. Martin in the late 1960s and bought the property here in 1972. The architect Philip Johnson is the principal designer of his home, a long, white, rectangular structure divided into three distinct sections. There is a 40-foot living room, dining area and kitchen; a bedroom; and his studio. Sliding glass doors span the entire length of both sides

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jasper Johns, center, in 1966 with one of his flag paintings, and other works by him: top left, the drawing "Within" (2007); top right, the painting "Within," begun in 1983 and finished in 2005; left, an untitled drawing (2001) and below that, the painting "Near the Lagoon" (2002), based on the untitled drawing; and below right, "Bushbaby" (2005), a painting that hangs in Mr. Johns's Caribbean home.

of the building. On one side they open onto a terrace overlooking the lagoon and Marigot Bay; on the other are views of the swimming pool and pavilion.

This has been an unusual winter for Mr. Johns. For one thing, he has been preoccupied with the "Gray" show and with a large exhibition of drawings that opened on Friday at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. "These shows bring you into a different frame of mind because you're having to think a lot about things that you have already done rather than about what you're doing," he said.

Still, he said, "I'm working in my mind." A new sculpture, which he steadfastly avoided describing, will be awaiting his attention when he returns to Connecticut.

It was crucial to Mr. Johns that "Gray" include not just his paintings but also prints, drawings and sculptures. He often executes drawings after he finishes a canvas, rather than before. "To do a drawing for a painting most often means doing something very sketchy and schematic and then later making it polished," he said. "It's done out of a different kind of energy. I love drawings, so I've always enjoyed making drawings that exist on their own."

Yet the idea for the "Gray" show originated when Mr. Johns departed from that norm, producing a predominantly gray untitled drawing in 2001 that paved the way for a large 2002 painting.

After the Art Institute purchased the work on paper, said Douglas Druick, chairman of its medieval through modern European painting and sculpture department, "we loved the drawing so much that we were intrigued to know how the painting would turn out."

So he and James Wood, then the museum's director, visited St. Martin to view the painting, "Near the Lagoon," which measures nearly 10 by 7 feet and, like the drawing, was inspired by Manet's "Execution of Maximilian" from 1867-68. The Art Institute ended up buying the painting.

"It was a eureka moment," Mr. Druick said. "It was then we thought by tracing an idea like gray, we could look at his entire career afresh."

For Nan Rosenthal, one of the curators of the Met show, it was crucial that the museum take an in-depth look at Mr. Johns's career. (The Met acquired its first Johns painting, "White Flag" from 1955, only a decade ago.) "A show as luscious and challenging as Jasper's gray works definitely belongs here," Ms. Rosenthal said.

Some of the drawings at Matthew Marks — all of which date from the past 10 years — correspond to paintings in the Met's show. Among them is "Within," a 2007 drawing with a predominantly gray background and Mr. Johns's signature cross-hatched imagery, over which he has painted a flagstonelike motif. It was inspired by a painting he started in 1983 and did not finish until 2005.

Unlike so many contemporary artists producing in today's overheated art market, Mr. Johns relies neither on dozens of assistants nor a computer to make his creations. He executes his work by hand. "It's a different art world from the one I grew up in," he said, relaxing in his living room in a pair of khaki shorts, a light blue shirt and sandals. "Artists today know more. They are aware of the market more than they once were. There seems to be something in the air that art is commerce itself.

"I haven't really been a part of it, although I'm sure in some way I am. It just doesn't interest me."

Asked what influence he feels he may have had on those young artists, Mr. Johns paused. "To me," he said, "self-description is a calamity."

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ARTFORUM

Left: **View of "Jasper Johns: Gray," 2007**, Art Institute of Chicago. From left: *False Start*, 1959; *Jubilee*, 1959. All works by Jasper Johns © Jasper Johns/licensed by VAGA, New York. Right: **Jasper Johns, *Two Flags*, 1959**, acrylic on canvas, 79¼ x 58¼".

"Jasper Johns: Gray"

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Carroll Dunham

JASPER JOHNS has been the subject of so many career surveys, narrowly conceived museum exhibitions, and critical/theoretical writings that one might be forgiven for some initial skepticism regarding the need for a big show focusing on his use of the color gray. The premise seemed symptomatic of a curatorial compulsion to occupy niches perhaps not crying to be filled. But the show's reality obviated such ungenerous concerns: "Jasper Johns: Gray" operates as a kind of shadow retrospective, illuminating in a necrotic light a narrative underbelly that even his most attentive enthusiasts might have had trouble imagining, and for which it is difficult to summon an artistic or curatorial precedent.

Johns has made a lot of gray art, and there was a lot of it in the show, which brought together nearly 140 paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures. The exhibition began with two paintings from 1959, *False Start* (which is not gray but contains the word *gray* as a pictorial element) and *Jubilee* (which is basically black, white, and gray, and also includes that word). These works were not the earliest present but were positioned to frame curators Douglas Druick and James Rondeau's didactic intentions, and, considered in tandem, they succinctly encapsulate the artist's early concerns with the nature of language's relationship to experience and with the doubtful possibility that thought or feeling could be transferred as meaning to an artwork, along with his agnostic relationship to the content of painterly gesture. Both iconic canvases are "about" gray, whether as a subject (the word *gray*) or as an experienced fact, and although their juxtaposition is hardly rocket science, it isn't at all obvious to use them to introduce room after room of relentlessly colorless material.

Henceforth, the installation was organized by subject or perceived affinity and, in gross terms, chronologically. Early on, Johns began dealing with his subjects as motifs or armatures that provided points of departure for works in various media and categories. (His gravitation to printmaking was probably both a result and a reinforcement of this basic disposition.) A precedent might be Cézanne's repetitive return to certain landscape subjects, although the operations of rotation, doubling, and mirroring, which Johns combined with his attraction to the properties of diverse materials, located his work in a diagrammatic and abstract realm. The American flag, at this point an almost overdetermined touchstone in our view of his artistic origins, provided the structure not only for the historically critical and familiar Flag paintings but also for a surprising number of gray versions, which neutralize the weirdly ambivalent patriotic formalism of their better-known siblings and set the subject adrift in a sociologically disconnected limbo. It was particularly interesting to see *Two Flags*, 1959, which is painted in acrylic, a material that Johns has used only rarely and that gives this painting a scratchy, dry starkness very different from the more familiar and lush encaustic versions. The fact that this subject famously came to Johns in a dream was reinforced by these ghostly alter egos.

Targets, maps, alphabets, and numbers, the other key subjects of Johns's early work, were all absorbed into his repetitive and relentless mode of investigation, and all appeared at some point in gray incarnations. This was the period of early television, years before color became the norm, and black-and-white photographs were still the common form. His ideas about color at that time played off commercial four-color printing technology and the systematized, nameable hues of the spectrum, so it was perhaps only logical for an artist of such a literal and analytic turn of mind to extend his territory into the gray scale, but that doesn't account for the oddness and power of much of this work. The gray number paintings in particular, such as the superimposed composition *0 through 9*, 1961, and the renderings of individual numerals like *Figure 2*, 1962, and *4 Leo*, done surprisingly late, in 1970, convey a philosophical weight and grating objecthood different from their more familiar relatives. Of all Johns's subjects, these isolated integers are perhaps the most archetypally powerful: Hovering revenants from the dawn of abstract thought, translingual and transnational, these numerals basic to all the systems that make our civilization possible are also utterly prosaic, a part of the earliest imprinting by which an individual undergoes socialization. Other paintings that have appeared widely in more "normal" Johns surveys, such as *4 the News*, *Device*, and *Fool's House*, all 1962; *Voice*, 1964–67; and

Dunham, Carroll. "Jasper Johns: Gray." *Artforum* 46, no. 6, February 2008, pp. 283–85.

the monumental drawing *Diver*, 1962–63, were elevated to a kind of creepy majesty by the absence of their more brightly colored contemporaries.

There were a few breaks in the retrospective continuity of the exhibition, and the first and most telling was that between these works of the mid- to late '60s and the appearance of the so-called Crosshatch paintings in 1972. These emerged as an apparent turn toward abstraction (which, as with most of Johns's subject matter, proved to be not so abstract), and in them the function and affect of gray appear to have changed. There is no longer the sense that these paintings represent black-and-white versions of other works or motifs. Instead, gray operates more as its own color, increasingly nuanced toward the edges of definition and cohabiting more openly with its skewed chromatic relatives. *The Dutch Wives*, 1975, is a gray painting in only the most nominal sense; calling it such is a bit like referring to a Zurburán as black. *Céline*, 1978, is a particularly mesmerizing example of the decayed pictorial mulch Johns was turning at the time, a balance between structural order and random, emotionally charged gestures like the lurid orange handprint in the top section of the painting.

Modern and contemporary art history is loaded with examples of artists after whom others were doomed to toil in a changed landscape. Duchamp, Picasso, Pollock, Warhol, and Richter, to name some of the most obvious examples, have all been posited as limiting cases, and there was a time when Johns was seen by many as the definitive paradigm shifter, parked squarely across any road an ambitious younger artist might take to the future. The problem with this approach to history is the freezing in amber of living artists within a theoretically useful but artificially static slice of their own trajectory, which fails utterly to account for the growth in time of individual experience. These "after-artists" also have to live "after" themselves, and Johns's solution to that problem (if, indeed, he himself ever saw it as such) has been instructive.

Throughout the '80s and more recently, Johns appeared to contradict the strict parameters of his earlier work. His subjects have grown increasingly personal, obscure, and even arbitrary in feeling. The "known unknowns" and "unknown knowns," to expand upon Donald Rumsfeld's formulation, have accomplished a fairly complete migration from the realm of public signs to that of memory and intuitive association. How much and what kind of a change this represents are fundamental questions raised by Johns's art. Psychically charged objects appear in a shallow space reminiscent of trompe l'oeil painting, arranged in almost scrapbook fashion across the surface of the picture, while points of view unlike any in his previous work are suggested. The motif of the running bathtub faucet at the bottom edge of the pictorial field, which is seen from the perspective of "the bather" (initiating a weird chain of association back toward late Cézanne), appears in many works of this time and establishes a space of blocked intimacy, intensely private and inaccessible. The depiction of what is presumably the artist's shadow falling across the "Seasons" canvases similarly invokes moments of passing solitude and fleeting perceptions of the uncanny that are both common to and far from the public domain. Following his earlier practice, Johns made two versions of *Racing Thoughts*, one in 1983 in rather colorful encaustic and one a year later in oil with a palette dominated by shades of gray, tan, and brown, which was included in the exhibition. While technically a version of another work, the more somber of the pair extends the multivalent chromaticism of the Crosshatch works, with gray again functioning as a kind of color choice, the dominant tone in a slightly off-key chord. *Winter*, 1986, from "The Seasons," was also in the show and further demonstrated the complex new layers of evocation Johns was finding in a predominantly gray palette. It was a mild relief to see this painting isolated from the other three in the group and to consider it as part of the exhibition's narrative rather than having to focus on the intricate permutation of symbols across the entire series. The chilly subject matter turned the content of the show back toward universal experience, however different weather may be from the realm of signs or abstraction. Johns's perhaps oddest area of exploration during this phase involved images of facial features, schematically rendered and dispersed around the edges of the rectangular field, creating the sense that the canvas, though occupied by other motifs, is itself a face. This sounds like such a bad idea that it is always surprising to encounter these things in person and to interact with their loopy intensity. *Untitled*, 1991, whose creamy white field stretched the envelope of the show's premise, was

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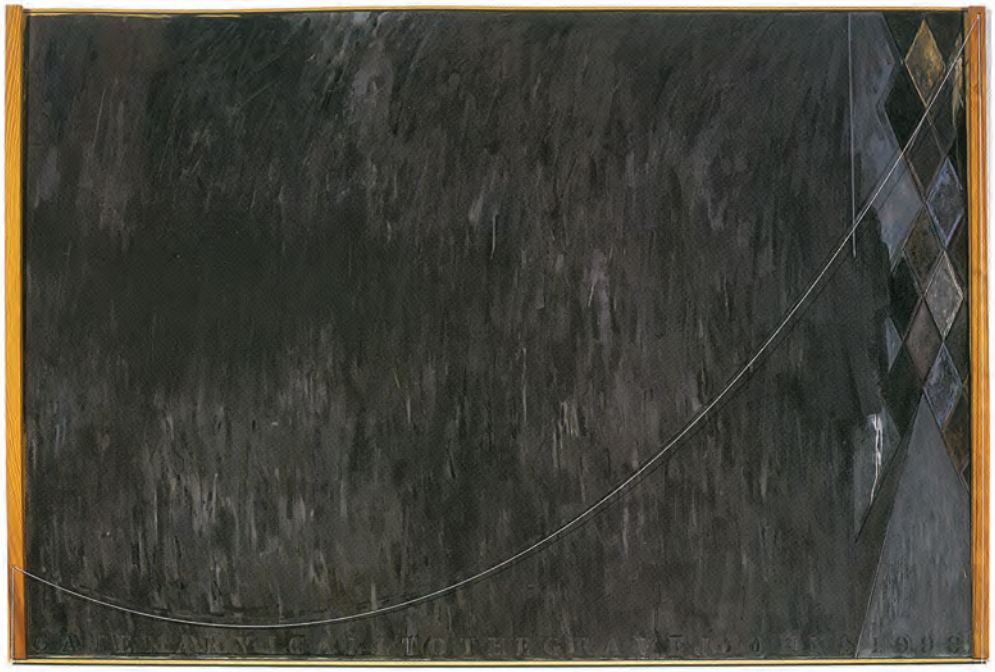
Opposite page, left: **Jasper Johns, *4 Leo*, 1970**, encaustic and collage on canvas, 50⅜ x 35¾". Right: **Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts*, 1984**, oil on canvas, 50 x 75". This page, left: **Jasper Johns, *Winter*, 1986**, encaustic on canvas, 75 x 50". Right: **Jasper Johns, *Catenary (I Call to the Grave)*, 1998**, encaustic and mixed media on canvas, 78 x 118 x 8".



nonetheless welcome as a locator of an outer edge of Johns's sensibility.

The "Catenary" series, which has occupied Johns for much of the past decade, uses as its central device the curve formed when a cord is hung between two points. This figure is present both as a literal artifact (a suspended string) and at the level of image, often inscribed within the gray expanses that fill most of these paintings. The catenary curve is viscerally satisfying and metaphorically rich, triggering thoughts of trajectories, lifelines, and the immutable laws of material existence. The rainy-looking gray fields reinforce these associations, as do titles like *Catenary (I Call to the Grave)*, 1998. There are some strange notes. The simple wooden slats and more complex hinged elements at the edges have a cabinetwork feeling a bit at odds with the paintings' sepulchral atmosphere, but they are consistent with Johns's earlier interests and might also allude to the conventions of Northern altarpiece painting, embodying a conception of picture-object relations not typical of our moment. Most of the catenaries themselves are asymmetrical, connecting points of different heights, but in *Near the Lagoon*, 2002–2003, one of Johns's largest paintings, the curve is bilaterally symmetrical, like a parabola. It was somewhat jarring, after studying the painting for several minutes, to realize that its opaque monumentality was giving way to the sensation of standing before the chest and necklace of a gray female giant. Given some of the associative matrices Johns has constructed, this doesn't seem an entirely ridiculous thought. These are extremely complicated paintings, uningratiating and counterintuitive, yet ruthlessly consistent with the long arc of Johns's concerns. It is impossible to imagine them having been made by a younger artist, and they may operate out in front of what we typically consider good taste.

The exhaustiveness of Johns's working methods can encourage a curatorial inclusiveness that tends to bury more poetic readings, and if this show suffers from anything, it is too much of a good thing. While the reciprocity among the various media is illuminating, it dilutes what might have been a more stark and focused immersion in this overcast parallel dimension of Johns's sensibility. The thought did occur that it's far more unusual to see a gray painting than a gray drawing or print, and the sculptures' implications go in another direction entirely. Nevertheless, by the end of the exhibition, one felt as though the threshold of one's eyesight had been altered. Persistent grayness, in all its subtle forms, brought the material qualities of the work to the forefront of consciousness, so they were viscerally experienced rather than intellectually appreciated. It seemed possible to imagine another art history, in a world of the color-blind, where the "pictorial" is defined not by chromatic optics but rather by value and the physical layering of primordial matter. After a second look at the show's beginning, *False Start* felt like a false note, overly rich, like candy when one needs balanced nutrition. But, of course, this impression could also signal a newfound accommodation to death over life, if the expressive and metaphoric layers of these works are fully accepted.

During the 1980s painting renaissance in New York, Johns represented the gold standard of propagandistic reference: There was no artist in whose shadow a younger painter of a certain disposition would rather have been perceived. More recently, that honor has apparently fallen to Andy Warhol. The inwardness and self-referentiality of Johns's interests, and the care he takes in making things (while avoiding nostalgic and regressive conventions of representation), are at odds with the general tone of the art scene right now. Yet if certain iconographic and aesthetic considerations are suspended, his negotiation between the demands of the private self and an acknowledgment of painting's closed and self-generating nature is vividly illuminated. This exhibition, by employing such an apparently narrow filter, opens a window on the intricately branching pathways Johns has followed. The accompanying catalogue features a conversation with the artist that is a model of prickly, contrarian precision. He basically disavows any thoughts about possible precedents for his involvement with gray and in fact disavows having thought much about the subject at all. When asked about the historical dilemma in which a young artist of his day might have found himself, he replies, "For me, there was no art-historical problem—I wasn't that sophisticated." Far from being disingenuous, this goes to the heart of what is so fascinating about Johns's perceived role and his work itself. Operating expansively within his own limitations, applying a rather bleak vision, a demanding work ethic, and an almost annoyingly thorough autodidactic scrutiny to subjects, materials, and procedures that he could consider plausible, he became a screen for the wide-ranging projections of others while he has traveled deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole of his own preoccupations. What is there was always there, but, as this show made clear, there are many versions of the truth. □

"Jasper Johns: Gray" will be on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from Feb. 5 through May 4.

CARROLL DUNHAM IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.

Dunham, Carroll. "Jasper Johns: Gray." *Artforum* 46, no. 6, February 2008, pp. 283–85.

ARTNEWS

Reviews
UP NOW

Jasper Johns

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Through April 29

Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, 33⅜" x 26" x 3".

Around the time of Jackson Pollock's death in a 1956 car crash—not to say because of it—the consequential mode of painting shifted. The sincere, passionate, indulgent, and exaggerated angst of Abstract Expressionism was surpassed in the minds of the critical establishment by the ironic, cool, calculated, and reserved stoicism of what might be called proto–Pop art. Robert Indiana, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers, among others, helped invent it. But the most important artist in that alteration of esthetic course was Jasper Johns, a laconic Southerner who was then in his mid-20s.

With a half century's retrospect, it might appear obvious and even inevitable to us that somebody would come along and make some clever art puzzles by applying a little Duchampian thinking to brushstroke-fetishizing nonobjective painting. Which is exactly what Johns did. But what's astonishing is that Johns made those art puzzles so beautiful and so capable of staying beautiful for such a long time. This show could be transported to any contemporary gallery and seem right up to date.

In this retrospective, titled "An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965," curator Jeffrey Weiss (recently named director of the Dia Art Foundation) has assembled 85 crucial paintings and drawings from Johns's first momentous decade to make the case that the artist quite carefully and almost programmatically tried to find a wry way out of the Abstract Expressionist cul-de-sac. To that end, Johns focused on, in Weiss's words, "four particular motifs: the target; the 'device' (the pivoted slat used to scrape paint); the stenciled naming of colors; and the trace or imprint of the body."

Weiss is right on three out of four. The targets, simultaneously abstract and representational, are easily the best things in the show, and of these the tenderly textured, teasingly transparent, and adroitly accessorized *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) is the real killer. The targets are forcefully compact, deceptively laconic, and, well, just plain memorable. The compasslike "device" works come a little later and represent a wicked deconstruction of the targets' own deconstruction of Abstract Expressionism. The naming-of-colors pictures add to the conceptual mix, first with the disturbing paradox of seeing the word "yellow" in blue letters, and then in the three color-labeled horizontal bands of *Out the Window* (1959), a hallucinatory sunset seascape ("red" on top, "yellow" in the middle, "blue" on the bottom) that calls into question the whole business of pictorial representation.

Only the body parts miss their mark—in terms of both visual gravitas and Weiss's thesis (the castings, especially, don't yield much, except as addenda to that one target painting, until they morphed into ale cans). What should have replaced them, of course, are flags. They fall within the show's time brackets—the Whitney's famous *Three Flags* dates from 1958—and they up the edginess ante of the targets by playing with the fire of patriotism. We can only lament that the flag paintings didn't make it to the National Gallery with this otherwise visually exciting and art-historically instructive show. ***—Peter Plagens***

This show will be at the Kunstmuseum Basel from June 2 through September 9.

Plagens, Peter. "Jasper Johns." *ARTnews,* April 2007, p. 138.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Times

Bull's-Eyes and Body Parts: It's Theater, From Jasper Johns

WASHINGTON — Art and crass are all but inseparable. So it's no surprise to find an exhibition that brings together a record number of Jasper Johns's famous target paintings being bankrolled by Target. You pass the corporate bull's-eye logo, small but vivid, on a wall on your way into "Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965" here at the National Gallery of Art.

HOLLAND COTTER

ART REVIEW

Mr. Johns's targets, endlessly reproduced in the half century since he painted the earliest of them, have themselves become a form of advertising, a logo for American postwar art. Through sheer omnipresence they've become nearly invisible. What could change that now?

The answer: Seeing them live. The 15 "Target" paintings installed in the show's first gallery look every bit as radical and mysterious as they surely did in New York in the 1950s, when, simply by existing, they closed the door on one kind of art, Abstract Expressionism, and opened a door on many, many others.

The National Gallery show, organized by the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, Jeffrey Weiss, has mysteries of its own. It isn't a survey of the decade 1955-65, but a selection of 90 Johns works from that time organized by visual theme: targets, "devices," words and the human body. Other motifs at least as important to that phase of his career, like flags, numbers and maps, are nowhere in evidence. Nor can the connective "allegory" proposed by the exhibition title be readily discerned. No matter.

Walk in the door, and you're hooked. Try to move

Continued on Page 37

Collection of David Geffen/VAGA, New York

'Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965,' *at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, includes "Target With Four Faces," from 1955.*

Cotter, Holland. "Bull's-Eyes and Body Parts: It's Theater, From Jasper Johns." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2007, pp. 31, 37.

Bull's-Eyes, Body Parts and Jasper Johns

Continued From Weekend Page 31

through the show in a hurry, and you can't. The work is too strong, too unusual. It keeps stopping you, here, then here, then here. Mr. Johns, you suddenly remember, doesn't just create visual objects, he creates situations, events. Each painting is a mini-theater, with farce and tragedy silently acted out and the audience invited to participate.

Initially Mr. Johns wanted the participation to be physical. "Target With Plaster Casts" (1955) is a painting surmounted by a row of wooden niches holding casts of body parts: a hand, a foot, a penis, a breast. And each niche has a little flip-up door, designed to be opened and closed by viewers, to give them a different, more intimate art experience than usual. Of course, if you reach for them now, in a museum, you risk arrest. So the real message, which Mr. Johns must have anticipated, is: Touch, but don't touch.

His art is built on such ambiguities. Most of his very early paintings, done in a thick encaustic medium that makes them look molded instead of brushed, feel like sculptures. Many of those done a bit later in oils have three-dimensional objects attached to their surfaces so that, like furniture, they carve out sculptural space.

Dada, cerebral and vacant, was a big influence on Mr. Johns. His group of paintings made up of the stenciled names of colors — red, yellow, blue — was inspired in part by Marcel Duchamp's use of language as art. Duchampian too are the so-called "devices" paintings, which have rotatable wooden discs, with squeegeelike arms for smoothing arcs of paint, affixed to their surfaces.

One assumes that Mr. Johns was declaring his complete dissociation from gestural abstraction, with its fetishized brushstroke, its existentialist soul, its emotional acting out. But then you arrive at a word-painting like "False Start" (1959), which explodes with hysterical brushwork. Or "Device Circle" (1959), on which the attached wheel looks gloomily derelict, like a one-handed clock. Or "Painting Bitten by a Man" (1961), which has a mouthful of wax encaustic gnawed out of its center, leaving a mark like a frozen scream or guffaw.

What's the story? Is he mocking expressive painting or declaring it compatible with Dada's cerebral conceits? Is he exposing a reserve of hidden passion beneath Duchamp's dandyish, bone-dry wit?

In 1962 Mr. Johns made a group of prints by pressing his face and hands, covered with baby oil, onto large sheets of paper. The resulting images suggest a person swimming up from beneath an opaque surface that he is unable to push through. Over the next two years he finished two paintings and a drawing that referred to Hart Crane, the American poet who jumped off a ship in midsea and drowned.

The larger of the paintings, "Diver," is very large and holds a compendium of motifs from earlier work: stenciled words, turbulent brushwork and a rainbow-colored target. At the center, two long wooden arms, ending in palms-open hands, reach upward.

If the painting theatrically approximates the psychic splintering that drove Crane to suicide, the related charcoal drawing, also called "Diver," suggests the aftermath of his leap. Here the arms have hands at both ends. They point both downward and upward, with the descending hands meeting to form the shape of a

"Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965" continues through April 29 at the National Gallery of Art, East Building, Constitution Avenue between Third and Ninth Streets, Washington; (202) 737-4215, nga.gov.

ONLINE: POETRY IN PAINT

Additional photographs from "Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965" at the National Gallery of Art:

nytimes.com/design

"Handprint" (1964), from "Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting."

Cotter, Holland. "Bull's-Eyes and Body Parts: It's Theater, From Jasper Johns." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2007, pp. 31, 37.

skull in a subaqueous twilight.

It is in these theme-gathering works that a narrative, or "allegory," comes together, though how to interpret it is hard to say. Countless glosses have been applied to Mr. Johns's art, which is always assumed to be thick with coded meanings. Critics and scholars have scrutinized the art he has looked at, the writers he has read, the thinkers he has thought about.

Others have parsed his life. The artist Robert Morris, in a powerful catalog essay, links the themes of targets, flags and maps to Mr. Johns's stint in the Army from 1951 to 1953. The art historians Kenneth E. Silver and Jonathan Katz have noted the dark, personal turn in his art after he and his lover, Robert Rauschenberg, split up in 1961. Their relationship seems to have shaped the careers of both men. It lives on in an art-world game that pits them

Like John Donne, a metaphysician in a time of change.

against each other in a who's-greater competition, though they are very different kinds of artists.

And what kind of artist is Mr. Johns? Various labels have been advanced: post-Dada, proto-Pop. I would call him a metaphysical artist, in the way that the 17th-century English poet John Donne is a metaphysical poet. Like Donne's poetry, Mr. Johns's art is equally about body and mind, sensuality and reflection. It is unmystical, unromantic, unnostalgic but obsessed with transcendence and the reality of loss.

Despite the difference in medium, the languages of Donne and Mr. Johns share many features: deliberate awkwardness, ungraceful beauty, a virtuosity so extreme that it turns weird. Their work can be startlingly, even embarrassingly candid, but is more often self-protectively opaque. Metaphor, rather than statement or confession, is their method. Some people find Donne manipulatively difficult and withholding. They might feel the same about Mr. Johns.

Finally, both metaphysicians appeared when a culture was on the cusp of change. And they were prepared to engage with that change, boldly, anxiously, in long careers that were electrifying early but are of profound interest all the way through. Mr. Johns's career is of course still very much in progress, and I look forward to each future phase. I know of no major postwar American male artist whose work more completely approaches the condition of poetry, that reads as richly as it looks. To me it always feels new.

Photographs from VAGA, New York

"Field Painting," an oil on canvas with objects, from 1963-64, shows one of Mr. Johns's recurring motifs, the use of the names of colors.

Cotter, Holland. "Bull's-Eyes and Body Parts: It's Theater, From Jasper Johns." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2007, pp. 31, 37.

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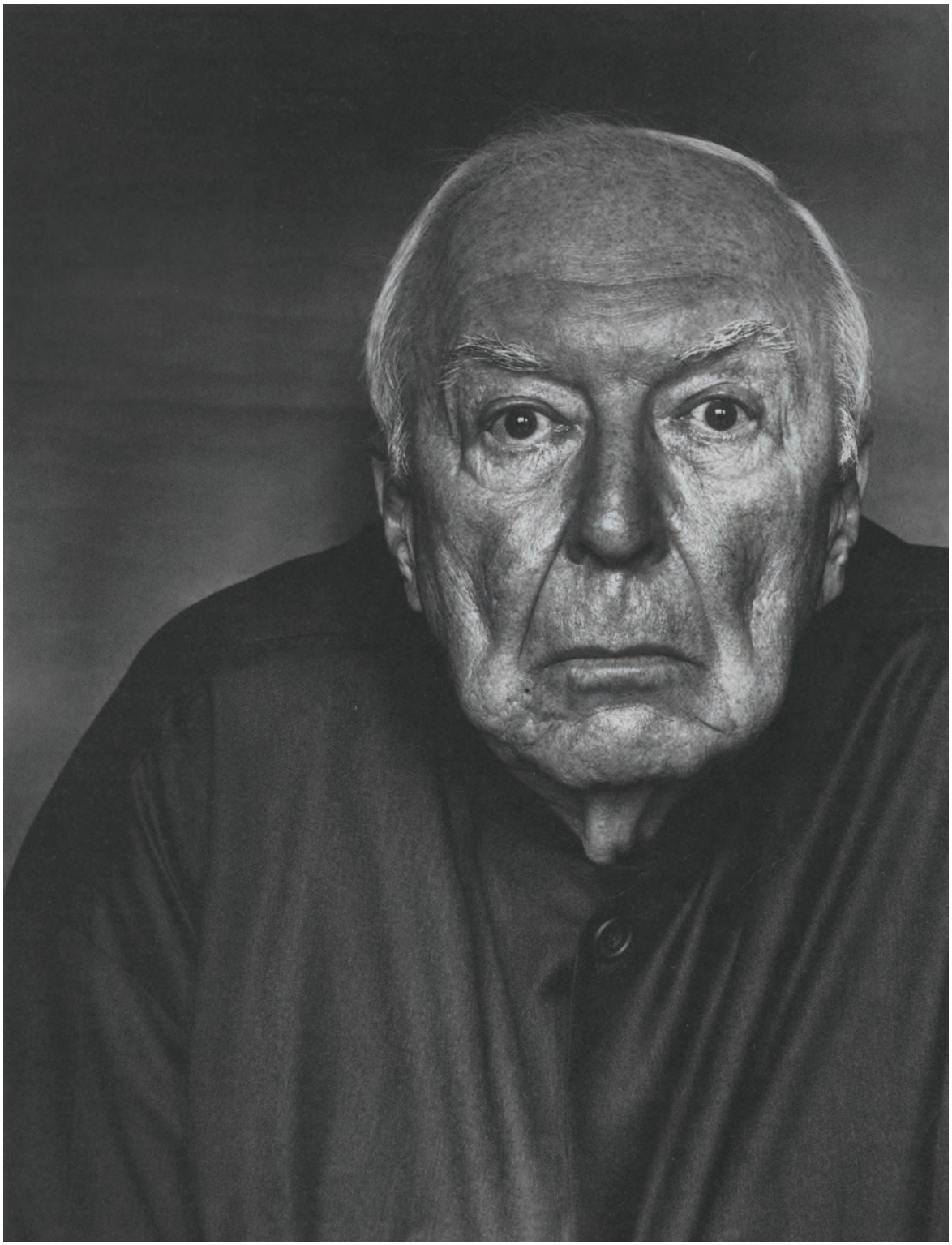
THE NEW YORKER



Tomkins, Calvin. "The Mind's Eye." *The New Yorker,* December 11, 2006, pp. 76–85.

PROFILES

THE MIND'S EYE

The merciless originality of Jasper Johns.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

The artist Jasper Johns lives alone in a large gray fieldstone house in northwestern Connecticut. Built in the nineteenth century, the house stands on a hillside overlooking a hundred and thirty acres of meadows and woods and a distant lake, and from the outside it has a staid and formal aspect. Inside, Johns has opened it up and cleared away most of the period décor, leaving a suite of sparsely furnished, uncluttered spaces, where he has placed works by artists he admires. In the living room, a small oil painting by Cézanne, a version of the famous image of a male "Bather with Outstretched Arms," hangs over the fireplace. Twelve framed Cézanne drawings rest on shelves in a nearby bookcase. A large freestanding sculpture made of bent and twisted auto-body parts, by Johns's contemporary John Chamberlain, occupies one corner of the room, and a stack of Andy Warhol's Heinz cartons serves as a side table for one of the two pale-gray armchairs. On a long table against the far wall, five Jomon pots (rare, prehistoric Japanese ceramics) group companionably at the far end. "I always wanted five of them," Johns says. "And now I have five."

Johns, at seventy-six, is an imposing presence. Just over six feet tall, with thinning white hair and considerable bulk through the chest and shoulders, he projects a concentrated self-assurance that is less armored than it used to be. Twice before, during the forty years we have known each other, I have proposed writing about him for this magazine; both times he said he would think about it, and then, a week or so later, he tactfully declined. Recently I asked him again, and this time he said that he was willing to try, with the understanding "that it might be a failure." I knew what he meant. Johns has never been an easy interview. Although he makes a serious effort to answer most questions about his work, attempts to probe into meaning or interpretation annoy him. He prefers to talk about how a work was made, not why, and his answers tend to be literal, succinct, and often opaque. This does not encourage personal revelations. As the art critic Vivien Raynor once wrote, in *Artnews*, "He has a remoteness that, while very amiable, makes all questions sound vaguely coarse and irrelevant."

Johns had suggested I meet him that morning in his painting studio, in a converted coach barn about a hundred yards from the house. The studio, which occupies half the ground floor, is a big, open room with a high ceiling and immense sliding doors at either end. There are several worktables, with paints and art supplies neatly laid out. On the wall just to the right of the entrance is a very small, very crude oil sketch by Cézanne of a reclining nude woman. To the left of this door, on the wall and clustered on two shelves, is a miscellany of disparate objects that Johns likes, or that people have sent him because they think he would like them: two versions of Marcel Duchamp's self-portrait in profile; a geode with water trapped inside it; a tiny Joseph Cornell box; four shadow-box frames containing, respectively, a sea horse, a praying mantis, a large beetle, and a tarantula; some children's drawings; a micro-teapot made from a single penny; several novelty toys, two of which feature an outhouse with a small boy inside who pees on you when you open the door—Johns demonstrated one of them for me.

Four recent paintings hung on the back wall. All four were painted in a pattern of irregular abstract shapes that

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

Jasper Johns, New York, 2006. Johns claims indifference to critics: "I always find it interesting that they have anything to say, because I find it difficult to say much."

Tomkins, Calvin. "The Mind's Eye." *The New Yorker,* December 11, 2006, pp. 76–85.

echoed the "flagstone" motif Johns had used extensively in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. Three of them were in muted colors, and the fourth was predominantly gray, a color whose tonal complexities have figured prominently in Johns's work throughout his career. This one's title, he said, was "Beckett." When I asked why, he told about working with Samuel Beckett on a book, in 1976, with writings by Beckett and images by Johns—flagstone images, and also the tight clusters of short, diagonal "crosshatch" brushstrokes that he was using in many of his pictures then. "Sam was looking at some etchings I had made," Johns said. "He held them up very close to his face—he had bad eyesight—and then he said, 'I'll tell you what I see. Here'—pointing to the crosshatching—'I see you try all these paths in different directions, but, no matter where you go, you come up against this wall.'" I asked him whether Beckett's remark, with its ring of comic futility, might have had to do more with Beckett than with Johns. "Don't you think that all of our interpretations of other people's work sound like us?" he said, laughing. "That's what's interesting—you get to see yourself another way."

Later, we walked over to the main house for lunch. On weekdays, Johns has lunch with his staff—his studio assistant, James Meyer; John Lund, who runs a fully equipped print studio that occupies the other half of the building's ground floor; Sarah Taggart, his longtime secretary and personal assistant; and Taggart's aide, Lynn Kearcher. On this Sunday in May, the staff was absent, but Johns's chef had prepared lunch, which was precisely laid out on a side table, on antique Japanese plates—seafood salad, corn salad, asparagus, wild rice, fresh bread, and sautéed morels, gathered that morning from a spot that Johns pointed out to me, under an oak tree, where they appear at this time every year. There were three paintings in the dining room, each with a wall to itself. A small, metallic image of the American flag (the subject of Johns's 1954 breakthrough work) hung over the fireplace—it is actually a cast, in silver, of a collage that Johns made for Robert Rauschenberg in the early nineteen-sixties. One of Cy Twombly's large "blackboard" paintings, with white scribbled lines on a black background, occupied a side wall, and a 1963 silk-screen painting by Rauschenberg, called "Cove," was on the wall facing the Johns flag.

During lunch, I started to ask him about what had struck me, in the studio, as a return to his "abstract period" of the nineteen-seventies, but he cut me short. "What are you talking about?" he said. I said I was referring to the flagstone and the crosshatch motifs. "If you consider that abstraction," Johns said. "Those stupid marks." Most people do, I said. "Well, I don't know that I think of my other work as representational," he said. "This is an idea that isn't mine. If I meet someone I don't know, someone slightly naïve, and they ask me what I do, I say I'm a painter, and if they ask what kind of a painter, I say an abstract painter. It's a way to get out of saying anything else. Or I just say I'm a modern artist. But I don't know what kind of an artist I am."

Jasper Johns's first solo exhibition, at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958, established him as an artist of great originality and singular importance. Alfred Barr, the Museum of Modern Art's director, came in, stayed for an hour, and bought three paintings for the museum, a virtually unprecedented vote of confidence for a previously unknown painter who was still in his twenties.

Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who had an intense personal and professional relationship from 1954 to 1961, are often said to have broken the dominance of the Abstract Expressionist style and opened up new approaches and new subject matter. These included, in Johns's case, figurative paintings of targets, flags, numerals, and letters of the alphabet. Johns's seductively painted renderings of these "things the mind already knows," as he put it, and Rauschenberg's wildly inventive collages and "combines" (part painting and part sculpture), which brought the whole, promiscuous image bank of contemporary American experience into art-making, set the stage for Pop art, minimalism, and many subsequent developments. Although Rauschenberg's reputation has fluctuated widely, Johns's remained at an exalted level for three decades. (As late as 1988, the *Times* critic Michael Brenson cited his standing in Europe as "the greatest American artist since Jackson Pollock.") The first stirrings of discontent surfaced over "The Seasons," a suite of four large paintings done in 1985 and 1986, in which autobiographical references and deliberate borrowings from Picasso made some critics suspect that the artist was losing his merciless originality. Critical dissent has slowly gathered momentum since then, fuelled by Johns's increasing tendency to fill his paintings with cryptic, puzzle-like images, and with details taken from pictures by other artists, from Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece to the forgotten W. E. Hill's 1915 drawing of a woman's head which, depending on how you view it, can be either a pretty young Gibson girl or a forbidding hag in a head scarf. The complaints reached a fairly shrill pitch during his show at the Matthew Marks Gallery last year, when several former enthusiasts attacked what Michael Kimmelman, in the *Times*, called Johns's "ever more preening and self-mythologizing brands of obscurity." Other critics had similar reactions. Peter Schjeldahl, in a review in this magazine, wrote that Johns had, in his new work, "attempted to retreat behind a curtain of hermetic, teasingly simple formats. The result is undernourished and overthought."

When intelligent critics dismiss the current work of an artist who has been as extravagantly admired as Johns has, it is often because the work does not coincide with their expectations. (For a while in the nineteen-seventies, the rap on Picasso was that he had done nothing major since "Guernica," in 1937.) The recent Johns criticism has been consistent and troubling, nevertheless. I have had my own feelings of frustration with what has sometimes seemed like Johns's willful oscillation between pulling me in and shutting me out. The large painted maps of the United States that he did in the nineteen-sixties, one in bravura, Abstract Expressionist style and primary colors, another in subtly muted, mostly gray tones, struck me as the most beautiful works I had seen by a living artist—until the "Usuyuki" series of crosshatch paintings that he did fifteen years later. (The Japanese word *usuyuki*, which refers to a light snow, was an apt verbal equivalent to these works, whose exquisite colors seemed to lie just beneath the surface.) The in-

Tomkins, Calvin. "The Mind's Eye." *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2006, pp. 76–85.

creasing complexity and the hidden references in his work of the eighties and nineties never made me think that the artist was playing trivial games, but some of the paintings did seem clotted and hermetic. Over time, though, I have come to think that Johns is following the only course available to him. He believes in Duchamp's theory that the artist sets in motion a creative process that the spectators must complete, and the current disconnect may indeed turn out to be a failure on his part. My guess, though, is that the work will hold up and the criticism will not.

Again and again in his career, he has thwarted critical expectations by abruptly changing the way he paints. The first major shift occurred immediately following his début show at Leo Castelli's. Abandoning the deadpan reticence and muted palette of his targets and numbers, he began painting splashy, colorful, mostly abstract canvases that carried echoes of Willem de Kooning's loose-elbow style, canvases in which swatches of a bright primary color were identified, confusingly, by the stencilled name of another color. A very different sensibility marked the series of dark, somewhat morbid paintings and drawings that he did in 1961-63, soon after a bitter falling-out with Rauschenberg; their titles ("No," "Liar," "Fool's House," "Painting Bitten by a Man," "Diver") suggested, to the multiplying herd of Johns's explicators, that personal emotions had invaded the work of an artist whose previous approach had rigorously ruled them out. After the predominantly abstract flagstone and hatch-mark paintings in the seventies, recognizable images returned in 1979—real knives and forks attached to the picture frame in some paintings, three-dimensional plaster casts of body parts in others, painted images of skulls and male and female genitals in the "Tantric Detail" series. We also began to see more and more direct borrowings from older artists, borrowings that took on, in Johns's cerebral reworking, a strange duality. When Picasso reworked Velázquez, Delacroix, and other Old Masters, he seemed to be devouring them, appropriating and digesting for his own use their mysterious essence. Johns's motive is more like compulsive curiosity: Why does this image carry meaning, and would it still do so if I used it in this way?

In his most recent painting—"Untitled" (2006)—Johns revisits his "flagstone" motif.

Through all the stylistic variations in Johns's work over the decades, what didn't change was his painterly touch. In whatever medium he used—oil paint, encaustic (a nearly extinct technique, which Johns rediscovered in an art book, of mixing pigment with hot wax), charcoal, pencil, crayon, watercolor, lithography, etching, and so forth—the physical skill he brought to its application carried an almost erotic charge. "Looking closely helps," his friend John Cage, the composer, wrote in an early essay on Johns, "though the paint is applied so sensually that there is the danger of falling in love."

Even his detractors still pay perfunctory tribute to the way he handles paint. It's the subject matter that riles them. They want to know what, exactly, is the point of these bizarre and unrelated images in his work of the past two decades: the schematic floor plan of his grandfather's house in Allendale, South Carolina; the little stick figures wielding paintbrushes; the shadowy child with superimposed geometric forms; the spiral galaxy; the weirdly distorted female face from Picasso's "Straw Hat with Blue Leaf." Aside from the skill involved, what do these images have to do with anything beyond Johns's all-too-private conceits and preoccupations? As Kimmelman wrote in 1991, "His cur-

Tomkins, Calvin. "The Mind's Eye." *The New Yorker,* December 11, 2006, pp. 76–85.

rent drawings and paintings seem increasingly based on a code that demands to be broken but to which he alone holds the key." But why should Johns be denied the use of unexplained images? The mysterious, unidentifiable shape near the center of Matisse's "The Moroccans" does not keep it from being considered one of the greatest pictures in the Museum of Modern Art.

Impatient with all the critical spadework that has gone into decoding his images, Johns unveiled a new puzzle in a 1990 painting called "Green Angel," a roughly rectangular shape that has appeared in several subsequent works; when asked about it, he said that he was not going to reveal the source. Baffled reviewers took to calling it "a buffalo in a blanket." This might suggest that the artist is indeed playing games with his viewers, but to think that, you would have to believe in the kind of intentional working process that he has always made clear he does not follow. For Johns, as for most of the great modern artists, a picture is not a statement, nor does it emerge from a preconceived plan. Every brushstroke, even the first, is a response to something that has occurred before, on the canvas or in the artist's mind or memory, and will influence what happens next. Johns would like viewers to construct their own meanings from his pictures. With "Green Angel," as he explained to me during another visit to his Connecticut studio, "the idea was not to create a mystery about the derivation of an image but to free the image from that other thing"—its previous association. "I was trying to find out something about how our minds and eyes work, and what creates a new or original image."

I asked him what had triggered his use of autobiographical references in "The Seasons" and later paintings. He was silent for some time, frowning slightly—enough to make me think he was irritated. "I don't know how to answer you," he said at length. "But I'll try. When you're painting, you have a central thought that pulls in various kinds of details, and that's the way you make the painting. You go in a direction, and you gather up whatever you need to move that way. It's not necessarily that you have planned to make a picture like this. It's not 'Well, now let's say something about myself.' You're saying, 'Now let me make another painting.'"

I reminded him of his early statements about not wanting his work to be about himself, his life, or his feelings. "Well," he replied, "one realizes that it's a failure, that effort. It produces something, it's an attitude which allows you to filter certain things, and gives the work a direction, or the sense of a direction. As other things are filtered or allowed in, you get a different kind of image. One would like to control that, but it is more or less a hopeless procedure." In other words, I suggested, the autobiographical elements were not important in themselves—they just happened to be what he was working with at a certain point. "That's what I think," he said.

Johns's work will be featured next year in two major museum exhibitions—"Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965," at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. (opening January 28th), and "Jasper Johns: Gray," a survey of his gray paintings over several decades, which opens at the Art Institute of Chicago next November, and then travels to the Metropolitan Museum here. Last spring, I asked Jeffrey Weiss, the curator of the National Gallery show, how he felt about the recent critical backlash against Johns. "That's a hard thing to account for," he said, "except to say that art has changed so much, and critical expectations have changed as well. His language is more closely attached to the distant past than to what's being done now." It is true that not many young artists today seem influenced by Johns, in the way that so many used to be in the nineteen-sixties, and so many are still influenced by Rauschenberg and Warhol. Johns has become like an Old Master—but one whose work continues to change, double back on itself, contradict expectations, and disturb. On my last visit to Connecticut, in October, Johns brought out a small flagstone painting that he had finished just the day before. About a quarter the size of "Beckett," it was much more vivid: the flagstones were red, yellow, and blue, on a white ground. The interaction of color and shape was remarkably active. The little picture had a brilliance and clarity that I had not seen in Johns's work for a long time, or maybe ever.

Johns appears to be indifferent to the recent attacks. "Usually I have read what critics say," he told me last spring. "I always find it interesting that they have anything to say, because I find it difficult to say much, and certainly not to sum things up. I don't hold on to what they've said, and more recently I pay less attention." He was silent for several moments, looking off into the distance, as though considering what he had just said. "Of course," he added, "artists can torture themselves over almost anything." I asked him what were some of the things he tortured himself about. "I

don't think I want to tell you!" he said, with a burst of laughter.

Johns was not always so unmoved by criticism. Early in his career, he made a wicked little sculpture called "The Critic Sees II." It consists of a pair of eyeglasses embedded in what looks like a block of lead. (The block is actually plaster, covered with a gray compound called Sculpmetal.) Behind each lens, instead of an eye, there is an open, speaking mouth.

One day in the nineteen-seventies, the art dealer Irving Blum invited Jasper Johns to lunch at an expensive uptown restaurant. During the meal, Johns asked what the lunch was about. Blum explained: he knew an important collector who wanted very much to buy Johns's "White Flag," a 1955 painting that Johns still owned. The collector would pay big for it, Blum said—up to two million dollars. Johns, whose prices were extremely high by then, but not that high, smiled and changed the subject. Dessert and coffee arrived. Blum called for the check. As they were saying goodbye, he ventured, "So, Jasper, what do you think of my proposal?" Smiling broadly this time, Johns said, "Irving, it's not worth it."

For a long time now, the prices paid for Johns's work have been the gold standard for contemporary art. His "False Start" broke the auction record for work by a living artist when Sotheby's sold it for seventeen million dollars in 1988; last month, it brought eighty million in a private sale. Johns gets nothing from these secondary-market resales, but they help to boost the market for his new work, whose prices are unaffected by the critical backlash. Johns, who stayed with the Castelli gallery until Leo Castelli's death, in 1999, no longer needs a primary dealer. He produces very few paintings in any given year—rarely more than four or five, some years none at all—and he tries to hold on to at least one work from every show. Occasionally he sells something directly out of the studio, or through Matthew Marks or Barbara Castelli, Leo's widow, who has a small gallery on the Upper East Side. There is a long list of people waiting to buy anything he does, at several million dollars for a painting, upward of five hundred thousand for a new drawing, and up to fifty thousand for a print. This enables him to live exceedingly comfortably. In addition to the property in Connecticut, he has a house on St. Martin, in the Caribbean, where he spends the winter, and he is thinking about renovating a space in a downtown Manhattan building that he co-owns with a friend. (Johns used to own Gypsy Rose Lee's former town house, on East Sixty-third Street, but he sold it several years ago; now he wants a place to stay when he is obliged to come in from the country for an opening or a dinner party.) Wherever he is, he lives in what I think of as a kind of monastic luxury. Johns's most visible extravagance, apart from his real-estate holdings, is the work of other artists, which he buys at auction or through private sales or exchanges. In addition to the examples already mentioned, he owns works by Degas, Picasso, Matisse, Magritte, Picabia, Schwitters, Warhol, de Kooning, Juan Gris, Barnett Newman, Eric Fischl, Brice Marden, Frank Stella, as well as many more works by Rauschenberg. Unlike some of these artists, Johns has managed, through rigorous refusals and the protective loyalty of a few close friends, to avoid becoming an art star. Outside the art world, few people know him by sight.

This is not to say that he doesn't appreciate his success. "I've been very fortunate to have a large enough number of people interested in my work over a long time," he said to me. "The generous reception it's had has allowed me to be much more—free in my decisions. More obstinate. I feel I have benefitted from the kind of attention I've had, rather than being hampered by it." There was another long pause. Then he said, "In fact, I think I've been treated so well that I'm overly comfortable."

Jasper Johns, who was born in 1930, grew up in rural South Carolina. His parents divorced when he was two or three, and he was sent to live with his paternal grandfather, a well-to-do Baptist farmer, who had a much younger second wife and a large house in Allendale, in the southwestern part of the state. His grandfather died in 1939, and Johns spent the next year living with his mother and her second husband and their two children, in Columbia, the state capital. That summer, when he was ten, he was sent to visit his father's sister, Gladys, who lived on Lake Murray, about eighty miles north of Allendale. "It wasn't a town," Johns recalls, "it was an area that people called the Corner. At the end of the summer, I was informed that I was to stay there." He stayed six years. For the first three years, he went to a one-room schoolhouse, where his aunt Gladys taught all the grades. There were only two other children in Johns's class; he loved learning how to diagram sentences, which his aunt taught "with passion." When the time came to go to high school, he commuted by bus to the town of Batesburg. After tenth grade, he moved in again with his mother and stepfather, who had relocated to Sumter, about forty miles east of Columbia. "Most of the time," he said, "wherever I lived, I felt like a guest."

Johns's paternal grandmother, who died before he was born, had been an amateur artist, and her paintings—scenes from nature, copied (he suspects) from other sources and hanging in the Allendale house where he grew up—were the first art works he saw. "I think I always wanted to make art, as far back as I can remember," he told me. "What I find curious is that I didn't train myself. It was simply a kind of blank ambition." Although he once said that he started drawing at the age of three "and never stopped," he also insists that he never really learned to draw, and still has no facility for it. In 1948, he entered the University of South Carolina, in Columbia. "I had no interest in most subjects," he recalls. "I had no sense of history, so I didn't do terribly well. But I found the art classes very interesting, and by the beginning of my second year—maybe the second half of the first year—I stopped studying and took only art classes." One of his teachers there, Catharine Phillips Rembert, who had studied with Hans Hofmann and knew the New York art scene, became a close friend and mentor. She invited him to dinner at her house almost every night. (Her dining table, which Johns bought from her a few years ago and enlarged, is now his dining table in Connecticut.) Rembert talked to him about contemporary art and artists, and told him that

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he should go to New York. In the winter of his second year of college, he did so, and enrolled at the Parsons School of Design. He soon ran out of money. He was offered a scholarship, but was told that he didn't deserve one: the Parsons administrator said she was only offering it because of her friendship with Catharine Rembert. In that case, Johns said, he couldn't accept it. He quit Parsons and got a job as a messenger. He took and passed the examination for the art school at Cooper Union, which was free, but he did not enroll there. In the spring of 1951, he was drafted into the Army.

The Korean War was in its first year then, and Johns, who was trained as a heavy-weapons infantryman, expected to go to Korea, but after a year and a half of running an art-exhibition program for soldiers at Fort Jackson, in South Carolina, he was assigned to a Special Services unit in Sendai, Japan, about two hundred miles north of Tokyo. His duties—printing movie schedules, designing posters on the perils of venereal disease—were not onerous, and in his time off he initiated what became a lifelong interest in Japanese culture. He visited Kyoto's temples and gardens, attended Kabuki performances, and went to a Surrealist-inspired exhibition in Tokyo where he remembers seeing an elephant's foot pinning a woman's glove to a pedestal. After his discharge from the Army, in 1953, he moved back to New York and spent one day at Hunter College, which he could attend on the G.I. Bill of Rights. He went to an English literature class on "Beowulf"—"where the teacher was talking about the mead hall"; a French class in which he couldn't understand a word anyone said; and an art class whose imposing, red-haired female teacher praised his "marvellous line quality." Returning to his railroad apartment on East Eighty-third Street that evening, he passed out on the street (the effects of a virus, he surmises), stayed in bed for several days, and decided that the Hunter experience was not worth pursuing.

Most of the work Johns had done up to this point no longer exists; he destroyed it in 1954. Some years ago, Johns told me that his work before then "was mainly negative, concerned with not doing anything that had been done before," but last summer he said he couldn't remember what it was like. He worked as a night clerk at the Marboro bookstore, on West Fifty-seventh Street. Walking home after work in late 1953 or early 1954, he saw someone he knew, the writer Suzi Gablik, who was with two other people on the corner of Fifty-seventh and Madison. Gablik introduced him to her friends, one of whom was Robert Rauschenberg.

"Bob was the first real artist I had any contact with," Johns told me a couple of years ago. "You could say that I learned what an artist was from watching him, on the practical level." For seven years, beginning in the summer of 1954, when Johns moved to a downtown industrial-loft studio on Pearl Street, they saw each other's work almost every day. Rauschenberg was living a few blocks away, on Fulton Street; the following summer, he moved to the floor above Johns on Pearl. "For a number of years," Johns said, "we were the main audience for each other's work."

Rauschenberg, who was five years older than Johns, had grown up in Port Arthur, Texas. He'd had one-man shows in New York and knew many of the city's artists, but his recent work—fetish-like objects made from scrap materials, collages whose elements included newspaper, mirrors, fabric, gold leaf, or things he picked up on the street—had found few buyers, and for several years after he met Johns no gallery wanted to show it. He and Johns, who had quit his job at Marboro, supported themselves by designing window displays for Tiffany's and Bonwit's; Gene Moore, the display director for both stores, paid them his top fee of five hundred dollars a job, which they could live on for three months.

Johns's breakthrough had come when he dreamed that he was painting the American flag. The next day, he did paint it—not a painting *of* the flag but the flag itself, stars and stripes filling the canvas from edge to edge. This led to the targets, and the letters and the numbers, and the maps of the United States. The map idea came from Rauschenberg, who one day brought home a cheap outline map of the states and gave it to Johns.

They traded ideas as well as pictures, and occasionally tried their hand at each other's work. "I did a couple of gold-leaf paintings," Johns once told me, when I was interviewing him for an article about Rauschenberg. "And I did one in the style of his painting 'Rebus.' I thought I understood what went into his pictures, but my work wasn't convincing." Rauschenberg told me in 1963 that he had been "envious of Jasper's encaustic, but too respectful to touch it, except once. He was painting one of the large flags. It smelled so delicious, all those aromatic bubbling waxes. I begged him to let me do one stripe, and he finally said all right, one. I stared at the painting, savoring the moment, and then I dipped a brush in the red wax and made a stroke—in the middle of a white stripe! Oops! Needless to say, I didn't ask him again." A few years later, after hearing of de Kooning's crack about Leo Castelli's salesmanship ("That son-of-a-bitch; you could give him two beer cans and he could sell them"), Rauschenberg was trying to work two crumpled beer cans into one of his combines. "You should let me use that," Johns said to him, and Rauschenberg agreed. The result was Johns's "Painted Bronze," a 1960 sculpture of two cast bronze, meticulously painted replicas of Ballantine Ale cans.

In those long-ago interviews, you get a sense of how the two artists felt about each other. "Jasper was soft, beautiful, lean, and poetic," Rauschenberg said in 1963. "He looked almost ill—I guess that's what I mean by poetic. . . . He read a lot, and he wrote poetry. Jasper would read Hart Crane to me in the studio. I loved it—I just didn't have the patience to read it myself." And Johns, around the same time: "I felt kin to him. He seemed amazingly naïve, but he functioned in ways that I couldn't. Bob assumed that other people would support what he did. I assumed I would have to do it in spite of other people."

Their closest friends in those years were John Cage and Merce Cunningham, the modern-dance choreographer,

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both of whom Rauschenberg had studied with in 1952 at Black Mountain College. Rauschenberg and Johns became closely involved with the activities of Cunningham's dance company. They made sets and costumes, and Rauschenberg acted as the company's lighting designer and eventually as Cunningham's artistic adviser, a role Johns took over in the late nineteen-sixties. (The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, a private grant-making agency that Johns and Cage established in 1963, and that Johns still oversees, grew out of a fund-raising effort for the Cunningham company.) The four men shared certain ideas and ambitions which would soon become much more influential than they were then—ideas of an art based not on self-expression or heroic individualism or some concept of the sublime but on a field of aesthetic possibilities reachable through nontraditional means such as chance, experimentation, and the unapologetic embrace of everyday experience. Cage, who was a few years older than the others, had come to these notions intellectually, through his delvings into modern literature, Zen Buddhism, Hindu philosophy, and the work and thought of Duchamp. Each of the others had arrived on his own, by different routes, but they found reassurance in Cage, who was a natural teacher and a world-class optimist. "It had great meaning for me that John was so organized in his thinking," Johns recalled, in one of our conversations. "Although I was very attentive, I would say I was not a good student. John didn't like to argue. I like to argue, and that annoyed him tremendously."

A few years after Johns and Rauschenberg's unhappy parting, in 1961, Cage talked to me about the relationship between them. "We called them the Southern renaissance," he said. "Their personalities were so very different—Jasper was much quieter in those days—but often a kind of electricity seemed to pass between them, striking sparks that lit up any discussion. I remember thinking I didn't need to have any other friends. Their breakup seemed to me a very great deprivation."

One day last spring, I watched Jasper Johns carefully unwrap a large black-and-white lithograph. He had made it that week. Brushy abstract markings ran down one side of the sheet, opposite more or less untouched areas of white paper, and near the bottom was a narrow horizontal shape in a diamond pattern that suggested one of Picasso's Harlequin figures. The print was based on two large paintings, called "Pyre" and "Pyre 2," which Johns had done in 2003, and which would shortly make their first public appearance in the current "Picasso and American Art" exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

This is how Johns often works. He makes a painting, and afterward (rarely before) he may make any number of drawings and/or graphic works in which different aspects of the painting are added to, omitted, or altered. Prints are as important to his working process as drawings; they allow him to explore the endless possibilities he is able to find in any visual motif. "I prefer work that appears to come out of a changing focus," he said in a 1964 interview—"not just one relationship or even a number of them but constantly changing and shifting relationships to things in terms of focus." This sense of a shifting focus is one of the things he responds to in the work of Cézanne, whose "synesthetic quality," as he once remarked, "makes looking equivalent to touching." I inquired about the title, "Pyre." Did it imply a funeral? "I don't think so," he said.

Against my better judgment, I asked whether the thought of death had been on his mind when he made the paintings. "I don't mean to scorn what you're saying," Johns said carefully. "Such things do come into play, but I think to focus on them would be a mistake."

There is a common misperception about Johns that he is a secretive and melancholy person. He enjoys many things in his life—food, books, plants of all kinds, conversation, friendships. Although his work requires a certain degree of isolation and solitude, which he takes care to provide for himself, he can be extremely good company. He is witty, well-read, curious, and interested in what others think, although he doesn't hesitate to argue with it.

"Jasper is good for me," Susan Sontag wrote in her journal in 1966, when they were seeing a lot of each other. "He makes it feel natural + good + right to be crazy . . . to question everything." Johns told me that he had loved talking with Sontag. "She was certainly lively in her thought, and in her willingness to encounter things. I would go with her occasionally to literary gatherings, with people like Lionel Trilling. She seemed to think my presence would be interesting to everyone else, although I think they couldn't understand what they were supposed to find interesting about me." His friendship with Sontag may have had something to do with his agreeing to appear, last December, one year after Sontag died, in a *Vogue* fashion shoot by her longtime companion, the photographer Annie Leibovitz. The theme was

"The Wizard of Oz," with Keira Knightley as Dorothy (in frocks that L. Frank Baum could not have envisaged), and a gaggle of contemporary artists as the other characters. To the astonishment of much of the art world, Johns appeared as the Cowardly Lion, sitting on a large rock, wearing a heavy overcoat and looking extremely dire. Some artists were upset by this. Johns had come to represent for them the incorruptible exception, "an example of how to lead your life without letting wealth and celebrity and fashion take over and subvert your work," as one of them said to me. This sort of reverence is probably quite boring to Johns, who sometimes goes out of his way not to be bored.

Johns began going to St. Martin in 1969. He bought a piece of land there in 1972, on the French side of the island, and had Philip Johnson, a friend, sketch out a house, which two younger architects then built. The house is a stucco rectangle with a bedroom, a bath, and Johns's studio at one end, coming off a forty-foot living room whose sliding glass doors overlook a wide lagoon. When my wife and I went down there last winter, Johns insisted on picking us up at our hotel in his tiny Renault Twingo—the roads, he indicated, were too hazardous for us to navigate on our own.

He also insisted on making dinner for us. While he busied himself in the kitchen, behind a counter at one end of the all-white living room with its cathedral ceiling, we took in the view from the covered veranda that runs the length of the house, listened to "The Magic Flute" on the stereo, and studied the room's single art work, a tall, relatively recent Johns canvas called "Bushbaby." The painting, which looked to be about six feet high by four feet wide—Johns didn't know the exact dimensions—was divided lengthwise in three sections: Harlequin-patterned form on the right, gray encaustic brushwork in the center, and colored circles on the left. Attached to the frame were two tall wooden slats, upright and overlapping, with a length of string hanging down from one of them. The string moved gently in the breeze coming through the sliding doors. Like the series of "catenary" paintings in his 2005 New York show—so called because each contains a length of string whose ends are attached loosely at two points, forming what mathematicians call a catenary curve—this one was empty of recognizable images. To me, it looked very quiet and meditative. I asked why it was called "Bushbaby." Johns said that he thought bush babies were small nocturnal animals found in Africa, animals "with monkey-like features and very large eyes." He said that this painting was a new version of an earlier, smaller one with the same title. But why the title? "It's a personal association," he said.

The self-imposed solitude at the core of Johns's life is more apparent in St. Martin. James Meyer, his studio assistant in Connecticut, comes down at the start of Johns's stay each year, which usually lasts from just before Christmas to March; he helps Johns set up the studio, stretch canvases, and so forth, but then he leaves, and Johns is alone in the house. Friends come for brief visits—he has a guest house—but you sense that he is perfectly comfortable with no one around. Although he keeps to no regular schedule, he gets up early and usually works for several hours every day. For recreation, he swims in his pool, or he gardens. The round, slatted-wood table in the living room is piled with books that people have sent him: "Kafka on the Shore," by Haruki Murakami; "The Liberal Imagination," by Lionel Trilling; "The Complete Poems of Ted Berrigan"; "Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine," by Wayne Anderson. He often wakes during the night and reads.

Dinner was fricassee of chicken and vegetables, served in its own broth, with couscous, red wine, and salad from the garden. Johns drank water. He hasn't touched alcohol for the last year. In November, 2005, he was driving two other people home from a Thanksgiving dinner in Connecticut when his car skidded out of control on an iced-over hill and hit a utility pole. The other people were not seriously hurt, but Johns broke several ribs.

I asked him if he had seen the recent show of Rauschenberg's work from 1954 to 1964, the influential combines, which opened last December at the Metropolitan Museum. (I knew that he had not been to the opening; although Rauschenberg and Johns can't help running into each other occasionally, they tend to avoid doing so.) Johns had gone before the show opened. "My first thought was that it was wonderful," he said. "Next thought was that the unfortunate thing about those early works is that they take on a quality of being relics. Originally, they were fresh, immediate, not precious—things apt to be overlooked,

picked up here and there, like a minute ago. Maybe that's not important—maybe all work goes through this kind of thing."

Johns is somewhat more willing than Rauschenberg, these days, to discuss their early relationship, but the curtain lifts only so far. At dinner that night, when I mentioned Cage's comment about not needing any other friends, Johns nodded, and said, "Well, for a while the four of us were a very interesting group—at least to ourselves—because there was complete and open communication, and different levels of experience and knowledge. I've certainly never experienced anything like that before or since."

I also brought up something Cage had written in his essay on Johns, that the atmosphere of his work was heavy rather than light, and that this was "something he knows and regrets." "I haven't read that piece in years," Johns said. "I'm not sure what he meant, but I think it's fair. There is a kind of—hesitation, or feedback, in my work that would give it the sense of heaviness rather than lightness. It doesn't just move forward gracefully." And would he prefer it if his work didn't have this heaviness? "Oh, I would. I think anyone would prefer to move ahead in a cheerful way, without hesitation. One would like to have a life that caused no confusion." He glanced across at my wife and added, mischievously, "Not you, Dodie!" Starting to laugh, Johns said, "No, the basic question here is whether you think life is a wonderful condition, or not. I don't, particularly. Amazingly enough, it's not entirely to my liking."

The next day, we had lunch at the Claude Mini-Club in Marigot, a restaurant where Johns often goes by himself. He wore a white shirt, baggy white pants, and sandals. The Mini-Club is open on three sides, with terrible murals and a good view of the harbor. The waiters all knew him, but nobody else did. At lunch, I had hoped to get him talking about Duchamp. Of all the artists Johns has learned from or made use of over the years, Duchamp seems to be the closest to him in spirit. What Johns wrote in a brief memorial statement on Duchamp, in 1968, that he had moved his art "into a field where language, thought, and vision act upon one another," applies just as well to his own work, and clear references to Duchamp's ideas and images run like a leitmotif through Johns's paintings, drawings, and prints. On this occasion, I reminded him of something else he had written about Duchamp, that "it may be a great work of his to have brought doubt into the air that surrounds art." At first Johns said that he didn't remember what he had meant by that, but then he mentioned the readymades—common, manufactured objects such as a snow shovel or a bottle-drying rack, which Duchamp had elevated to the status of art simply by choosing and signing them. "You don't know what they are," Johns said, "and I would say he didn't, either. He was not concerned with knowing what they were. He did it out of good will, and a feeling of wit and optimism, but basically they convey a kind of pessimism, or what I would call doubt. You could say they became expressions of a fact of life." Such as the fact that there can never be a valid definition of art, as Duchamp always maintained? "Well," Johns said, "there can't be a permanent definition of anything, it seems."

Johns and Rauschenberg met Duchamp in 1959. They both made paintings in homage to him soon afterward, but Johns has always made it clear that they saw Duchamp and his wife, Alexina (called Teeny), no more than a dozen times in all, and that he, Johns, would certainly never have presumed to talk about art or ideas with Duchamp. He particularly treasures a memory of the night in 1959 when he and Rauschenberg and Duchamp and Teeny had Christmas dinner together in Chinatown. During the meal, Duchamp said he was not happy with his own replies to a recent interviewer, who had asked him why he quit painting. (Duchamp's last painting on canvas was dated 1918.) As Johns remembers it, Duchamp had told the interviewer that it was "because of dealers and money and various reasons. Largely moralistic reasons. And then he looked up and said, 'But you know, it wasn't like that. It's like you break a leg—you didn't mean to do it.' " What Johns loved about this, I think, was Duchamp's denial of conscious intention as a ruling principle. It coincided with his own feeling that an artist does what he is helpless not to do.

Driving back from the restaurant, Johns wanted to get to a drawbridge before three o'clock—the hour when it's raised. A red light was flashing at the bridge entrance. The Twingo sailed through it. A man in some sort of uniform yelled at us. Johns shouted out the car window, "Sorry, I didn't see it," and kept on going. Caribbean justice did not descend.

At the house, he showed us around the garden and gave us iced lemongrass tea under a tiled-roof shelter overlooking the swimming pool. I asked him whether, as he grew older, there had been any changes in the way he went about his work. He was silent for some time, looking away and chewing on some ice. "I don't feel overloaded with ideas that I have to express urgently," he said. "But I don't know that I've ever felt that way." Did he think that the impulse to keep on making new work might someday run out? "Not that it might run out. I just don't feel the pressure of it now. I feel more freedom to do anything I might think to do, but my range of choices may be more limited. I'm old enough that I can see in my work things other people might not see—limitations, repetitions, states of mind that seem limited—and sometimes I have a sense of those things before, or while I'm working."

There was another long pause, punctuated by sounds of vigorous ice-crunching. "Part of working, for me," he went on, "involves anxiety. A certain amount of anxiety, or hesitation, or boredom. Frequently, I think for a long time before I do something, even though I've decided over the years that this is absolutely pointless. Actually, when one works, one comes to a solution much more quickly than when one sits and thinks. But I can't avoid it. I just sit and wonder. I don't *think* that used to happen, but I'm not sure."

A brief rain shower sent us inside. Standing at the windows, looking out over the lagoon with its surrounding green hills, Johns spoke of how much he enjoys the rain here. "It's so beautiful, like a curtain in front of the mountains," he said. "You see it coming, and you see it pass." ♦

Tomkins, Calvin. "The Mind's Eye." *The New Yorker,* December 11, 2006, pp. 76–85.

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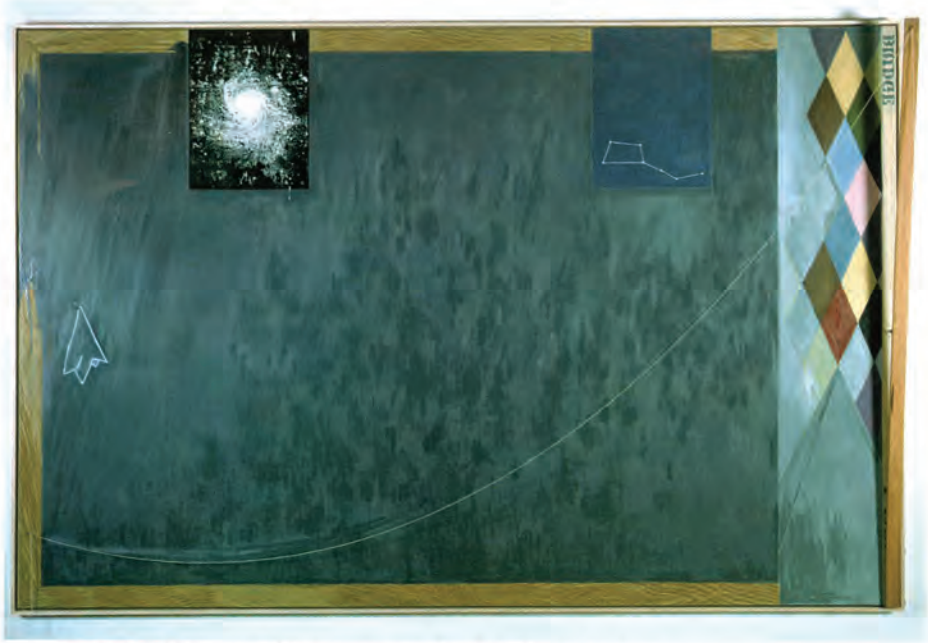
82. *Untitled*, by Jasper Johns. 2003. Encaustic on canvas and wood with collage and objects, 95 by 127 by 12 cm. (Private collection; exh. Matthew Marks Gallery, New York).

Jasper Johns
New York

by JAMES LAWRENCE
The University of Texas at Austin

FROM THE BEGINNING of his public career in the late 1950s, Jasper Johns and his works have remained enigmatically matter-of-fact. His statements and notes, many of which were published to coincide with a major survey of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1996, reveal the practitioner but conceal the thinker.[1] An escalating spiral of reference and self-reference in his work suggested a reluctance to surrender the last measure of privacy that remains when material, method, form and content are relentlessly

Lawrence, James. "Jasper Johns." *The Burlington Magazine* 147, no. 1230, September 2005, pp. 641–43.



80. *Bridge*, by Jasper Johns. 1997. Oil on canvas with objects, 198 by 300 by 20 cm. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; exh. Matthew Marks Gallery, New York).

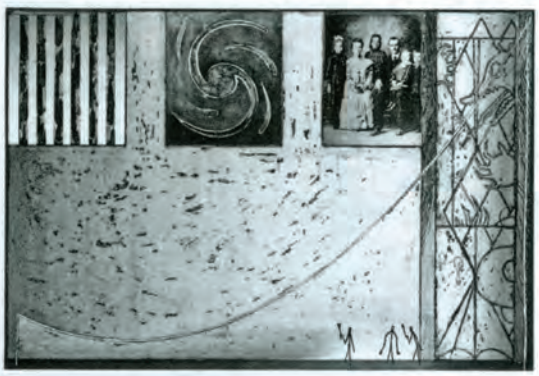
scrutinised in public. At key moments, the critical pursuit of Johns seemingly ceases to chase meaning and chases its own tail instead – a maddening but nonetheless instructive lesson in the limits of interpretation. This aspect of Johns's work has a distinguished pedigree going back to Leo Steinberg's essay 'Contemporary art and the plight of its public', which first appeared in the March 1962 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

It seems likely that Johns ran out of patience with this frenzy of interpretation, for in the wake of the 1996 retrospective he developed a new body of work around – or, more accurately, behind – a single formal principle. Although some of the works in *Jasper Johns: Catenary* at **Matthew Marks Gallery, New York** (closed 25th June), have been seen before, the exhibition provided an opportunity to assess the entire series. Thirty-eight works were shown, and the catalogue includes reproductions of all sixty-one paintings, prints and drawings based upon the catenary form.[2] The paintings reintroduce elements of construction and three-dimensional fabrication that had receded in Johns's work after the early 1960s, although they returned briefly around 1982. Wooden slats, hinges, hooks, eyes and nails provide the various means by which Johns attaches lengths of string to the paintings. The strings describe various curves: some swoop in steep arcs, some droop gently and others hang symmetrically. In each case, the string hangs across the painting making little or no contact with the painted surface. The prints and drawings incorporate these curvilinear forms into a range of compositional experiments that elucidate the development of the series without seeming merely ancillary. Where the catenary is reduced to two dimensions, it gains a variety of textures and effects in compensation.

Catenary curves have a distinguished history in American modernism. The Gateway Arch in Saint Louis is an inverted catenary; the dominant visual elements of suspension bridges are catenaries. It is a form that suggests the practicalities of engineering rather than the aesthetic preoccupations of architecture, although in the American landscape that distinction is often blurred. The first painting in Johns's series, *Bridge* (Fig.80), has been thoroughly discussed by several scholars in relation to the Brooklyn Bridge, an icon of American modernism that takes a central role in one of Johns's possible sources, Hart Crane's poem *The Bridge*.[3] The painting retains several elements familiar from Johns's earlier work, such as the depiction of a cloth nailed to the board, harlequin patterning and galactic images. Unlike earlier works with plural sources – such as *Perilous night* (1982) or the aptly named *Racing thoughts* (1983) – *Bridge* is sparse and serene. Rhetoric surrounding this show refers to Johns retreating to his studio 'to wipe the slate clean', but there is scant evidence of genuine crisis or of formal catastrophe and subsequent absolution. Clarification, revision and retrenchment are all evident, but not repudiation or rejection. The hanging string in *Bridge* marks a decision to impose gravity upon a compositional field that was in disarray in the years leading up to the MoMA retrospective. The resulting curve reorganises Johns's sense of significance, but it does so more by suggestion than by definition.

The value of the catenary as an ordering principle is capably demonstrated in a suite of thirteen works that includes *Untitled* (Fig.81). The common elements – the early photograph of the Johns family, the Stars and Stripes and the spiral galaxy – are familiar pieces from Johns's repertory. The reptilian form and harlequin patterning at the right edge provide counterbalancing vertical heft. The catenary is particularly satisfying in this arrangement, and remains so throughout the thirteen variations. Johns rearranges and multiplies his motifs freely as he moves among colour, tone, resolution of image and weight of touch, but the catenary holds each work together by implying the primacy of the ordered field. Such arrangements emphasise how the pared-down *Bridge* provides for a new syntax which encourages coherence without enforcing it. That distinction is crucial for an artist whose work embraces the full spectrum of intention, including painstaking deliberation, serendipity, complete chance and abdicated responsibility.

The paintings clarify this point. Their construction is not only straightforwardly conceived and executed without concealment, but also tantalising for the viewer. The boards to which the strings are fixed, with bare hooks, eyes and hinges, invite movement and change. The obviously variable length of each string, the surplus of which dangles freely, promises the possibility of adjustment. In several works, including *Untitled* (Fig.82) and *Near the lagoon* (2002), Johns indicates alternative curves. Some have already been used during fabrication, when he applied encaustic with a string in place and then removed it to leave an impression. It is sometimes unclear



81. *Untitled*, by Jasper Johns. 2001. Intaglio on paper, 66 by 84 cm. (Private collection; exh. Matthew Marks Gallery, New York).

Lawrence, James. "Jasper Johns." *The Burlington Magazine* 147, no. 1230, September 2005, pp. 641–43.

which curve is string, which is shadow, and which is image. Such manipulation of index and icon is recurrent in Johns's work, and it provides the most persuasive links with Pop art but, as with *trompe-l'œil* painting, the answers are found by touch. Confirmation comes from a physical event. In a public exhibition this can occur through the flutter of air caused by a passing visitor or by an open door. This kinetic aspect gave the show a surprising vitality, a reminder of how stealthily Johns introduces temporal aspects. His handling of encaustic, oil and numerous other media remains vivid, even when the palette is restricted to an uninflected grey. The catenary strings project into space from surfaces with considerable presence in their own right.

It is inappropriate to gauge the catenary series in isolation, for it neither begins anew nor contains any clear moment of cessation. The persistently indeterminate catenary form suggests a certain gradualness and obscures any sense of formal conclusion. The series does not seem greater than the sum of its parts, which might say more about the quality of the parts than about any shortcomings of the whole. Johns has perhaps reached the point where lyricism holds more attractions than dramatic grandeur. His self-quotation seems more like recollection than argument, possibly because this group of works invokes its formal predecessors instead of a set of depleted figurative signs. For *Catenary (Manet–Degas)* (1999), Johns revived his practice from the late 1950s of attaching pieces of canvas to his paintings, in this case to evoke Manet's *Execution of Maximilian* (c.1867–68). It is instructive to see which strategies and tactics Johns chooses to revisit. Long-term consideration of the catenary works will require careful assessment of these choices.

One intriguing image that appears in two paintings and a number of drawings deserves mention. Its source is a lithograph, executed around 1835 by Henri Monnier, which shows a voyeur watching, through a screen, a couple in bed. His shadow, cast on the screen, shows him to be in a full state of arousal. As Scott Rothkopf mentions in his impressive catalogue essay, the hinged slats of the screen and the revelatory shadows echo some of the key formal traits of the catenary paintings. Monnier's lithograph is nonetheless a satire, and Johns's purpose in repeatedly using the image may be no less satirical.

The catenary series invites active participation and close reading of revitalised form and imagery, but the catenaries themselves are still barriers that ultimately remain inviolate. They attract attention and hold it, which serves the casual viewer well but also creates distance. The curve becomes the thing that is seen, rather than the way it is seen. This might be deliberate, for Johns's work is professionally rather than confessionally autobiographical. It sets the limits of the intimacy it permits. The catenary form cools down imagery that had become overwrought, and critical approaches to Johns's work might benefit from similar reappraisal.

[1] K. Varnedoe, ed.: *Jasper Johns: Writings, sketchbook notes, interviews*, New York 1996.

[2] Catalogue: *Jasper Johns: Catenary*. Essay by Scott Rothkopf. 128 pp. incl. 81 col. pls. (Steidl/Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2005), $58. ISBN 3–86521–162–3.

[3] See esp. G. Garrels, R. Field and J. Pissarro, eds.: exh. cat. *Jasper Johns: New paintings and works on paper*, San Francisco (Museum of Modern Art), New Haven (Yale University Art Gallery) and Dallas (Museum of Art) 1999; at the time of this travelling exhibition, the catenary paintings were known as the 'Bridge' series.

Lawrence, James. "Jasper Johns." *The Burlington Magazine* 147, no. 1230, September 2005, pp. 641–43.

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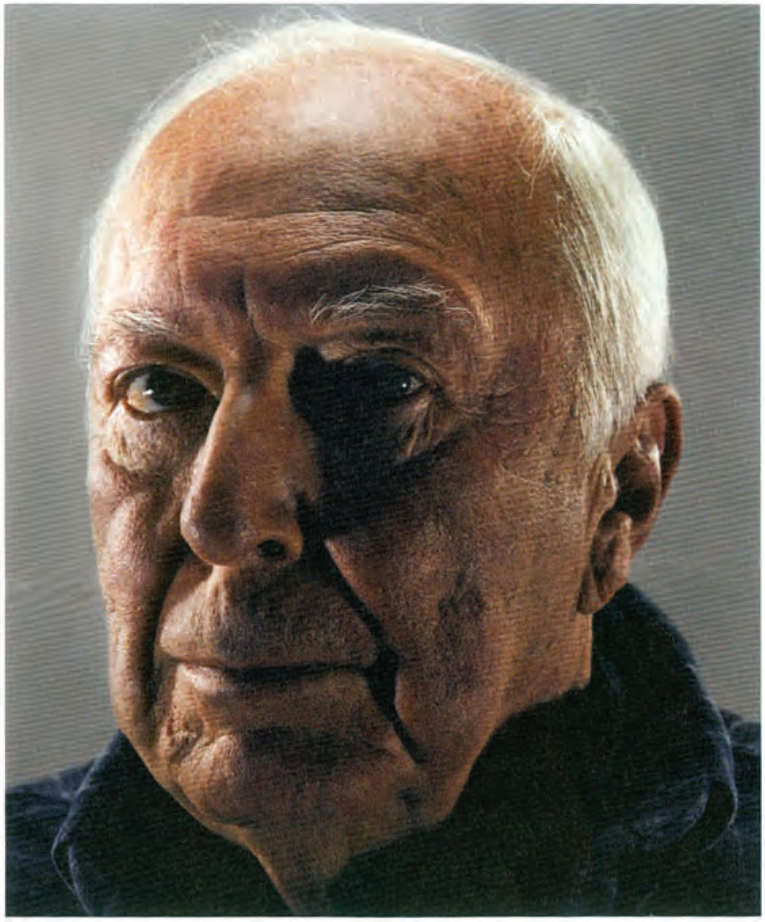
STRING FELLOW



HE MADE ART HISTORY WITH HIS FLAGS AND TARGETS. AT HOME IN CONNECTICUT, **JASPER JOHNS** TALKS ABOUT HIS LATEST PAINTINGS—WITH STRING AS A CENTRAL MOTIF—AND ABOUT THE OLD DAYS WITH RAUSCHENBERG AND CASTELLI.

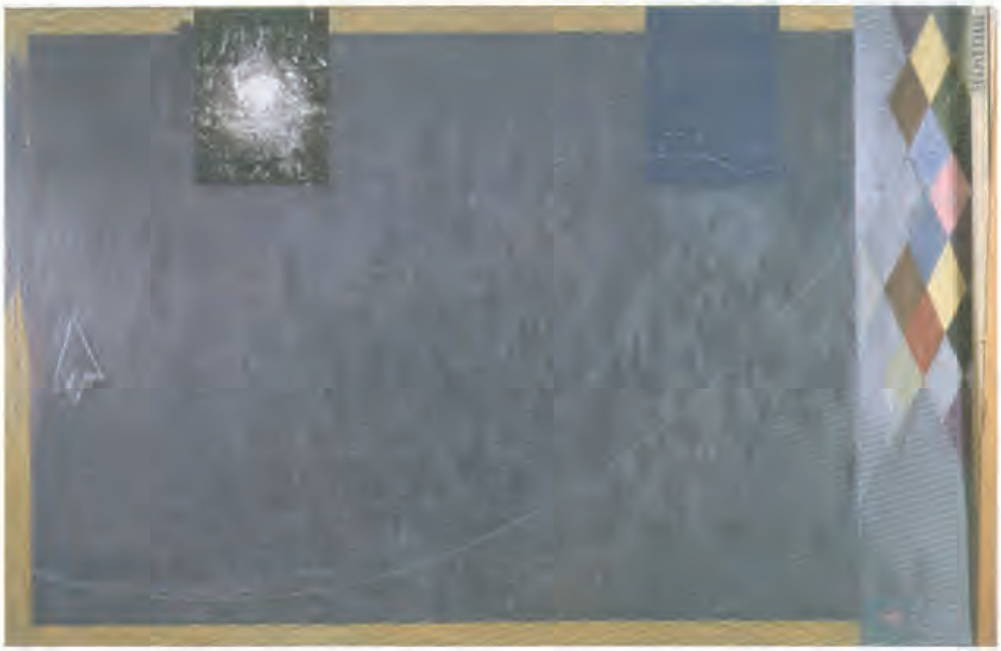
Says Jasper Johns: "I feel that works of art are an opportunity for people to construct meaning, so I don't usually tell what they mean. It conveys to people that they have to participate." Opposite: FROM HENRI MONNIER, 2000, ink on plastic.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

PORTRAIT BY MARIO SORRENTI

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine*, July 2005, pp. 64–69.

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine,* July 2005, pp. 64–69.



BRIDGE, 1997, oil on canvas with objects

Jasper Johns is standing over a long worktable in the studio on his rural Connecticut estate, his longtime assistant by his side. Two prints, seemingly identical, are laid out for him. On closer inspection, one has a splotch of purple where the other doesn't. Johns's full-time printmaker, who toils in a studio on the other side of the renovated barn, wants his boss to choose. Johns, whose every brushstroke has been pondered, analyzed and debated by critics, art historians and grad students for nearly 50 years, takes a brief but studied look, then makes his official pronouncement: "I don't care."

A few minutes later, in a comfortable upstairs sitting room ringed with drawings by the likes of Willem de Kooning, Brice Marden, Bridget Riley and Cecily Brown and a fan sculpture that Claes Oldenburg gave him one drunken night many years ago, Johns tries to explain his surprising apathy in the aesthetic matter. When he was a younger man, he says, he discarded countless prints, but with age has come a mellowing, an acceptance that such perfectionist standards are at times little more than youthful folly. "When you're used to looking at things very closely, you see things," he says. "Years later, when it doesn't make the slightest difference to you, you don't see it."

On the eve of his current exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York's Chelsea—his first major painting show since his 1996 blockbuster retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—the man commonly described as the country's most important living artist shows few signs of the art-world pretension that would be more rightfully his than just about anybody else's. Still robust at 75, the famously laconic artist has not grown loquacious in his later years, but his economy of words belies both a gentlemanly graciousness and a wry sense of humor (this is a man who has a kitschy beaded *Mona Lisa* wall hanging at the entrance to his studio). Sipping fizzy water and toying with his eyeglasses, he pokes fun at all manner of subjects, including himself and, with subtle poignancy, all those Johns watchers and the near cosmic significance they place on his life's work.

"Occasionally one observes how one is looking at things—I don't know how to explain it," he begins. "Well, at lunch today we were talking about the nature of works of art on the wall. I said that one would not notice if a painting in the house were replaced with a color photograph of the painting, at least not for a while." It turns out the scenario wasn't purely hypothetical. When workmen recently needed to adjust the lights in his studio, a relief of a flag, one of Johns's most famous motifs, was taken down for safekeeping and then rehung. The other day, Johns recalls, he asked Jim, his assistant, "When was it last removed?"

"Two months ago," Jim answered. "Why?"

"It's upside down."

"How did you notice?"

"Well, I looked at it."

Johns breaks into hearty laughter, his already rosy cheeks turning redder, his creased face crinkling like tissue paper. Then he admits it wasn't the first time he discovered his work hanging upside down; he once came across a painting flip-flopped at the Pompidou Center in Paris. "It was an easy mistake to make," he says magnanimously. "No one else would have noticed. It's the kind of painting that it would hardly make any difference, except any drips would have gone up the wall instead of down."

His own brand of abstraction may be the punch line here, but the subtext is that most of us are just plain lazy when it comes to looking. And Johns has spent a lifetime prodding us to look. "I feel that works of art are an opportunity for people to construct meaning, so I don't usually tell what they mean. It conveys to people that they have to participate," he says, then adds with a laugh, "They either pay a great deal of attention or dismiss it."

Of course, it's almost always the former. His elusiveness tantalizes critics and scholars. In the art world, even to his friends, Johns is larger than life.

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine*, July 2005, pp. 64–69.

UNTITLED, 2003, encaustic on canvas and wood with collage and objects

"I think everybody's got a connection to Jasper in some way, everybody who's making paintings—trying to go through it, or go around it," says the artist Terry Winters, who has known Johns since the early Eighties but who still talks about him with the awe of a schoolboy who has met his idol. "He's a very imposing figure, Jasper. He's like a king."

Although the critics do occasionally lambaste him—for painting in a kind of obscure code that needs deciphering—they never ignore him. "You can feel the sense of necessity in the work," says Gary Garrels, senior curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "You feel the artist is still grappling with truly bringing into the world thoughts and emotions that are pressing. This actually is very rare. Very few artists can maintain that intensity."

His most recent work—the grouping on view at Matthew Marks until June 25—experiments with the geometry of a catenary, which is essentially a fancy word for a curve. Technically, a catenary is formed by a cord hung but not stretched from two fixed points, as on a suspension bridge, leading to much speculation that the paintings are about connections. Johns, apparently unaware of the term when he began the series in the late Nineties, gracefully swept a piece of string across the canvas, imprinting it in the monochromatic surface like a child's hand pressed into wet plaster, and then letting it hang loose. Many of the paintings have hinged sides, and a handful of images recur: a formal family portrait, with Johns's father as a little boy, holding a hammer and sitting on his own father's knee; a harlequin print; the Big Dipper; a swirling galaxy; the dragon from a "Chinese" Halloween costume Johns wore as a child. Stenciled words, a familiar Johns motif, run across the bottom or along the edge of several of the pictures: CATENARY MANET DEGAS J. JOHNS 1999, reads one title.

Some of the work has been exhibited before in a small show that originated at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and it's all long since sold (his paintings go for seven figures, his prints for six), but Johns seems a touch jittery as the New York opening approaches. He's never done so many paintings of the same image, "if you can call a hanging string an image," he says. "This work more than anything I've done before is a definite series. It may turn out to be a very monotonous show." While those breathless acolytes have panted that the Catenary paintings represent a major turn in his career, Johns isn't so sure. Where others see novelty, he sees continuity: "On some level, I always think my work is in a rut and never gets out."

His early paintings—the flags and maps, the targets and numbers, painted in beautifully thick encaustic—long ago cemented his place in the history books, which credit him with helping discover the path out of the dense forest of Abstract Expressionism. Fusing the painterliness of Picasso with the intellectual rigor of Duchamp, Johns led the way to Pop, Minimalism and beyond.

The acclaim for his latest work, however, isn't unanimous. One art-world veteran gripes that the Catenary paintings are "bloodless, dried-out pastiches of his former work," and *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* reviews were dismissive of the show, the latter complaining the paintings suffer from "oppressive claustrophobia." On the other side of the debate, Winters calls the series a "totally remarkable body of work. I think it's as good as anything he's ever done. Despite how smart they are, they're mysterious and moving. It's about what one feels in front of the paintings." Garrels, who curated the show of the first Catenary pictures at SFMoMA in 1999, calls them both "austere" and "romantic."

It's an interesting choice of words, considering the works' creator seems so uncomfortable with subjects of the emotional or personal variety—at least when it comes to discussing them. All art, Johns says, is personal, though he takes issue with critics' recent emphasis on the autobiographical nature of his pictures. "There is a period in which I began to use images from my life, but everything you use is from your life," he explains. "I think it's more a way for people to talk than anything else."

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine*, July 2005, pp. 64–69.

STUDY FOR MERCE, 2002, encaustic on canvas and wood with collage and objects

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine,* July 2005, pp. 64–69.

Johns grew up in South Carolina, passed from relative to relative after his parents divorced when he was two. It was a lonely childhood. "I always wanted to be an artist," he recalls. "I don't think I knew what it meant. Part of it was that I knew I couldn't be an artist where I was, so it meant I would get to be somewhere else. My childhood was not particularly happy, so I think I thought somewhere there was the possibility of enjoying myself more."

That somewhere turned out to be New York. Johns arrived in 1949 as a 19-year-old and soon forged what would turn out to be the most important artistic relationship of his life, with Robert Rauschenberg. A Texan almost five years his senior, Rauschenberg had already begun to navigate the New York art world. Johns took up residence in a studio downstairs from him. At a time when Abstract Expressionism was the only game in town, their rebellious liaison—using found objects in their work, painting banal symbols like numerals—changed the course of art history. "I can't think of anything more useful to a young artist than another artist who is able to communicate with him," says Johns, who is modest when it comes to his contributions to the pairing. "I'm trying to imagine what he might have gotten from me. But we certainly treated each other as equals and traded thoughts in the most direct way. Each was the audience for the other.

"I can remember watching him paint—and that was a wonderful experience—but I can't describe it," he continues, gazing out the window. "At a certain point I would say, 'Here's an idea for you,' and he would say, 'Here's an idea for you.' A lot of the time it was not that blunt, it was more subtle."

It was a connection so intense that Johns, in a rare moment of candor about Rauschenberg, says it has been impossible to replicate. But asked if, as is commonly believed, the two were lovers, Johns responds, "How is it relevant?" Whether his Southern sense of propriety is to blame for his reticence or he's just being coy, his voice and manner reveal the depth of emotion. "I felt a great kinship with Bob. My childhood was such that I never felt closely akin to anyone in my family, so there was something about our relationship that"—he trails off, his expression turning melancholy—"was colored or formed by this feeling of mine, of kinship. I don't know enough of such things to go into it." He notes that some people have compared the duo with Cain and Abel. "The complexities of brotherhood, I don't know what they are, but they are very rich. It was a very rich soup we were in." Whatever the specifics of their relationship, it ended long ago, and now he sees Rauschenberg, who at 79 is in ill health and lives primarily on Captiva, off the Florida coast, "only by chance."

In addition to fueling Johns's creative expression, Rauschenberg introduced his young friend to the man who would become the most essential partner of his career: Leo Castelli. Johns's 40-year collaboration with the era's preeminent gallerist began in 1958, when Castelli gave him his first solo show, and the artist remained loyal until the dealer's death in 1999, at the age of 91. He describes their relationship as "pretty close and pretty long. I don't know that many people who've had dealers that long. Early on, Leo said, 'We don't have a contract, but I certainly wouldn't want you to be with my gallery if you didn't want to be.' 'Me neither.'"

Castelli represented many of the biggest names in art, including Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg, but he is most closely associated with Johns. "To a degree they're inseparable, he and my career," Johns says. "I didn't have a career anywhere else. He was the funnel for everything I did." Castelli left Johns alone to make art, and Johns let Castelli do his salesmanship thing—usually. "Occasionally Leo had involvement with people I could not stand," Johns says, rolling his eyes and adding that he would veto those sales.

Following Castelli's death, every art dealer in New York was believed to be salivating at the thought of moving in on one of the world's most expensive living artists. Johns, however, claims that Matthew Marks—a 42-year-old gallerist whose roster includes Johns's contemporary Ellsworth Kelly as well as hot younger artists like Robert Gober and Andreas Gursky—was the only one who proposed a show. He seems genuinely flattered that Marks, as much a fan as a businessman, had kept up with his work. "I have one painting behind my wall that I didn't tell Matthew about, so it won't be in his catalog—I'm sure he'll be very upset," Johns says, explaining that he hid it because "I wasn't sure I liked it. It looked too much like a toy."

Though he rarely dumps a painting, Johns admits to dry spells. "I go through stages where I don't know exactly what to do and have to let things rest," he says. "I think the best way to make things work is to keep working, though I get into a spirit when I can't do that." When he's stuck, he'll turn to his prints or go out in the garden and prune trees. "That kind of work needs doing—a different way of moving, a different form of exercise. Also, the way you look [at things] is different because you're moving about."

Johns has a circle of devoted friends, but he is the epitome of the isolated artist. He lives with his dogs in rural Sharon, Connecticut, about two hours from New York City, where, on a sunny spring day such as this, a storm might suddenly kick up over lunch. (Of his dog Alice Faye he says, "She's not dangerous, but occasionally she bites. I have a friend who says, 'I think of you every time I see where Alice bit me on the knee.'") Having sold his Upper East Side town house, he maintains a pied-à-terre, where he says he has slept only 12 to 15 times in the nine years he has been in Connecticut. Lately he has been missing New York and the feeling of being in touch with all that's going on in the art world, and he says he may return on a more regular basis. "I'm interested in other artists' work as a stimulus for my work. I do not just appreciate their work—I want to use something of it," he remarks with a wicked grin. "Even noting how someone is not like you, who is an artist, that reinforces you in your individuality or loneliness. You see they have an equal possibility for isolation."

Before heading back downstairs to look at his two current paintings (half encaustic, half oil, with hinged sides and string that, unlike in the Catenary paintings, simply hangs straight down), Johns walks around the room looking at some of the art he's collected. There are Duchamp sculptures, drawings from his friends Terry Winters and Julian Lethbridge, and one work by Al Hansen made of Hershey's wrappers. "I think I loaned Al Hansen $25 or $50 once," Johns recalls. "Written on the back is I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN. I love drawings, and they sort of stick to you. I bought that de Kooning drawing, the woman, from Leo, probably in 1958."

Johns insists he's not that good a draftsman himself and says his difficulty is not just a matter of getting older. "I do make drawings and remember years ago visiting Louise Nevelson," he says. "She said, 'What are you doing?' 'I've been making a drawing.' She said, 'Dear, you don't *make* a drawing. You *draw*.' I think of Ellsworth Kelly, who does very rigid geometric works, but all along has continued drawing from nature and has that ability. I don't do that. It requires a certain sense of space and recognition of forms."

The way Johns tells it, even the late writer Susan Sontag was a more skilled draftsman. He recounts how she once made a copy of a Picabia drawing he bought in the Sixties. "I don't know whether I could have done that," he claims. "I was astonished. I taped her drawing to the back of the real drawing."

(For the record, Gary Garrels, who specializes in drawings, calls Johns "one of the most incredible draftsmen I have ever seen.")

Regarding his place in the annals of art history, Johns demurs: "I don't take that kind of thing very seriously. As for my work, I think of it as kind of isolated. I'm really competing with myself if anything, not with anybody else." He pauses a moment, as if deciding just how honest to be, and then allows, "There's the satisfaction artists get of having the attention of people—over their friends.

"That's terrible, but I think it's human nature." ●

Belcove, Julie. "String Fellow." *W Magazine*, July 2005, pp. 64–69.

Time Out New York

Reviews

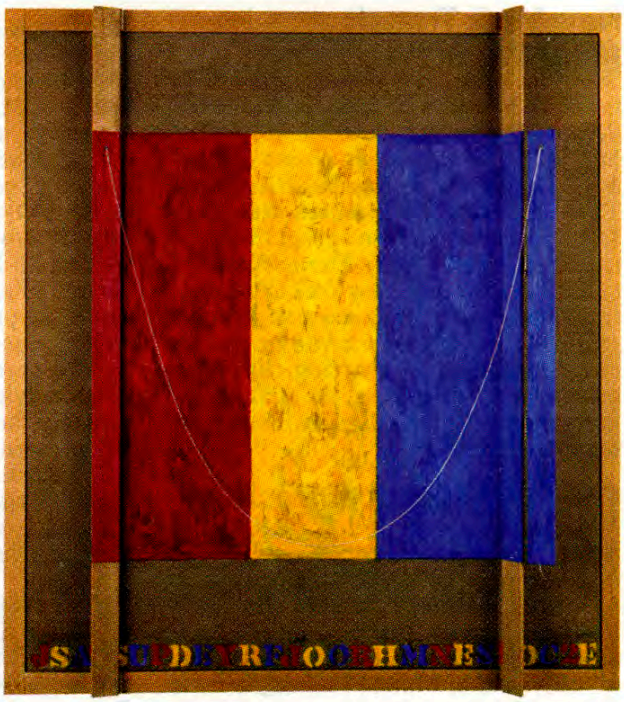
Jasper Johns, "Catenary"

Matthew Marks Gallery, through Sat 25 (see Chelsea).

"Catenary," Jasper Johns's first exhibition in eight years, contains some of his best work in decades. The title refers to the curve of a string that hangs between two fixed points. In works like *Bridge* (1997), the string is suspended between a real wood slat and a trompe l'oeil one so that it traverses the classic Johnsian terrain between reality and illusion. Elsewhere, the string seems to generate drapery folds in works like *Untitled* (2003), thus referencing a real but absent string while simultaneously giving the impression of a gray curtain pulled down over the canvas (a theme Johns has explored since he famously glued a real window shade to a canvas in 1959).

More subtle still is *Study for Merce* (2002), where red, yellow and blue monochromes join another suspended string and seemingly jumbled letters, which are stenciled along the bottom edge of the painting. By reading the letters in chromatic order the "code" is quickly deciphered as, J-A-S-P-E-R J-O-H-N-S 0-2/S-T-U-D-Y F-O-R M-E-R-C-E (a reference to choreographer Merce Cunningham).

In "Catenary," Johns at last directly addresses the subject of homosexuality—long a tacit theme in his work—via allusions to Leonardo and, by extension, Freud. Freud famously misread a Leonardo drawing of a copulating heterosexual couple as anatomically incorrect and, so, as proof of the artist's repressed homosexuality. In *From Henri Monnier* (2000), among other pieces in the show, Johns reworks that drawing to portray copulating men, whom he disguises in marbled swirls. Here, Johns takes on sexuality as he once approached beer cans and flags—with playfulness and a trenchant (art) historical acumen.
—*Noam M. Elcott*



Jasper Johns, *Study for Merce*, 2002.

Elcott, Noam M. "Jasper Johns." *Time Out New York*, June 23, 2005, p. 64.

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Jasper Johns
Catenary
Matthew Marks

It has been said that a painter's "late style," when old age prevails, is characterized by the coincidence of simplicity of pictorial forms and high ambition. In the case of the late paintings of Titian and Rembrandt, their anguish and vulnerability is wedded to their unstable representations: space becomes mysterious, light becomes dramatic and spotty, and form becomes fragmented. This is also true of the late work of Matisse and de Kooning, but for the opposite reason. Also notable is Mondrian, who found enthusiasm in old age—one may think of his "Broadway Boogie Woogie" as an exciting response to New York's captivating sound and rhythm. Continuing on, suddenly night falls and there appears Jasper Johns, on the pretext of fishing, fixing on the heavenly stars reflecting on the water, tracing the formation of the Milky Way or even the Big Dipper. With a bit of prolonged hesitation, he turns his gaze on the curve of his bamboo rod and transforms its beautiful shape into fragile string.

Like an old man who becomes a child, like a philosopher who gives up philosophizing in favor of fishing by the riverbank, full of a sense of wonderment while contemplating the matter of life, death, and the universe—these are the major themes of Jasper Johns's new body of work, dating from 1997 to 2002. This exhibit marks a significant time since the great painter's retrospective at the MoMA in 1996. As I've always been utterly perplexed and amazed by Johns's ability to gather objects and subjects alike from previous work to give birth to new ones, I now realize that he has done this consistently with a keen pacing between intervals, which parallel his movement and repose, all in the service of introspection. Just as much as I've tried over the years to read into the meanings of his iconographies, I also have contented myself by acknowledging their resistance to interpretation. They simply install their own meanings among many meanings.

Let us begin with Johns's ability to itemize his objects or subjects, or vice versa, throughout his long and productive opus. First of all, they are man-made things that could be found in our everyday environment. They persist while retaining flatness, though rarely after their shapes. Secondly, they belong to no hierarchical system, which allows them to be animate and yet remain perfectly still. In other words, they are unchanged by how they are situated in space and how they're affixed to the painted surface. This leads to the question of edges in relation to the negative space between them, which in turn negotiates the occasional overlapping and repeating figures with ground distinction. As a whole, they yield to a democratic unity, organized by the memory of the hand's movements: remembering things past in order to arrange the present and anticipate things to come. These elements appear in paintings like "According to What" (1954), "Diver" (1967), "Perilous Night" (1982), "Untitled" (1984), and "The Seasons" (1985–86).

One of the distinguishing features of our first-person avowals of our mental states is that they are both autobiographical and incorrigible. It is not that the abstract is increasingly pronounced in Johns's perpetual flux since *The Seasons* paintings. Whether I could have traced cross-references that pertain to both Johns's history and art history—the blueprint of his grandfather's house, a boy's shadow, the outline of a Grünwald soldier from the Isenheim altarpiece, the color diamond patterns and the handkerchief from Picasso's *Harlequin* and *Weeping Women* series, the renovation after Degas' reconstruction of Manet's "The Execution of Maximilian" (a double play of the same world), the erotic humor within Monnier's prints—what most interests me are the dramatic changes in the predominantly gray field.

Unlike his signature gray strokes, which at times can be physical and heavy in their paint application and at other times display discrepancies in their expressiveness, in these new paintings his touch adheres to uniformity in spite of the dense surfaces. Both "Bridge" (1997) and "Catenary (Jacob's Ladder)" (1999) evoke greater discrepancies in their field of vision. By heightening the tonal scale of gray with a variety of brushstrokes, they suggest a meteorological presence. One feels the moisture in the air; then comes the rain. They remind me of Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk Before the Sea" (1808–10), a painting of a monk in black costume with a bald spot on his head, standing alone on sand dunes in the foreground facing the massive, dark ocean and the gray sky. Friedrich's painting evokes the monotony and boundlessness that tie the spiritual conception of the body, the mind, and the celestial light together with the spirit manifesting itself in nature through light. I certainly felt the vastness and a profound immensity of distance between the pictures and myself. Like the dreams in Dr. Edward Young's *Night Thoughts in Life, Death and Immortality*, there is a strong feeling of the didactic and aphoristic, and yet an air of mystery and sorrow as well. In addition to his use of contrast, Johns employs a fragile string that sags from a thin wooden slat that is hinged at one edge, the other edge attached to the canvas. The string helps to defuse the tension between darkness and lightness, density and fragility.

By letting go of his previous eloquence and the dialogue with the external realm, the great painter this time turns inward. Ever so diligently he begins to introspect the basic meaning of life and art all over again. It is a matter of the metaphysical and existential domain, as the extreme qualification once stated by Ludwig Feuerbach that "a true philosopher does not have a philosophy."

—Tomassio Longhi

Longhi, Tomassio. "Jasper Johns." *The Brooklyn Rail,* June 2005, p. 22.

The New York Times

Jasper Johns at work on a painting, as yet untitled, in his studio in Sharon, Conn., with one of his dogs in the background. Mr. Johns is preparing for an exhibition of his latest work in San Francisco.

A Master of Silence Who Speaks in Grays

By AMEI WALLACH

SHARON, Conn.

THE first impression is that Jasper Johns, on the cusp of 70, is looking great. He has shed that C.E.O.'s look of pressured prosperity that he wore in the months leading up to his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York three years ago. Contemplating a work in progress in his studio, in stone-washed khaki's and black T-shirt, he's serene and trim.

The second impression is of silence. The studio is as awash in silence as it is in light.

Mr. Johns has been working on the new painting all morning and preparing others for an exhibition of his latest work, which opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on Sept. 16. So there are people about: his assistant, James Meyer, his master printer, John Lund. They've all worked together for so long there doesn't seem to be any need for talk.

Outside, on a hot summer day recently, there is barely sufficient breeze to stir the meadow grasses that surround the studio, stretching past distant maples to layered green hills, where a turkey hawk is gliding. Someone in white is sweeping the veranda.

Inside, silence seems to emanate from the paintings, which are majestic, mysterious and gray. In some, the central gray field is interspersed with rectangular windows in which there are images — the galaxy, the big dipper, a Chinese dragon, a harlequin pattern. Attached to each of the paintings at one vertical edge is a stick of wood, near whose top a string hangs diagonally in an arc, with plenty of slack, to the lower corner at the opposite side of the canvas.

The painting Mr. Johns has been working on this morning is rectangular, 78 inches high by 118 inches wide. In addition to the wood and the string, it consists, in large part at this stage, of a painterly gray field that is alive with camouflaged color — a vagrant ochre and a fleshy pink. The painting's vivacious surface seems particularly seductive when compared with the profoundly reticent finished works that line the wall beside it.

So will this painting turn out to be more lush, more ingratiating to the viewer's senses?

"That painting is going to change a lot before it's finished," Mr. Johns says. "It's too jumpy at the moment."

It has never been Mr. Johns's enterprise to please the viewer, though from the first flags and maps with which he revolutionized American art in 1958, he often has. His project has been to challenge and confound, both the viewer and himself. But viewer response has always been central to his paintings — an element to bounce off and manipulate, in the same manner that he rethinks space and perspective.

The new group of nine paintings and six works on paper, though, is the first to be inspired almost wholly by a viewer's chance remark. This happened around the time when the Johns retrospective was traveling in 1997, and it happened at Mr. Johns's house on the island of St. Martin.

There is a wall in that house that his friends call his "latest greatest wall," because there is always one of his newest paintings on it. The paintings that hang there, Mr. Johns explains, are always painted expressly for the wall, which took on its present dimensions after Philip Johnson designed two cabinets for the stereo and television. Among the first works that hung there was an untitled oil, which came to be the cover of the retrospective catalogue and is owned by Agnes Gund, the president of the Museum of Modern Art.

Mr. Johns then made an encaustic variation on the same theme, "because of the climate in St. Martin," he explains. "The wax protects it." And once the second painting left for the retrospective, he had an empty wall to fill.

So he painted "The Bridge," the first gray painting in what he had no reason to expect would become a series. "I don't know where ideas come from," he says. "But somehow the fact that the painting was going to go on the wall in that place made me think of it as a kind of object, and then I thought, well, it would be nice if this object expressed the idea that it was an object, and that's how I started thinking of things happening in the physical space, like the stick and the string."

At this point Henry Cortesi, a New York lawyer, went to St. Martin for a visit with his wife Nan Rosenthal, who is a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He looked for a while at the curved string on the painting. "And Henry said, 'Oh, that's a catenary,' " Mr. Johns recalls. "I said, 'What are you talking about?' I'd never heard the word before." Mr. Cortesi faxed him the dictionary definition: a curve assumed by a cord of uniform density that hangs freely from two fixed points.

Jasper Johns finds inspiration in the random curve of a string. What's fascinating about that? 'You know you do something,' he says, 'and you just do it.'

"I became very interested that there is a name for that," says Mr. Johns. "And I don't know if I would have painted this series without Henry's having said that. You know you do something, and you just do it; I never thought that anyone had figured out a mathematical formula for it." He laughs hugely. "And then another person came and said, 'Oh, catenary, that's a word often used in relation to bridges.' "

Uncannily, the painter had already named the first painting "Bridge." The bridge in his title "seemed appropriate to me," he says, because, "obviously the painting has to do with, in a sense, connections, doesn't it? So that in itself is a bridge, whether they are connections among all the various ideas we have of space, or connections of thought, or what? Connections to what you're calling emptiness, and what I'm calling fullness."

I have called it emptiness — the gray and the references to galaxies and outer space, to the harlequin of art history and the Chinese dragon costume he wore one Halloween as a boy, the fragile string that describes the curve of the earth — because these paintings seem in their spaciousness and seriousness to be taking on the big spiritual subjects of life, death, emptiness and eternity.

The last paintings Mr. Johns completed before this series — the paintings that left his wall in St. Martin for the retrospective at the Modern — were crowded with emblems of the brutal abandonments of the artist's childhood, including the floor plan of his grandfather's house, where he spent the most stable years of his youth. His mother had divorced his alcoholic father, moved away and started a new family. But since the retrospective, it seems, he has emerged from this attic of memory and loss into a more metaphysical atmosphere of reconciliation between eternal truths and personal history.

To do so, paradoxically, he has returned to the studio. The wood slats and the silent gray in the new paintings hark back to elegiac works from the early 1960's, like "No," and from the early 1980's, like "In the Studio," which Gary Garrels, chief curator of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, has taken care to include in his show. The period of "In the Studio" began Mr. Johns's fascination with Picasso's work of the "Guernica" period and the war years.

There is an animation to Picasso's form and a grandeur to his depiction of human suffering in those paintings that is compelling to Mr. Johns. A couple of years ago in an art magazine, he saw what he calls "this tiny little postage stamp reproduction," of what turned out to be Picasso's 1938 painting "Reclining Nude." Mr. Johns made a copy of the mangled, articulated torso

Continued on Page 31

Amei Wallach's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about the artist Ray Johnson.

Wallach, Amei. "A Master of Silence Who Speaks in Grays." *The New York Times*, September 5, 1999, Arts, pp. 29, 31.

A Silence That Speaks in Gray

Librado Romero/The New York Times

Jasper Johns, whose flag paintings revolutionized American art, in his Connecticut studio.

Continued From Page 29

whose splayed fingers and suffering mouth are depicted by a single ribbony line. His copy turned out to be only a detail from the real picture, and it faces the wrong way, but he keeps it hanging in his Connecticut studio nevertheless.

"I wanted to see if I could learn anything from doing it, because I think the image is so wonderful, and also the articulation of the subject," he says. "I wondered if I would find something. I didn't." He laughs. "The thoughts remain his thoughts; they cannot be my thoughts."

What obsessed him about Picasso's line was its dynamism. "Sort of like Leonardo's sense of seeing waves and imagining how waves would move," he says. "It's genius. I don't know the word for it. You just can't understand how he arrives at the way that hand and the mouth go together. It's soooo —— I mean, he can't have thought, 'I want to make the fingers fit around the mouth, the mouth fit around the fingers.' It can't be just that. The only thing I achieve like that is by jamming them together into space, just putting several things together." He laughs again. He crunches on a piece of ice. He blows his nose.

Mr. Johns is at a time in life in which ambitions for what he wishes to achieve in his art share space with concerns about what will happen to his own substantial collection of his work. He wants his art to be seen in context of other artists and of art history, just as he works in the context of his collection of works by others: Duchamp and Warhol in his studio, Dürer and Vija Celmins in the bathroom, sculpture by John Duff and works on paper by Cézanne, Lipchitz, Terry Winters, Willem de Kooning upstairs in his bright, arched sitting room.

He doesn't envision a Jasper Johns Museum, "but my mind can always change," he says. He sold one of each print he has made to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and has promised to continue to do so. The San Francisco Modern and its trustees, he notes, are "busy buying up everything" by everybody. What he really likes is the Duchamp room at the Philadelphia Museum, where "you get a really complete picture of Duchamp's work," he says.

Then he puts down his glass and walks over to the painting he has been working on that morning. He lifts up the slat of wood, which is hinged in two places, like those dangling toys called "Jacob's Ladder," he explains. For this reason, in stenciled script, using an arcane system by which you read every third letter, he has painted the title of the painting across its lower rim: "Catenary 1999. Jasper Johns. Jacob's Ladder."

He picks up the dictionary he keeps on the desk in his studio. There is also a dictionary upstairs by his bed. "It encourages me to dream," he explained when he showed me around his upstairs quarters. He used to say he had seen his first flag paintings in a dream.

"Jacob's Ladder," he reads from the dictionary. "A ladder seen by Jacob in a dream, reaching from the earth to heaven." He looks up and smiles. □

Wallach, Amei. "A Master of Silence Who Speaks in Grays." *The New York Times*, September 5, 1999, Arts, pp. 29, 31.

ARTNEWS

Enter the Dragon

New elements of autobiography surface in Jasper Johns's latest paintings • By John Yau

JACK SHEAR

Jasper Johns, 70, has incorporated childhood memories into his work.

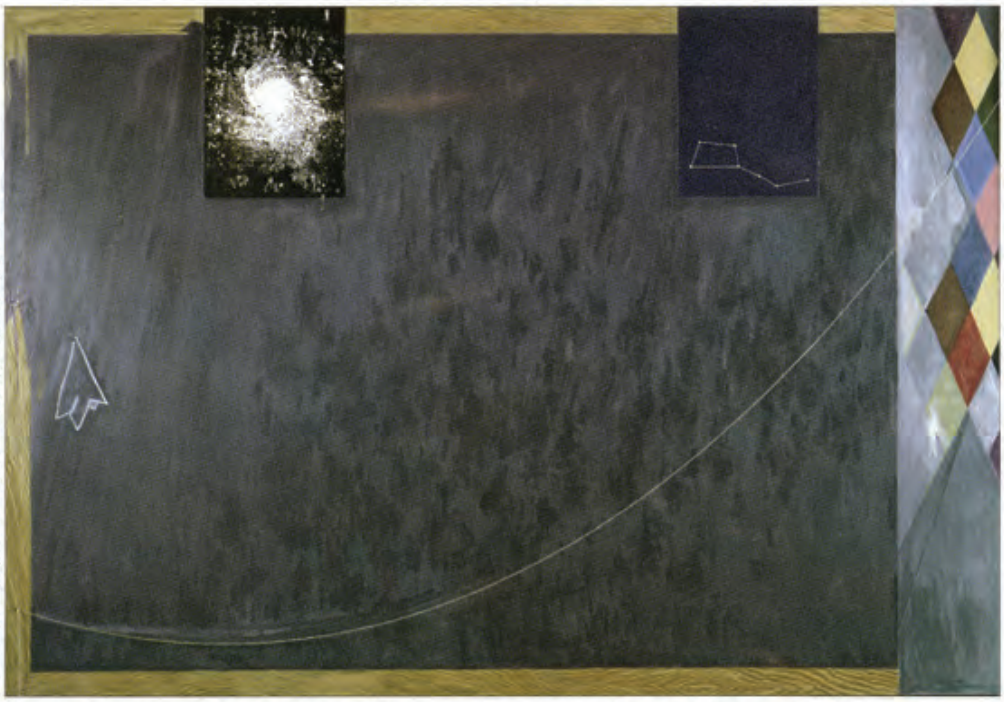
Retrospectives offer artists a chance to step back, assess, and reassess what has been accomplished. Many often find it necessary to take a break before moving on. Not so, it seems, with Jasper Johns. If anything, his retrospective two years ago at New York's Museum of Modern Art seems to have liberated him to embark on a whole new body of work.

This series, seven paintings and six works on paper, debuts the 15th of this month at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The show, which runs through January 4, 2000, also includes earlier works, but the focus is clearly on the latest efforts of the 70-year-old artist and on the themes—ranging from the personal to the cosmological—that have preoccupied him since 1997. "Restrained, muted, serene, and austere" are some of the words Gary Garrels, the San Francisco museum curator who organized the exhibition, uses to describe the works, which are dominated by gray and employ such materials as encaustic, sand, wood, and string. "It now seems clear," he writes in the catalogue, "even so soon after their completion, that they mark one of the turning points that have characterized Johns's work throughout his career."

Johns produced most of these mysterious and compelling works in the restored barn near Sharon, Connecticut, where he has spent most of his time since 1995 (he also maintains a residence in St. Martin and has a house in Manhattan that is currently undergoing restoration). On a recent visit, the downstairs studio was pristine but for an open section of the *New York Times* (Johns does the crossword puzzle religiously). Upstairs, in the sitting room, where he entertains guests, are drawings by other artists—Willem de Kooning, Brice Marden, and Terry Winters—as well as sculptures by John Duff. A lone painting—a Cézanne bather—is in the country-style kitchen. Out back are some apple trees and the artist's future living quarters, a stone house that is currently being renovated.

Johns points to a group of trees in the distance. Between the house and the barn, he reveals, he has installed an apiary, where he pursues his new hobby of raising bees. It seems an appropriate pastime for an artist who, back in 1954, when he made his first "flag" painting, began using encaustic, which is made of beeswax, in his paintings.

In his earlier, groundbreaking work, Johns incorporated such motifs as the American flag, targets, and the numerals zero through nine. While he put his own face on an artwork (on a plate, actually) as early as 1964 (the work is entitled *Souvenir*), it was not until the early 1980s that he began to incorporate motifs with autobiographical associ-



COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY/©JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Bridge, 1997, the first of the seven thematically related paintings Johns did after his retrospective.

Yau, John. "Enter the Dragon." *ARTnews*, September 1999, pp. 124–25.

COURTESY SFMOMA/©JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

ABOVE *Untitled (Halloween)*, 1998. BELOW *Untitled*, 1998. Among the motifs new to Johns's vocabulary are the Harlequin's costume, the homemade lantern, and the Big Dipper.

ations. These included a view of a tub (its front rim and faucets) in a house he lived in and a blueprint of his grandfather's home in Allendale, South Carolina, where he grew up. The new series features several motifs that are new to Johns's vocabulary, many with personal implications: a Harlequin's costume, a piece of string, a Halloween costume, colored shapes that evoke a cutout lantern, a trompe l'oeil rendering of a handkerchief, and the Big Dipper. Often, these are juxtaposed with an image of a spiral galaxy, which Johns began using in the early 1990s.

And yet, however personal the motifs in the new works, they seem neither explicitly autobiographical nor any more forthcoming than his "flags" and "targets." For more than four decades, Johns has steadfastly refused to comment on any meaning his work might have. He just asks modestly: "Would you like to see a recent picture?" (He never uses the word painting to describe his work.) The picture Johns puts on the wall is *Study for "Untitled (Halloween)"* (1998), a small vertical painting made of encaustic. All he will say about the work is that it is based on a "Halloween costume I wore when I was five or six. I'm not sure which."

It doesn't take long to recognize that the artist's memory is of an embroidered black jacket, matching pants, hat, and pigtail. Evidently, when Johns was growing up in the 1930s, his relatives dressed him as a "chinaman." The encaustic has enabled Johns to make the embroidered lines of the fire-breathing dragon seem as if they are set into the black ground, while, in the case of the frog buttons, he has used wax to build up a series of curving, physical lines. The trompe l'oeil illusionism of the painting, its interplay between the visual and tactile aspects of the costume he has depicted, is the result of the artist's masterful use of encaustic.

Finally, there is the string, one end of which is attached by a screw eye to the upper part of a thin slat of wood that has been attached near the painting's bottom right edge. The slat tilts away from the painting's surface. The other end of the string is lower and attached to the painting, creating what is known as a catenary—a chain or cord freely suspended between two points. Johns first used this device in *Bridge* (1997), the first of the seven thematically related paintings he did after his retrospective. In all the subsequent works, he has either suspended a string between two screw eyes or drawn a gently curving line between two points. And in nearly all of the paintings, the string is suspended between a real wood slat and a trompe l'oeil one that Johns has painted, thus connecting the tangible world to an illusory realm. The theme of connecting and reconnecting resonates throughout this new series.

COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY/©JASPER JOHNS/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Notions of man-made order and imminent disorder seem much on the artist's mind. In the "flag" paintings, Johns used stars as symbols of individuals isolated from one another and themselves. In *Untitled* (1998), he has paired the Halloween costume with that of a Harlequin, a tragicomic figure that originated on the 16th-century Italian stage. Capable of abruptly shifting from laughter to tears, the Harlequin is, of course, a reference to Cézanne and Picasso—and, as Garrels points out, has a long history of acting as an alter ego for the artist. In *Untitled (Halloween)* (1998), within the gray field, across which the catenary is suspended, Johns juxtaposes the Big Dipper, one of mankind's earliest efforts to map the stars, a homemade lantern he remembers playing with when he was a child, and the spiral galaxy, which is based on a photograph of something we know exists but which we can't see with the naked eye. At the same time, the swirl of the spiral galaxy suggests a field of minute particles collapsing around an invisible center.

Johns's new work provides one bridge leading to many places. The paintings are a meditation on time passing: looking back to childhood and forward and out to the galaxies, the visible limits of the world we inhabit. "With their seeming simplicity," Garrels says, "they proved haunting." ■

John Yau is the author of The United States of Jasper Johns *(Zoland, 1997).*

The exhibition travels to the Yale University Art Gallery (January 20 through April 9, 2000) and then to the Dallas Museum of Art.

Yau, John. "Enter the Dragon." *ARTnews,* September 1999, pp. 124–25.