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RA

Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus



Jasper Johns

'Something Resembling Truth'

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Anna Testar

For the Learning Department
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Jasper Johns: 'Something Resembling Truth'

Main Galleries

23 September – 10 December 2017

FRONT COVER **Cat. 80**, Painted Bronze, 1960

BACK COVER **Fig. 1**, Johns in his Pearl Street studio, New York 1955 (detail)

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'One hopes for something resembling truth, some sense of life, even of grace, to flicker, at least, in the work.'

Jasper Johns, 2006

Introduction

In 1958, the 28-year-old Jasper Johns had his first solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. He had arrived in the city five years earlier, with little money, few friends, and few connections to the contemporary art world. But since then, he had received growing recognition for his paintings, drawings and sculptures of flags, targets, maps, numbers and letters. His objective renditions of flat, impersonal signs introduced a daring counterpoint to the large, gestural canvases of the Abstract Expressionists who dominated the New York art world and for whom self-expression and subjectivity were paramount. Drawing attention instead to things which were so universally familiar that they were 'seen but not looked at, not examined', Johns seemed to challenge the notion, which lay at the heart of Abstract Expressionism, that the main purpose of art was to communicate one's inner self. With the sale of all but two paintings at his 1958 Castelli show, including three to the Museum of Modern Art, Johns cemented his status as an

emerging talent on the contemporary art scene.

The pathway he had begun to forge would soon come to represent the fulcrum for a new direction in American art, and today Johns is widely considered to be one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

Over the course of his 60-year career, Jasper Johns has continually re-examined and recycled the motifs which provided the subject matter for his earliest work, while periodically introducing new visual devices which, collectively, have become the building blocks of his own visual lexicon. He has pursued a tireless interrogation of the visible fabric of the world, challenging his viewers to recalibrate their habits of perception and posing ongoing questions about the meaning of painting and the

role of art in the world. Despite his reputation as a highly innovative artist, who at the beginning of his career stated that he wanted 'only [to do] what I meant to do, and not what other people did', Johns has remained loyal to traditional forms of artistic production, and has acquired a reputation as one of the most accomplished draughtsmen and printmakers of the twentieth century.

Johns was born in 1930 in Augusta, a city in the southern US state of Georgia. Following the break-up of his parents' marriage when he was around two years old, he was brought up by various relatives across South Carolina. At the age of 17, he enrolled at the University of South Carolina, where he studied art for three terms before leaving for New York and enrolling at the Parsons School of Design, only to leave after six months because of financial difficulties. Two years later, in 1951, Johns was drafted into the army. After completing his tour of duty



Fig. 1

Johns in his Pearl Street studio, New York, 1955, with Flag and Target with Plaster Casts in the background.

Photograph by George Moffett

in Japan in 1953, he returned to New York, where he soon acquired a close group of friends, including the artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), the composer John Cage (1912–1992) and the choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), each of whom would go on to become highly successful in their respective fields, all the while playing a significant role in each other's artistic development.

Beyond the immediate circle of artists, writers, musicians and performers who provided Johns with a fertile creative environment in which to launch his career, he can be viewed within the context of a longer trajectory of artistic production. While his own work resists categorisation into any specific movement or style, Johns's knowledge of art history is deep and wide-ranging, and his work is replete with references to artistic predecessors from Matthias Grünewald (c.1470–1528) and Hans Holbein (1492–1543), to Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Edvard Munch (1863–1944), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). In turn, his singular body of work has influenced a generation of younger artists, including Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Peter Blake (b. 1932) and Michael Craig-Martin RA (b. 1941).

Determined from the outset to give away as little of himself as possible, and to create art that was impersonal and objective, Johns has over the course of his life gradually revealed himself through the evolving and increasingly personal iconography that has informed his work, a process he has referred to as 'dropping the reserve'. Private, introspective and profoundly contemplative by nature, his most recent paintings can be read as moving meditations on life, loss, memory and the passage of time.

Things the mind already knows

When Johns first arrived in New York City, he found that whenever anyone asked him what he did, he said he was 'going to become' an artist. 'Finally I decided that I could be *going to become* an artist forever, all my life. I decided to stop *becoming* and to *be* an artist.' This and two accompanying events paved the way for the creation of some of the most iconic artworks of the twentieth century. First, Johns destroyed all the artwork he had made up to that point, apart from four pieces which were already in other hands. Then, in 1954, he had a dream in which he painted the American flag. The following day, he went out and bought the materials he needed to make his dream a reality and quickly set to work. Beginning the painting with household enamel paint, he realised that this medium did not dry fast enough. Instead, he changed to a method called 'encaustic', which involved mixing colour pigments with hot wax. As it was very quick-drying, Johns could work on the painting constantly without having to wait for each layer to dry. This meant that each brushstroke was preserved before another was added, resulting in the textured surfaces which characterise many of his canvases. The resulting painting signalled the beginning of his lifelong interest in repetition and variation. The motif of the

'It all began with my painting a picture of an American flag. Using this design took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. So I went on to similar things like the targets – things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels.'

Jasper Johns, 1959

American flag became one of his most recycled motifs, and between 1954 and 2002 he made it the subject of 27 paintings, 10 sculptures, 50 drawings and 18 print editions.

Cat. 6 In this *Flag* painting from 1958, Johns has depicted the flag realistically, just as he did the first one in 1954–55. The flag fills the entire picture plane, with the stars and stripes arranged exactly as they are on an actual American flag. But by presenting it in richly textured encaustic on a stretched canvas, he prompts the viewer to do a double take. Is this a flag, or a painting of a flag? Could it even be both? It is instantly recognisable, yet also curiously unfamiliar, which makes us stop and look at it more closely. By using a pre-existing symbol as his subject matter, Johns is questioning what a painting is and how it differs from what it represents.

Although the image is deeply charged with political and cultural associations, Johns maintains that his decision to paint the American flag was not politically motivated. Rather, he appropriated the 'stars and stripes', which lie at the heart of America's identity, for their physical properties. He wanted to present the viewer with something so familiar that, out of context and continually repeated, it would become unfamiliar. Johns described motifs like this as 'things the mind already knows' – signs and symbols that we see often in our everyday lives but never take the time to really look at. Encountering them on a gallery wall jolts us out of our habitual way of looking and forces us to question our familiarity with them.

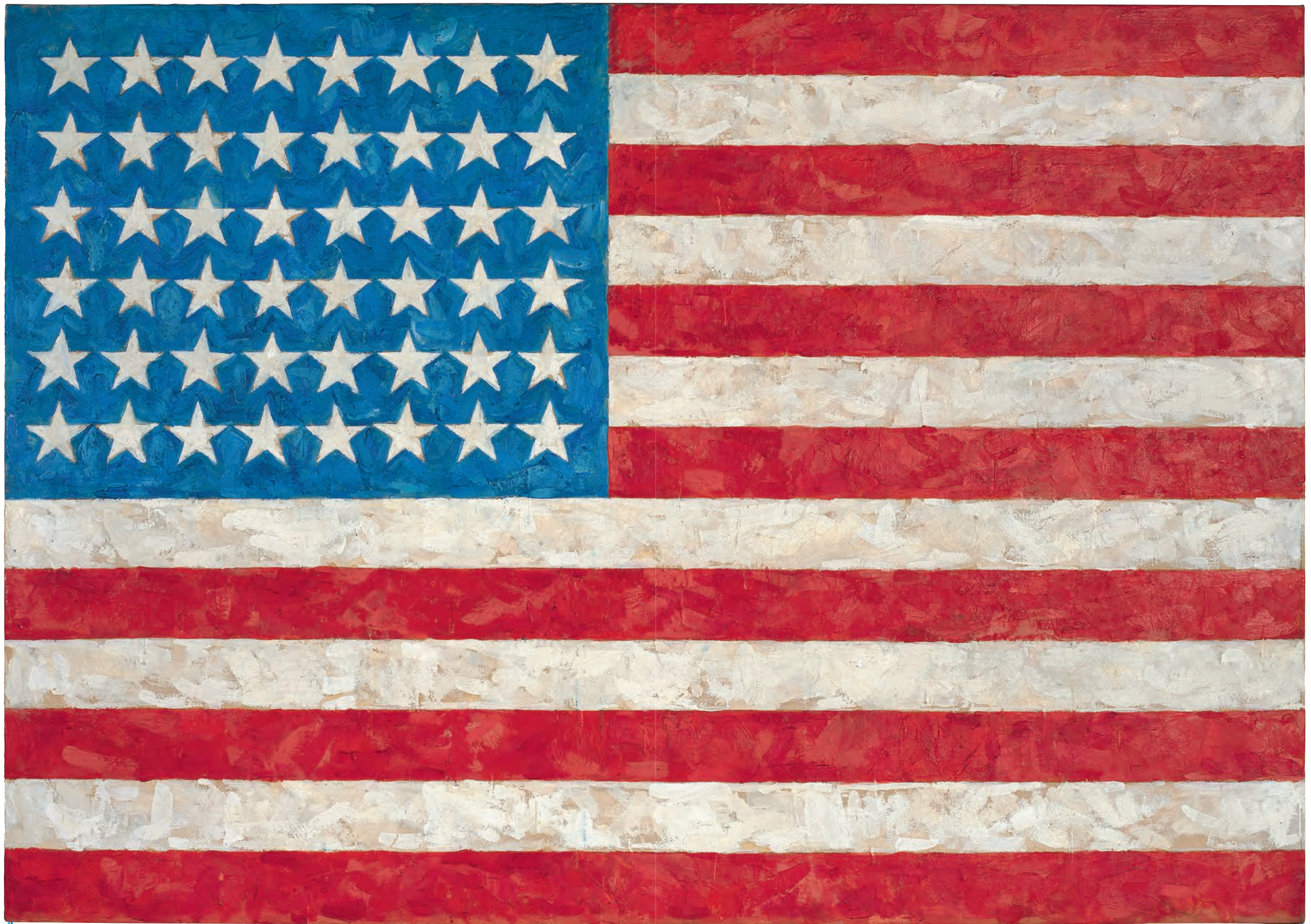
When Johns painted his first flag, Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970) had since the early 1940s been championing a new type of painting which represented internal, rather than external worlds, giving precedence to expression over perception and using form, colour and mark-making to convey emotion. The surface of *Flag* is composed of energetic brushstrokes, the encaustic technique ensuring that the hand of the artist can still be detected. Nevertheless, in many other ways it daringly contradicts the ideas at the centre of Abstract Expressionism, promoting a manner of painting which rejected individual expression in favour of an objective exploration of the visible world.

Look carefully at the surface of Jasper Johns's *Flag*. Describe the texture of the painting. How does this differentiate Johns's work from an actual flag?

How does this painting help you think in new ways about the familiar American flag?

Cat. 6 (overleaf)
Flag, 1958
Encaustic on canvas,
104.4 × 153.7 cm

Private collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017. Photo: Jamie Stukenberg © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, 2017



Numbers

Alongside his oft-repeated representation of the American flag, Johns developed an index of other everyday motifs which he used to ask similar questions relating to perception. These included targets, maps, numbers and alphabets – ubiquitous, impersonal signs with a practical and universal function. Like the flag, a painting of a target could also *be* a target; a painting of a map could be used to locate states, and a painting of numbers could be used for counting. Nevertheless, in spite of their functional purpose, each of these ‘things’ could also be viewed simply as visual designs which, without their associated symbolism, become a composition of various forms, lines and colours. To this end, numbers are essentially abstract forms which happen to hold value and meaning for anyone who has learnt to read them. Stripping them from their context – on a calculator, a watch, or a price tag – Johns presents them simply as forms which, through repetition, layering or isolation, adopt a strange and unfamiliar nature.

Cat. 31 Arguably one of the finest drawings Johns has ever produced, and one of the largest, *0 through 9*, 1961, presents the figures as almost ghostly apparitions, the varying tones of the charcoal and pastel causing the forms to drift in and out of focus so that at first glance one might discern a ‘3’, then blink and discover not ‘3’ but a ‘5’. Because both the medium and the subject-matter are normally encountered on a much smaller scale, the sheer size of the figures immediately makes them seem strange and unfamiliar. The towering forms take on almost human proportions, creating a sense of monumentality not usually associated with such everyday language. The complex, tangled composition compels us to approach this drawing as a visual puzzle that requires our full concentration, and to look at these numbers – ‘things the mind already knows’ – in a completely new way.

Johns has depicted numbers more often than any other motif in his work, with the first ‘figure’ paintings – which presented a single, isolated, digit – dating back to 1955 and the most recent sculptures cast in 2012. He has presented them in four distinct compositional formats: *Figures*, *Numbers*, *0–9*, and *0 through 9*. In the first three formats, individual figures were laid out in sequential grids or presented individually, each number retaining its practical value. But in *0 through 9* figures are layered on top of each other, stripped of their purpose. The complex arrangement of the figures in *0 through 9* creates a fragmented, abstract composition and hints at the breakdown of order which would come to represent much of the artist’s work of the ensuing decade.

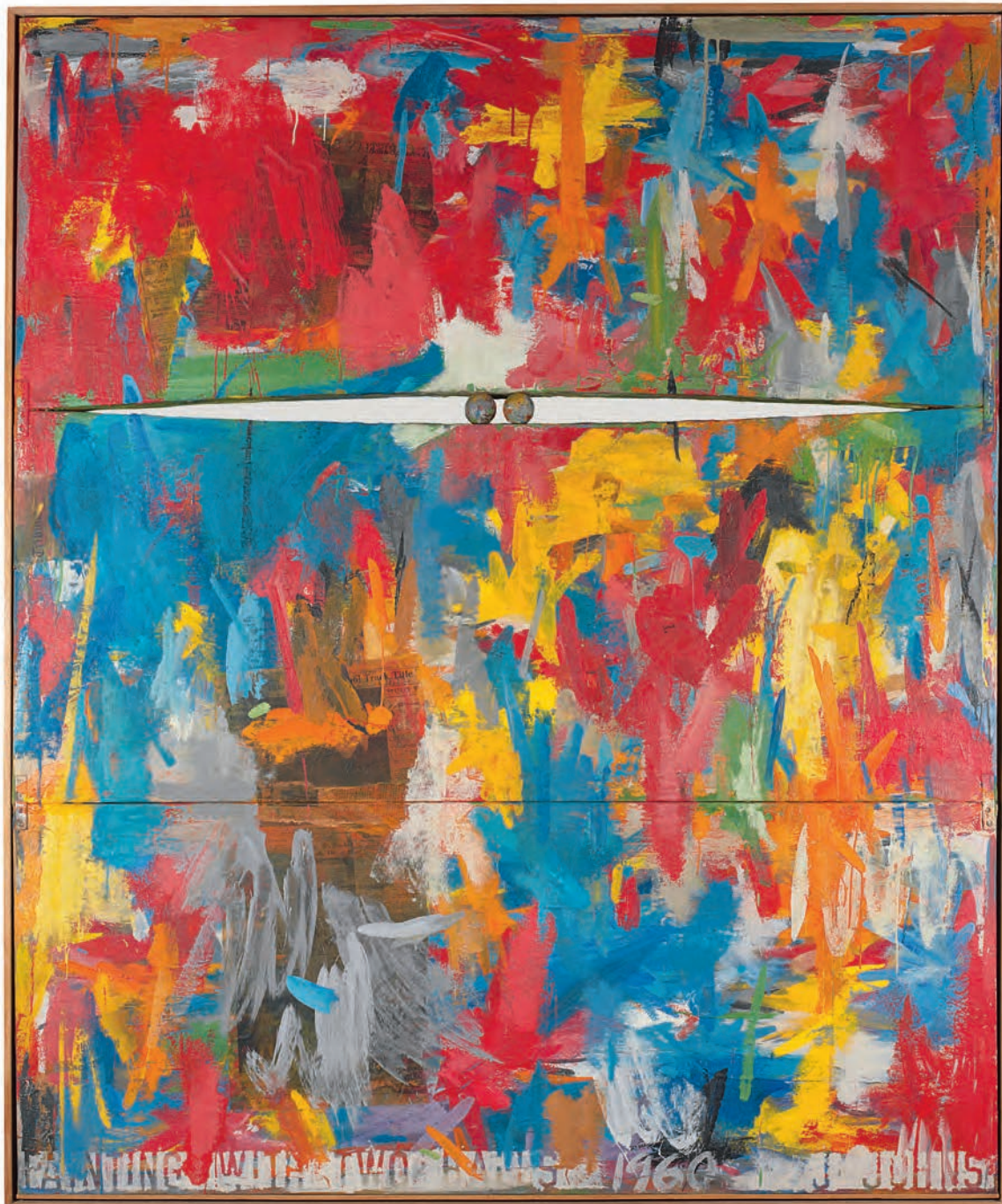
What different techniques does Johns use in this drawing from 1961 to make familiar numbers unfamiliar?

Describe the ways in which Johns’s treatment of the ‘figures’ in this drawing differs from how he did the *Flag* painting discussed earlier.

**‘Take an object /
Do something to it /
Do something else to it’**
Sketchbook note, 1963–64

Cat. 31
0 Through 9, 1961
Charcoal and pastel on
paper, 137.5 × 105.7 cm
Private collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New
York / DACS, London 2017. Photo: courtesy
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York





'My use of objects comes out of, originally, thinking of the painting as an object: [...] seeing that painting was paint on canvas, and then by extension seeing that it occupied a space and sat on the wall!'

Jasper Johns, 1963

Cat. 50
Painting with Two Balls,
1960

Encaustic and collage on
canvas with objects,
165.1 × 137.5 cm

Collection of the artist © Jasper Johns / VAGA,
New York / DACS, London 2017. Photo: Jamie
Stukenberg © The Wildenstein Plattner Institute,
2017

Paintings as objects

In the late 1950s, Johns began to paint in a style which differed from the restrained manner of the flat signs and symbols that had brought him acclaim. In contrast to the detached presentation of his early work, he began to fill his canvases with a vibrant palette of energetic, gestural brushstrokes which seemed to be in dialogue with the strand of Abstract Expressionism known as Action Painting. Key proponents of that movement, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), dripped, splashed and boldly brushed paint onto the canvas, employing colour and gesture as conduits for communicating their inner worlds.

Yet, despite the visual similarities, Johns's objective was in stark contrast to that of his Abstract Expressionist colleagues. From the beginning of his career, he had sought to undermine the illusionary character of art and challenge the traditional belief, as advocated by the Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), that the picture plane should act as a window onto another world. Although they represented inner rather than external worlds, the Abstract Expressionists could be seen as continuing this tradition, promoting a style of painting that drew viewers into an alternative, subjective reality. In contrast, Johns wanted to emphasise the material structure of paintings and their existence in the real world. To him, paintings were simply objects constructed from wood, canvas and paint, and hung on a wall. With this in mind, he sought to distance himself from the canvas, asking us to reconsider the position of painting in the visible world and its limitations as a vehicle of expression.

Cat. 50 *Painting with Two Balls* does this in several ways. Immediately shattering the potential for illusion or emotional interpretation, its title is a straightforward description of what you are looking at: a painting with two balls inserted into it. To emphasise the point, Johns inscribed the title, date and his name along the bottom of the canvas. The surface of the painting is characterised by bright, agitated brushstrokes in primary and secondary colours, yet rather than drawing the viewer in, the brushstrokes reveal a layer of newspaper collage underneath them. Not only does this remind us of the material construction of the painting, it also renders the paint devoid of physical or emotional depth, presenting it instead as a series of cursory marks atop the everyday material of a newspaper.

Crucial, though, are the two balls wedged into the painting as if they have literally broken the canvas open. By revealing the wall behind, Johns provides a disconcerting reminder that the painting is an object that exists in an external world. The work was constructed from three individual panels. Johns had originally intended to insert the wooden balls by forcing them in between the top two panels, but when that proved too difficult, he had two new panels made, each with one slightly curved edge to create space for the balls. So, what appears at first as a spontaneous expression of feeling reveals itself to be the product of a series of careful, pre-considered steps driven by a conceptual investigation into the

possibilities of what a painting could and could not be. A more light-hearted interpretation of the painting's critical engagement with Abstract Expressionism is the reading of the two balls as a wry comment on a movement dominated by men and the notion that a good painting had to have 'balls'.

Other works from the same period foreground the status of paintings as objects by including even more literal traces of construction. Johns affixed tools such as thermometers, rulers and brooms to his canvases to serve as unapologetic reminders of the measuring and mark-making inherent to the production of an artwork, while his use of bold colour and expressive gesture emphasised the formal properties of a painting. By exposing the practical processes central to artistic production, Johns asked his viewers to consider what a painting was rather than what it represented.

While such tactics were aimed to reveal, this direction in Johns's work also represented elements of concealment and absence. By creating artworks that preclude emotional engagement, Johns not only emphasised his reluctance to reveal himself in his work, but also his scepticism more generally about the ability of art to communicate the complex nature of individual feeling.

What is the impact of the opening in the *Painting with Two Balls*?

What do you think Johns is saying about Abstract Expressionism in this work?

Changing dimensions

Johns began making sculptures in 1958, in order to introduce a new dimension into his visual vocabulary and to develop his ideas about the perception of everyday objects. His earliest sculptural works were scale replicas of flashlights and lightbulbs, and just as he repeatedly explored his two-dimensional motifs, the flags and figures for instance, across different formats and media, he would go on to produce multiple versions of these objects in a variety of materials, including Sculp-metal, bronze, papier mâché, and plaster. His first sculpture, *Flashlight I*, comprised an actual flashlight covered in Sculp-metal, a compound material favoured by amateur model-makers, with the glass-covered lightbulb left visible. These witty sculptures of everyday household items were then placed on museum-like plinths which, particularly when cast in



'I am concerned with a thing not being what it was, with its becoming something other than what it is, with any moment in which one identifies a thing precisely and with the slipping away of that moment.'

Jasper Johns, 1964

Cat. 80
Painted Bronze, 1960
Painted bronze,
34.3 × 20.3 cm

Private collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017 Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

bronze, transformed them into precious works of art. By combining disparate materials, such as the glass from the real torch and Sculp-metal, Johns asks viewers to think about the relationship between commonplace objects and hand-crafted artworks.

Cat. 80 At first glance, the sculpture *Painted Bronze*, 1960, does not appear to be a sculpture at all, but simply a cluster of wooden paintbrushes standing in an old coffee tin, the kind of ordinary, everyday object to be found in any artist's studio. The title shatters this illusion. This unassuming tin is in fact a carefully cast sculpture, painstakingly fabricated from bronze and painted in oils, thereby disguising it as the object it represents. Johns, however, did not want to create an illusion. He was more interested in the possibility that while 'one might take the one for the other, [...] with just a little examination, it's very clear that one is not the other.' It becomes clear, for example, that the words 'Savarin coffee' have been painted by hand, while small patches of bronze remain visible on the brush handles. It becomes clear, for example, that the words 'Savarin coffee' have been painted by hand, while small patches of bronze remain visible on the brush handles.

While *Painted Bronze* and the painting, *Flag*, 1958, play visual tricks on us, and in turn invite us to take a closer look, there is a crucial difference between them. The painting of a flag could perform the task of a flag, but a sculpture of a tin of paintbrushes has no practical use – it is rendered impotent by its fossilisation in bronze and will only ever exist as a work of art. The objective nature of Johns's flat signs and symbols also begins to fade here. The sculpture of his paintbrush tin has often been viewed as a form of self-portraiture. With visible fingerprints on some of the brush handles and the tin, the object as a whole represents some fundamental tools of the artist's practice – his paintbrushes.

Johns created numerous iterations of this motif, using it, as he did with so many of his subjects, as a means of exploring its visual possibilities through a series of graphic works. *Painted Bronze* – along with its namesake of the same year, a bronze sculpture of two ale cans – has become one of Johns's best-known works. Its transformation from an ordinary, branded, object into an artwork would come to influence the Pop artists who came to fame in the 1960s, with Andy Warhol making his now infamous *Campbell's Soup* paintings the year after Johns created *Painted Bronze*.

Why do you think Johns named this sculpture *Painted Bronze* rather than *Savarin coffee Can*?

In what ways could this sculpture be considered a self-portrait?

Words and voices

Early in the 1960s, Johns's paintings took a decidedly more personal, melancholic turn, in contrast to the emotionally detached, conceptual nature of his work in the 1950s. By giving his work titles such as *Liar*, *No*, *Painting Bitten by a Man* and



'I've always been attracted to poetry [...] One finds harmony in poetry, but no systematic order. I wish I could say the same of painting.'
Jasper Johns, 1984

Cat. 67
Periscope (Hart Crane),
1963
Oil on canvas,
170.5 × 121.9 cm
Collection of the artist

In *Memory of My Feelings*, he suggested feelings of anger, loss and wistfulness, while paintings became drained of colour, pervaded instead by an austere palette of greys, browns and dark blues.

Johns had been in a romantic relationship with Robert Rauschenberg for seven years, but this came to an end in the summer of 1961, representing not only a profound emotional loss but also the end of a richly productive professional partnership. The two artists had supported and inspired one another from the beginning of their careers, and the demise of their relationship also put in jeopardy the strong creative network they had built along with John Cage and Merce Cunningham. In addition, growing interest in Johns's work by the early 1960s had left this introspective, private artist feeling increasingly exposed.

Grappling with the inherent conflict of working at a time of personal struggle while not wanting to reveal too much, Johns turned increasingly towards language and literature as a means of communication, using words and the work of favourite writers such as Hart Crane (1899–1932), Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) and Frank O'Hara (1926–1966) as a conduit for his own creative expression. In 1961 he read *Philosophical Investigations* by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), which had been published in 1953, and found an intellectual kinship with his enquiries into the nature of language. Wittgenstein was interested in the relationship between words and what they represented, and questioned whether giving something a different label could alter its meaning.

Cat. 67 In *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, 1963, Johns investigated Wittgenstein's idea of separating meaning from language by stencilling the words 'red', 'yellow' and 'blue' in greys and blacks, thereby detaching them from their descriptive function.

The painting was titled after a passage in Hart Crane's poem *Cape Hatteras*, which formed part of a much longer poem called *The Bridge*, published in 1930. A line in the poem reads '[...] time clears our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects a periscope to glimpse what joys or pain our eyes can share or answer [...]'. The themes of memory, loss and the passing of time expressed in this poem conveyed a wistfulness to which Johns would have felt connected. Hart Crane committed suicide in 1932 by leaping off a ship. Witnesses to his death reported seeing a hand shoot up out of the water before he submerged into the depths of the ocean. Perhaps it was the image of this final distress signal that Johns had in mind when he painted the imprint of an arm stretching out from the right-hand side of the canvas. The device of the periscope in Crane's poem provided Johns with a useful metaphor for suggesting things which are out of sight, hinting at the emotional turmoil in which he found himself at the time.

What is the effect of seeing the words 'red', 'yellow' and 'blue' painted in greys and blacks?

Describe the ways in which *Periscope* is successful in conveying the mood of Hart Crane's poem.

Fragmented bodies

Cat. 106 In 1964, Jasper Johns visited Japan, and it was here that he made *Watchman*. A man's disembodied leg is seated on an ordinary dining-room chair which, upended, seems either to be falling from or catapulting upwards into the space outside the picture plane. Are we to assume that this is the 'watchman' of the title? This seems likely, although any narrative suggested by the title or the figure is left ambiguous by Johns.

At first glance, the leg looks unnervingly realistic thanks to its flesh-coloured skin tone and anatomically accurate proportions. Johns said he had been inspired by the realistic waxworks he had seen at Madame Tussauds in London. However, signs of production, such as the stitched seam above the knee, confirm that this is a fabricated, lifeless, object. Immediately beneath the leg, an area of gestural brushstrokes in orange, green and grey help the cast blend into the two-dimensional surface of the painting. Like the explosive force of a rocket being launched into space, these brushstrokes suggest that the chair is being energetically propelled upwards. But beneath these marks a further layer of thin grey paint drips down the canvas, indicating a surrendering to the gravitational pull tugging the 'watchman' back down. Much like in *Periscope* (Hart Crane), there is in *Watchman* a sense of disruption, fragmentation and instability that perhaps suggests Johns's own turbulent emotional state at its time of production.

On the left-hand side of the painting, large stencilled letters reading 'RE', 'YE' and 'BL' indicate the words that describe the three primary colours. Taking his experiment with the relationship between language and meaning that we saw in *Periscope* (Hart Crane) a step further, Johns stencils the incomplete words in grey rather than in the colour they each represent. But then, as if compensating for this, Johns paints a chart to the right with three bright blocks of colour: red, yellow and blue. At the bottom of the painting, a wooden stick and a ball sit on a protruding shelf. The stick has been dragged from right to left, leaving a thick smear of black and white paint, while the ball has specks of red, yellow, blue and grey on it, indicating that it has been rolled around the painting. Once again, Johns reminds us with a jolt that we are looking at a constructed object. Similarly, the protrusion of the foot from the edge of the canvas and the subtle clues to the leg being a cast, rather than a real body part, suggest that the 'watchman' may be representative of Johns's fragmented psyche. This artwork makes us stop, look more closely, and reconsider the limitations of any painting in conveying personal expression.

Why do you think Johns chose to attach a chair and the cast of a human leg to the canvas rather than paint these objects?

How does *Watchman* present the themes and ideas that we have already considered in Johns's work? What does this reveal about Johns's practice?

Cat. 106
Watchman, 1964
Oil on canvas with objects
(two panels),
215.9 x 153 cm

The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2017

'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, 1980



Time and transience

In 1972, Johns introduced a crosshatching pattern that would assume a central role in the paintings, drawings and prints that he produced over the ensuing decade. As with many of Johns's visual devices, the crosshatching was the result of a chance encounter rather than a deliberate search for new material. Driving along the Long Island Expressway the previous year, the artist had seen a car painted with such a pattern and knew instantly that he wanted to use it in his work.

Repetitive by nature, the pattern consists of small groups of parallel lines arranged in opposing directions with no two lines touching. The pervasive presence of the crosshatchings in Johns's work of this period severely restricted his pictorial freedom, yet by his own admission it was their 'literalness, repetitiveness [...] obsessive quality [...] and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning' that appealed to him. The intricate patterns dominated the picture plane, usually filling it completely as if they could replicate outwards to infinity. Yet despite their repetitiveness, the crosshatchings represent far more than a straightforward decorative pattern. Their configuration is informed by rigorous formal strategies that result in complex volumetric arrangements replete with mystery. While their sensuous surfaces captivate the eye, the crosshatchings often both reveal and conceal further layers of marks which flicker in and out of focus, provoking an almost hypnotic search for visual coherence.

Cat. 99 Although *Between the Clock and the Bed* is a painting dominated by secondary colours, closer inspection reveals an under-layer of crosshatchings in red, yellow and blue. It was with these primary colours that Johns emphasised the inherent difficulty of self-expression in *Painting with Two Balls*. By burying them beneath the greater complexity of colour in *Between the Clock and the Bed*, the artist seems to suggest a surrendering of his long-standing reluctance to reveal himself in his art. Two other features of the painting attest to this. First, the presence (*top right*) of a scaled-down reproduction of an earlier screenprint,

'I think I began the crosshatch paintings as simple mathematical variations about how space can be divided.'
Jasper Johns, 1988

Cat. 99
Between the Clock and the Bed, 1981
Oil on canvas,
182.9 × 320.7 cm
Collection of the artist © Jasper Johns / VAGA,
New York / DACS, London 2017. Photo: Jamie
Stukenberg © The Widenstein Plattner Institute,
2017

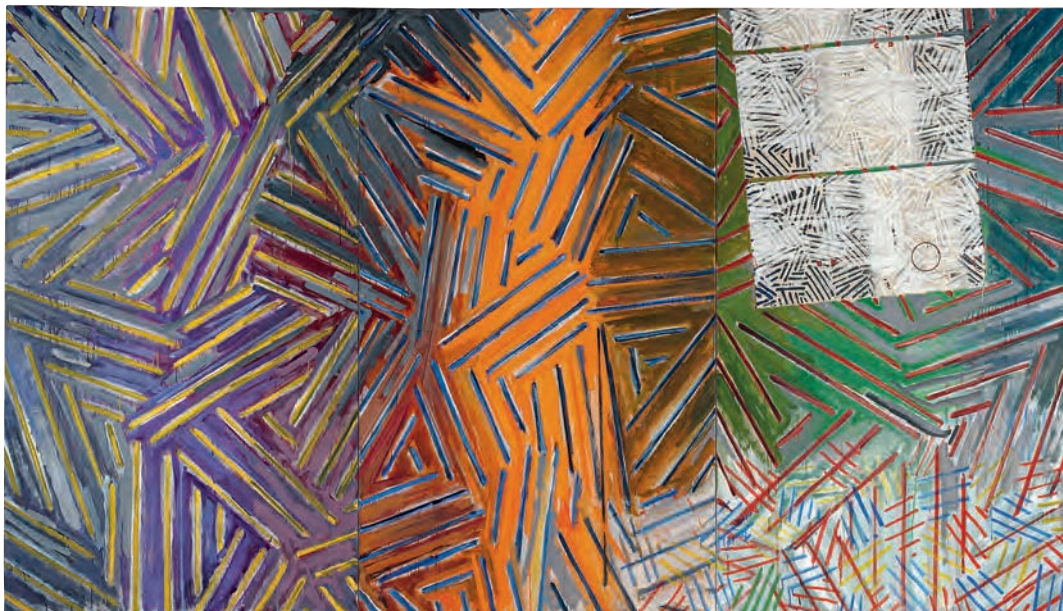


Fig. 2
Edvard Munch
Self-portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed, 1940–43
Oil on canvas,
149 × 120 cm

Munch-museet, Oslo, Norway / De Agostini
Picture Library / Bridgeman Images



Cat. 1 (overleaf)
Racing thoughts, 1983
Encaustic, screenprint and
wax crayon on collaged
cotton and linen,
122.1 × 191 cm

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York ©
Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS,
London 2017

Usuyuki (light snowfall), 1981, foreshadows an increasing tendency for versions of the artist's own work to feature in his paintings. And second, at the centre of the painting, a section of orange can be seen as an abstracted figure, the crosshatching giving form to a body and two legs.

While Johns's use of crosshatching may have been triggered by a chance sighting, this style of mark-making would already have been familiar to him. With his extensive knowledge of art history, he would have encountered the motif in countless graphic works from the Middle Ages onwards, as it is a standard means of rendering tone and creating spatial illusion. But a more immediate link is to Edvard Munch's *Self Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*, 1940–43, (fig. 2). Painted when he was around 80 years old, Munch portrays himself standing in his house, flanked to his right by a grandfather clock and to his left by a bed, its bedspread distinctively patterned with red and black stripes. It is widely accepted that these items were intended to symbolise mortality and the passing of time, and that the self-portrait represents Munch coming to terms with his impending death.

The title of Johns's painting, which came to represent a finale for his crosshatching period, confirms its link to the Norwegian artist's self-portrait. By the time it was created in 1982, Johns had reached something of an impasse with crosshatchings and was ready to move into a new phase. It therefore seems fitting that he would draw this period to a close with a reference to Munch's own meditation on death and the passing of time. It seems almost undeniable that the human-like form that emerges from the column of orange is a ghostly representation of Munch in the older artist's self-portrait. This is perhaps Johns's most explicit acknowledgement of another artist's work to date.

By referencing Munch's late self-portrait and the symbolism it communicated, Johns seems to suggest that his own work is on the cusp of change, with the impersonal, often inscrutable crosshatchings succumbing to a new chapter in which self-expression and self-reference are given increasing prominence. Nevertheless, while *Between the Clock and the Bed* represents a turning point for Johns, these increasingly expressive clues remain elusive, and are continually countered by his ongoing sense of unease about the ability of art to convey the complexities of the self.

How is the crosshatching different from other motifs we have seen in Johns's art?

Compare *Between the Clock and the Bed* with the painting by Edvard Munch from which Johns had taken inspiration.



Dropping the reserve

After the repetitive, largely impenetrable crosshatching period, Johns's work underwent a transition, giving way to more overtly personal expressions of thought and memory. He described this transition in 1984 (see quote, *left*), the year after he painted *Racing Thoughts*, and had realised he 'must simply drop the reserve'. And so, from the early 1980s, Johns began to reveal himself more openly in his work, filling the picture plane with a more directly personal iconography.

Cat. 1 *Racing Thoughts*, 1983, is one of six paintings which used the bathroom setting to draw together such imagery. At the time, he had recently described to a child psychologist how he was having trouble sleeping because of thoughts and images constantly racing through his mind. In response, the psychologist told him: 'We call those "racing thoughts"'. A set of bath taps at the bottom right of this painting reveals Johns's decision to represent this experience from the perspective of the bath, rather than the bed. Usually a calm space for reflection and introspection, in *Racing Thoughts* the bathroom is busy and cluttered, its walls crowded with pictures, motifs and decorative patterns, each of which vies for the viewer's attention.

The diverse imagery fixed to the wall suggests that the artist was reflecting on his past, memories, and certain artistic influences. On the left, a photograph of Leo Castelli – the dealer who gave Johns his first show and went on to play a significant role in the dissemination of his work – is rendered as a jigsaw puzzle and pinned to a wall on which the crosshatch motif reappears in self-contained sections that suggest wooden panelling or perhaps a door. Disguised in the panelling is a tracing of a detail from Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512–16, which Johns had first used in his work in 1981. The image of a diseased demon, taken from a panel of the altarpiece illustrating 'The Temptation of Saint Anthony', is barely discernible, and is further hidden by the photograph of Castelli and a pair of corduroy trousers hung there by their owner, who we imagine is lying in the bath.

A painted reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* appears to be 'taped' to the wall, possibly in tribute to two of Johns's most revered predecessors: Leonardo da Vinci, (1452–1519), who painted the original *Mona Lisa*, and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) who, in 1919, famously defaced it in his 'readymade' work, *L.H.O.O.Q.* By using the painting technique known as *trompe l'œil*, or optical illusion, Johns tricks our mind's eye into momentarily perceiving these images as real prints actually pinned or taped to the surface of the painting. At the top right is a painted rendition of a print by the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman (1905–1970), whom Johns greatly admired and knew well, but its position overlapping the skull-and-crossbones warning sign gives the illusion of it floating slightly away from the wall and being closer to us than the other images. Looming in the background as a reminder of mortality, the sign, which originated as a warning in a Swiss newspaper against falling ice [*glace*], is the most directly anguished motif in the painting. The

'In my early work I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions. This was partly to do with my feelings about myself and partly to do with my feelings about painting at the time. I sort of stuck to my guns for a while, but eventually it seemed like a losing battle. Finally, one must simply drop the reserve.'
Jasper Johns, 1984

right-hand side of the poster is not shown, yet the ends of the warning words appear on the far left of Johns's painting as if it had started out as a cylinder, then been indiscriminately cut through and flattened out. As well providing a metaphor for the endless cycle of life, this device once more reminds the viewer to consider the restrictions of the picture plane, and its inability to contain a complete illusory world.

At the bottom of the painting, two pots stand on a wicker basket. On the left is a piece from Johns's collection of work by the American potter George Ohr (1857–1918), while on the right is a commemorative vase made for Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee. In another optical illusion, the negative space on either side of the vase conveys the faces of the Queen and Prince Philip, another indication of Johns's fascination with perception and illusion. With its unstable depth of field and the combination of artistic tributes, subtle references to personal history and its ongoing reminders of mortality, *Racing Thoughts* confronts the viewer with a rare insight into the artist's psyche, yet all the while it continues to maintain a careful and considered barrier to his true self.

How does Johns use realism and *trompe l'œil* in this work? How is this different from his earlier depictions of familiar objects?

What are Johns's racing thoughts about? How much and what of himself do you think he reveals through these symbols and motifs?

Regrets

In 2012, Johns came across an image in an auction catalogue which would become the catalyst for a new body of work encompassing six paintings, twelve drawings and two print editions. The catalogue illustrated a crumpled and torn photograph of the painter Lucian Freud (1922–2011) taken by his friend, the

photographer John Deakin (1912–1972), in around 1964 (fig. 3). Sitting on the edge of a bed, Freud's pose echoes a traditional personification of melancholy: with his slouched body twisting away from the camera and one leg tucked underneath the other, he bows his head away from the lens and runs a hand through his hair, a momentary gesture which lends the photograph an air of introspective solitude.

The photograph belonged to a series commissioned by the painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992) for use as source material in his own work. Over time, it had become part

Fig. 3
John Deakin
Lucian Freud, 1964

Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, Ireland /
© The Estate of Francis Bacon / Bridgeman
Images



of the chaotic assortment of books, photographs, drawings, letters and newspaper cuttings that littered the floor of Bacon's London studio. Its resulting condition – paint-splattered, torn, folded and creased – is faithfully recorded in the auction catalogue, where its inclusion as portrait and archival object are of equal importance.

Johns, too, was as interested in the photograph's physical properties as he was in its composition and narrative. Along the bottom left-hand corner, a sizeable chunk of the photograph has been torn and folded into itself. As the series progressed, the shape created by this hole became its defining visual element, while the figure of Freud was increasingly disguised among the network of lines and abstract forms which signify not only the photograph's compositional elements, but also its folds and rips.

Cat. 142 Over a year and a half, Johns interrogated Deakin's photograph in much the same way as he had done over the preceding six decades with his ever-evolving inventory of motifs, exploring and manipulating the photograph across a breadth of compositions, dimensions and media. He doubled, inverted and mirrored the image, changed the colours and rendered the surface in a variety of marks from crosshatchings to smooth, inky brushstrokes. By the time he painted *Regrets*, Johns had produced a drawing in which the composition is doubled, with the flipped image placed alongside the original, so that the loss at the bottom left-hand corner is mirrored. Like a Rorschach inkblot test, it now appeared in the centre of Johns's composition as a large, abstract form resembling a tombstone. Johns produced six canvases based on this composition; the second version, pictured here, went through many stages before completion. Working from the earlier drawing, he translated the photograph onto the canvas in a complex grid of abstract forms filled with bright primary and secondary colours which he then overlaid with a network of black lines.

After setting the canvas aside for a few months, Johns went back and painted over the colourful forms with varying shades of blue and grey which allowed the original colours to peep through. By now, the figure of the man on the bed was scarcely discernible, although a collection of red, yellow and blue shapes hints at his presence. The looming shape in the centre is filled with a grid-like structure, and above it a skull seems to emerge, its component shapes emphasised by crosshatchings. To the right, a lighter coloured rectangle is outlined in black. Although it frames a section of the bedstead, this mysterious form is also reminiscent of the Barnett Newman print which Johns placed in a similar position in *Racing Thoughts*, suggesting his continued recycling of earlier motifs and referencing of earlier artists.

The title of the series, *Regrets*, seems a fitting reflection of Freud's anguished pose and the late stage of Johns's own life, yet it was a title which came to Johns by chance. In his office, a rubber stamp reading 'Regrets – Jasper Johns' is used regularly to respond to the many invitations sent to the artist. The sentiment is

'Photography is often interesting, but I know almost nothing about it. We may be grateful that photographs offer serious clues to spaces other than those we occupy, and, often, to eyes and minds other than our own!'

From an interview with Melissa Harris in *Aperture* magazine, 2014

Cat. 142
Regrets, 2013
Oil on canvas,
127 × 182.9 cm

Collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman
© Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS,
London; Photo: © Jerry L. Thompson

ambiguous – does it communicate a straightforward 'RSVP', or a deeper reflection on life and the decisions one has made over its course? This painting holds similar ambiguities. Is the figure momentarily brushing back his hair in the midst of a relaxed, otherwise jovial photo shoot, or is he in the throes of anxiety? And are the central forms, which seem to resemble a skull and a tombstone, intended as reflections on mortality, or simply compositional accidents? When viewing the painting, do we see a man sitting on a bed or simply an abstract collection of forms?

How does Johns present and transform the photograph of the painter Lucian Freud?

Why do you think Johns gave this painting the title *Regrets*?



Conclusion

Spanning six decades, Jasper Johns's long and fruitful career has run alongside a period of great change in the trajectory of art history. As Pop Art gave way to Conceptualism, and artists turned increasingly towards installation and the use of technology to convey their ideas, Johns remained on his own path, determined to find his voice in an increasingly noisy and crowded art world. 'It was not a matter of joining a group effort,' he once said, 'but of isolating myself from any group.' His ground-breaking paintings of flags, targets, maps and numbers paved the way for the Pop artists' representations of mass-produced imagery, but while this younger generation rose to fame, Johns's work seemed to grow increasingly poetic and introspective, asking fundamental questions about the place of art in the world while negotiating his own personal feelings and conflicts. Although it is possible to consider his extraordinary body of work in 'chapters', the boundaries which separate them are fluid and the contents untethered. All along, he has remained faithful to his own modes of expression, making use of his extraordinary skill as a painter, sculptor and draughtsman to explore questions which have occupied him since he was in his early twenties, all the while finding new ways to address his unfolding experience of the world as time passes.

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