

Disappearance and Negation

Jasper Johns moved to New York in the summer of 1953, following his discharge from the army in his native South Carolina. An aspiring twenty-three-year-old artist, he arrived on a scene then dominated by the supposed heroism and soul-baring of Abstract Expressionism. But Johns soon fell in with a group of peers charting their own course, including the artist Robert Rauschenberg, with whom he began a romantic and creative relationship; the composer John Cage; and Cage's partner, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. These connections exposed Johns to new ideas of chance and inspired an openness to everyday materials and actions. In the fall of 1954, as his friend Rachel Rosenthal remembered: "One day he destroyed everything, all the old work. It seemed as if his whole new conception was created in his mind." For Johns, this was a declaration of independence from his own artistic past and from the leading styles of the day: "I decided to do only what I meant to do, and not what other people did."

Johns shifted his work away from the then prevalent emphasis on an artist's interior life and expression toward a cooler, more impersonal mode of painting. He embraced the deadpan depiction of common signs and objects, including flags, targets, and numbers, and explored gestures such as covering and hiding, often in pale grays or dense blacks. These acts of disappearance and negation can lend Johns's art a somber and chilly air, full of loss, sadness, and even heartbreak.

The related gallery in Philadelphia focuses on the relationship between painting and everyday objects.

Flags and Maps

In 1954, Jasper Johns dreamed he painted an American flag, and the next day he set out to do so. This radical intuitive act inaugurated a way of working that has continued throughout his career: the direct transposition of common images and signs onto the surface of his art. His early motifs included not only flags but also maps, targets, alphabets, and numbers, what he described as “things the mind already knows.” Johns’s subjects shocked viewers, who found them more like everyday things than works of art at a time when abstraction predominated in New York galleries. Yet Johns’s deadpan approach opened onto a deep exploration of the philosophical boundaries between art and object, as well as representation and reality, since a painting of a flag or target could be seen both as the depiction of something and as the thing itself.

This gallery stages a face-off between Johns’s early flags and maps in black-and-white and those in color. From 1955 to 1970, he treated both these motifs across a range of mediums, palettes, and sizes, with a touch that varies from sensual to aggressive. Although Johns has repeatedly professed no particular interest in the nationalistic association of these subjects, they inevitably inspire meditations on the country and its history, present, and even future. Created when the United States was in the throes of the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War, they conjure contradictory attitudes toward a divided nation, ranging from hope and jubilation to pessimism and despair.

The gallery in Philadelphia exploring first motifs focuses on numbers.

South Carolina

Jasper Johns has lived and worked in a variety of places that have indelibly shaped his thought and art, including New York, Tokyo, and the Caribbean island of St. Martin. This gallery explores aspects of his relationship to South Carolina, where he spent his childhood and army service before settling in New York in 1953. He returned in 1961, when he purchased a retreat at Edisto Beach, following his breakup with Robert Rauschenberg. The seaside locale was known for its natural beauty and the vibrant Black cultural legacy of the Gullah Geechee people, but it was also still under the sway of violent and oppressive Jim Crow laws.

Many of the works in this gallery were made on Edisto Island or reference the seaside and nearby locations in their atmosphere, imagery, and inscriptions. The beach became for Johns a site and symbol of transience, loss, memory, and longing—particularly as evident in a group of works that evoke his friendship with Frank O'Hara, a curator and poet who wrote stirringly about everyday life and queer desire.

These pieces from the 1960s accompany more recent works, made beginning in the 1990s, in which Johns mines recollections of his family and childhood. Related series of paintings, prints, and drawings feature images from his youth, including the floor plan of his grandfather's house, where he was raised; gourd piggy banks; a Halloween costume; and a family portrait. Many of these motifs recur in combinative compositions, like fragments of memory flickering across the mind's eye.

The gallery in Philadelphia exploring place focuses on the artist's relationship to Japan.

According to What, 1964

In the early 1960s, Jasper Johns embarked on a new type of large-scale painting that was both synthetic and generative. While most of his prior works had focused on a singular image or concept, he started compiling multiple elements and techniques to create sprawling, self-referential mash-ups. Yet these paintings functioned not only as provisional anthologies but also as fruitful springboards for future works, sometimes in other mediums.

This gallery features a constellation of objects centered around the monumental *According to What* (1964), in order to illuminate Johns's obsessive process of working into and out of a key painting. The expansive canvas gathers incidents found in earlier ones, some on view here, such as hinged lettering and flat rectangles of primary color embedded amid splashy brushwork. Many of the details of *According to What* and its rebus-like structure pay homage to Marcel Duchamp, whose silhouette hides behind a latched panel at the bottom of the stretcher and who made similarly puzzling objects to decode. For Johns, the French-born artist was a powerful role model who moved art "into a field where language, thought, and vision act upon one another." Johns learned of Duchamp's work when critics compared his early flags and targets to the found objects of the elder artist's famous readymades. The two met in New York in the 1960s and Johns later collected some of Duchamp's work, which became a lifelong source of inspiration.

The related gallery in Philadelphia focuses on Untitled, 1972.

Leo Castelli, 1968

At certain moments throughout his career, Jasper Johns has made and displayed groups of new paintings in ways that emphasize their relationships to one another and the spaces in which they were shown. The next gallery re-creates one such exhibition, which he staged in 1968 at Leo Castelli Gallery in Manhattan. Johns filled the intimate townhouse gallery with a dramatic set piece of six paintings interconnected through shared imagery, processes, and a concern for architectural space.

Four of these works were made with the same silkscreen, in which a note indicates an image of a fork be reproduced at a scale of seven inches long, though it is actually printed at twice that length. This discrepancy foregrounds the space between reality and its representation, as well as the gaps between what we read, see, and believe. Other motifs, by contrast, appear at actual size, including rulers and window frames pressed directly on the canvases. Such elements play on the trope of painting as an illusionistic portal onto other realms, while also literally referencing the built environment, as do the flagstones Johns designed from his memory of a wall painted to look like stone. Throughout these works, airy color and open brushwork tense against rectangular borders and interior divisions, suggesting walls within canvases and sky within frames. As a whole, they form a carefully choreographed ensemble that points to their inner structural conditions and to those of the room that contains them.

The related gallery in Philadelphia re-creates Johns's Leo Castelli exhibition from 1960.

Savarin Monotypes

Printmaking can be a means for faithfully reproducing an image multiple times, but Jasper Johns often uses the medium to make experimental works. This gallery presents a series of monotypes, unique prints that are made by applying ink directly on a plate. The central motif in each of these works from 1982 is the uncanny 1960 sculpture *Painted Bronze*, cast from a Savarin coffee can filled with brushes, which Johns painted to look exactly like the real thing. Over time, he returned repeatedly to this motif, and the tools of his trade came to be seen as a stand-in for the artist himself.

Most of the monotypes on view here were printed over proofs of a lithograph that Johns made the previous year and rejected due to an inconsistency in the paper. To make them, he applied ink to plexiglass plates positioned on top of the lithographs so that he could see how his new marks would be superimposed. The resulting works present a sequence of free-flowing pictorial ideas and interrelationships, executed with a spontaneity rare for Johns. In some, he daubed the plate with his fingertips or layered colorful handprints atop his signature crosshatches. In others, drops of emulsifier dissolved the ink into starry speckles. Johns made the final works of the cycle on blank sheets, the last printed from the previous one, so that the ghostly image is reversed and almost unrecognizable. Taken together, they reveal Johns's obsessive creative logic of repetition and difference: each sheet is at once a fragment of a process and a whole.

The gallery in Philadelphia exploring unique prints focuses on trial and working proofs.

Small

Jasper Johns is the rare contemporary artist who has produced diminutive works throughout his entire career. Although almost all of them relate to larger, better-known examples, they are not studies but works of art in their own right. Some feature his most important motifs, including flags and numbers, symbols that have no fixed scale or actual size. Others are tiny reproductions of works in different mediums, such as Johns's drawings after the paintings *Three Flags* (1958) and *Souvenir 2* (1964). At times, he has been inspired by specific materials, including a baby announcement on which he painted a flag or a drawing on Shrinky Dink, a craft plastic that shrinks when heated in the oven. Spanning 1954 to 2010, the miniature works in this gallery present a kind of retrospective within the retrospective. Their minute and deliberate touch invites intimate thought and attention.

Mirror/Double

This gallery examines Jasper Johns's deep fascination with the twinned concepts of the mirror and the double, which inspired this retrospective's title, *Mind/Mirror*, and its unique bipartite structure in Philadelphia and New York. Sometimes Johns explores these ideas in works that depict pairs of objects or that are structured symmetrically so they mirror themselves internally. In other cases, he plays with doubling in versions of a work by executing it in different palettes, materials, or sizes. The relationship between objects grows even more entangled when Johns inverts the figure and background in a composition or reverses it from left to right or top to bottom, as in the aptly named paintings *Mirror's Edge* (1992) and *Mirror's Edge 2* (1993).

The unusual architecture and installation of this gallery are designed to emphasize the uncanniness of Johns's echoes and reflections. Four pairs of objects hang in the corners of the room, at ninety-degree angles, as though reflecting one another, while a kaleidoscopic structure mirrors views across the space. At the center of the room sits *Painted Bronze* (1960), one of an edition of two that features a pair of cast ale cans—the other is on view in Philadelphia. At first glance, the duo of cans seems identical, but close observation reveals they are imperfect copies of one another and of the commercial product they depict. Like *Painted Bronze*, all of Johns's experiments with reflections and doubles invite this type of heightened attention so that one senses oneself in the act of perception, a key characteristic of his art.

The related gallery in Philadelphia also focuses on reflections and doubles.

Dreams

After a decade spent primarily exploring abstract crosshatches, during the 1980s and 1990s Jasper Johns flooded his work with a profusion of perplexing new imagery, often in surreal combinations. Unlike his earlier use of found objects and common motifs, his new images derived from disparate art histories, popular sources, and his immediate surroundings and imagination. Some featured fragmented and distorted body parts, including the eyes from a 1936 painting by Picasso of his lover, which appear in many works throughout this room. Johns also frequently employed a mysterious craggy silhouette that he dubbed the Green Angel after the 1990 painting where it first appeared. He refused to identify the source of this image, as he had in his other tracings, so that its meaning remained open to the viewer's interpretation.

For the first time in his painting, Johns rendered images and objects in space rather than imprinting or flatly transposing them edge-to-edge on a canvas. Perspectival illusion, along with shading, creates a newfound sense of depth and three-dimensionality. As in a dream, images pile up, float, drift, and dissolve in spaces that straddle the real and the fantastical. Pale palettes and luminous materials, such as watercolor and pastel, contribute to the ethereal atmosphere. If Johns's earlier work invited analytical puzzling, his hybrid compositions from this time conjure a realm of irrational symbolic association, heightened emotion, and reverie.

The related gallery in Philadelphia focuses on darker, nightmarish visions.

Recent Sculpture

In the early 2000s, Johns returned to numbers and to sculpture, a motif and a medium he had largely put aside in the late 1960s. His renewed interest was inspired by his desire to cast in a more durable material his Sculp-metal relief *Numbers* (1964), which is on display at New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Although he never ultimately cast the original painting, he pieced together a new version of it in wax segments, which he developed through inventive formal and technical processes. Some numerals bear the crisp outline of stencils, whereas in other places Johns melted the wax to create painterly drips or silkscreened and imprinted passages of type taken from newspapers. He ultimately cast two monumental editions in bronze and aluminum, the latter of which hangs at one end of this gallery.

Over the next several years, Johns repurposed the wax used in the casting process of the large sculptures, cutting it up and rearranging the pieces into nineteen smaller sculptures, including the four freestanding versions exhibited here. Each double-sided work explores different aspects of the original composition, as well as the inherent qualities of its material. Displayed in this space, the silver, bronze, and copper objects reveal precise and sensual details in changing natural light.

Elegies in Dark

In contrast to the thematic diversity of the first four decades of Jasper Johns's art, the past twenty-five years demonstrate a remarkably persistent concern: mortality and its attendants, death, loss, and sorrow. These specters had haunted his work from the beginning, but as Johns entered his late sixties, his preoccupation grew more focused, even as the modes through which he explored it widened. During the late 1990s, he abandoned the surreal fantasies and busy compositions of the previous fifteen years and began the stark and solemn Catenary series, named for the tenuous curve of string that hangs across these works' dark, moody surfaces.

Since then, Johns has both revived earlier motifs and adopted new ones. He incorporated the outlines of the man and boy from the Seasons paintings (1985–86) in sparser compositions that signal the somber passage of time, while shrouds, crosses, and a pedestal urn evoke funereal markers. Johns also took as sources two photographs of despairing young men and an anguished woman from Picasso, and, as he neared the age of ninety, fixed on the character of a wily skeleton. Nearly all these works are weighted with elegy, and those presented here exist along a grim tonal spectrum. Rarely does a great artist make such frank work about the end of life so late in it. "Occasionally, I have thought that I was working on the last thing that I would do," Johns remarked in 2020, "but so far I've been wrong."

The related gallery in Philadelphia explores sorrow and mortality through luminous versions of recent motifs.