

Targets, 1966

Encaustic and collage on canvas

MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; former collection of Karl Ströher, Darmstadt, 1981/12

In this 1966 painting, Johns turned one of his iconic motifs, the target, into a sinister emblem by rendering it in sickly secondary colors and ghostly white rather than its typical primaries. The discordant palettes produce an optical illusion: if one stares at the upper target and then gazes at the white one below, it appears as a red, yellow, and blue afterimage. Here Johns uses a symbol designed to focus the eye and improve aim to make us self-consciously aware of the act of perception—one of his most enduring artistic preoccupations.

Liar, 1961

Encaustic, Sculp-metal, and graphite on paper

Collection of Gail and Tony Ganz

In 1961, Johns and Rauschenberg broke off their romantic relationship, resulting in some of the most bitter and despairing works of Johns's career. They met in 1954, not long after Johns moved to New York. The older, well-connected artist—"the first real artist that I knew," according to Johns—became his mentor, collaborator, and primary influence. The drawing *Liar* roils with accusation, while *Painting Bitten by a Man* viscerally indexes violence and anger. The tipped cup of *Good Time Charley* may refer to the now empty charm of Rauschenberg, who was known for his easy charisma. *Water Freezes* contains a real thermometer that responds to the ambient conditions of the room, while the painting's dark palette and frosty title suggest a somber mood.

Target with Four Faces, 1955

Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull 8.1958

Throughout his early work, Johns not only depicted common things but often incorporated objects themselves into his canvases, so that they became hybrids of sculpture and painting. In *Target with Four Faces*, Johns cryptically attached compartments filled with plaster faces, cast from studio visitors, above a painted bull's-eye. The jarring juxtaposition of the target and human fragments allude to the violence of a shooting gallery. While a target is meant to focus the eye, the cropped faces suggest the loss of sight, a state amplified by the hinged lid that can close to conceal these elements from us—or us from them. Johns's white and gray variations on the simple target, on view nearby, heighten this sense of invisibility. Leached of color and contrast, the concentric rings become difficult to distinguish from one another, an everyday symbol made purposeless and strange.

Hear about Johns's uncanny approach to the body in this work.

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Diver, 1962–63

Charcoal, pastel, and paint on two sheets of paper mounted on two adjoined canvas supports

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; partial gift of Kate Ganz and Tony Ganz in memory of their parents, Victor and Sally Ganz, and in memory of Kirk Varnedoe; Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest Fund; gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., gift of Philip L. Goodwin, bequest of Richard S. Zeisler, and anonymous gift (all by exchange). Acquired by the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art in memory of Kirk Varnedoe 377.2003.a–b

This monumental drawing evokes the swan dive of a figure plunging through moody darkness toward the floor. Johns made it by physically manipulating his materials in broad strokes and imprinting his greased hands and feet directly on the paper. *Diver's* title has been interpreted as an allusion to the suicide of the poet Hart Crane, whom Johns has referenced in other works named after him or his poetry. In 1932, Crane jumped off a ship into the sea at age thirty-two, reportedly after making a sexual advance at a sailor and being beaten up. The theme of shame and despair resonates with other works in this gallery, as does Johns's deep interest in poetry, evident in the nearby painting inscribed with the name of the nineteenth-century poet Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Hear how this drawing stands out from other works by Johns.



Two Maps, 1965

Encaustic and collage on canvas, two panels

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President 2002.275

In *Two Maps*, Johns doubles and stacks his motif in off-white encaustic embedded with bits of collaged fabric and paper. The two maps almost disappear into their fields, presenting a kind of optical test to perceive the faint images and distinguish any differences between them.

In the 1960s, many artists became interested in the process and effects of seriality that mass production had made possible. Here Johns's repetition hints at the multiplicity of his printed source, while wryly incorporating its image within a unique, handmade object.

Artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith discusses the color she sees in *Two Maps*.

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Three Flags, 1958

Encaustic on canvas, three panels

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

A hybrid of painting and sculpture, *Three Flags* acts as a complex visual and mental puzzle. From a distance, the stacked trio of successively smaller flag paintings resolves into a single image. Up close, however, they fragment into three separate, protruding planes. This ingenious structure playfully contradicts the conventions of perspective, through which the illusion of spatial depth is created in a drawing or painting through the depiction of objects at increasingly smaller scale. Vacillating between image and object, familiar and strange, *Three Flags* suggests a range of responses to flag and country. The work's mesmerizing optical zing can allude to giddy patriotism or, conversely, overbearing nationalism.

Learn how encaustic keeps a record of an artistic process.

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White Flag, 1955

Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric, three panels

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Reba and Dave Williams, Stephen and Nan Swid, Roy R. and Marie S. Neuberger Foundation, Inc., Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Paula Cussi, Maria-Gaetana Matisse, The Barnett Newman Foundation, Jane and Robert Carroll, Eliot and Wilson Nolen, Mr. and Mrs. Derald H. Ruttenberg, Ruth and Seymour Klein Foundation, Inc., Andrew N. Schiff, The Cowles Charitable Trust, The Merrill G. and Erita E. Hastings Foundation, John J. Roche, Molly and Walter Bareiss, Linda and Morton Janklow, Aaron I. Fleischman, and Linford L. Lougheed Gifts, and gifts from friends of the Museum; Kathryn E. Hurd, Denise and Andrew Saul, George A. Hearn, Arthur Hoppock Hearn, Joseph H. Hazen Foundation Purchase, and Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon B. Polsky Funds; Mayer Fund; Florene M. Schoenborn Bequest; gifts of Professor and Mrs. Zevi Scharfstein and Himan Brown; and other gifts, bequests, and funds from various donors, by exchange 1998.329

With its monumental scale and bleached palette, *White Flag* presents a contradictory symbol, wavering between a sublime heroic icon and a withering weakened one. Johns constructed his second and largest flag painting almost sculpturally from three separate interlocking panels, one for the section with stars and two more for the stripes. He built the image from layers of newsprint collage, semi-opaque encaustic, and oil paint. A mixture of pigment in warm wax, encaustic hardens quickly as it cools, preserving the artist's distinct textural brushstrokes. The absence of color in *White Flag* places it in dialogue with a history of abstract, monochrome paintings. As Johns explained, it is "no more about a flag than about a brushstroke, or about the physicality of paint."

Map, 1961

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, 277.1963

In 1960, Johns painted his first map directly atop a small map given to him by Robert Rauschenberg, which hangs at one end of this gallery. Like flags, maps are abstract symbols that don't physically resemble the things they signify. They represent the landscape and the idea of a nation in a way one can never actually see it. For Johns, this made maps a perfect matrix for testing the relationships between various visual and linguistic systems. Ordinarily, a map of the United States delineates the states with colors inside their boundaries. But here Johns blends abstraction and cartography, as exuberant brushwork crosses borders and hues no longer differentiate regions. Painting, drawing, and stenciled writing coexist, blurring the distinctions between different modes of perceiving, such as looking and reading.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith describes the darker histories she sees in Johns's maps.

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Flags, 1965

Oil on canvas with object

Collection of the artist; on long-term loan to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Although the flags and maps in Johns's early paintings usually fill his canvases, he also experimented with the formal and emotional possibilities of floating motifs in space. This painting evokes a bleak mood, while *Flag on Orange Field* (1957), across this gallery, projects a bright optimism. For the top flag here, Johns rendered the ordinarily red and blue elements in their complementary colors with the white stripes and stars in black. Its scale diminished by the somber ground, the flag is both familiar and not, jarring in its acrid palette. This inversion suggests something had turned inside-out about America, which was then engulfed in social upheaval and the Vietnam War. Johns made this connection explicitly with a similar flag in a 1969 poster, on view nearby, supporting the anti-war effort.

Studio, 1964

Oil on canvas with objects, two panels

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with partial funding from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 66.1a–c

Inspired by the shore and open sky, in *Studio* Johns replaced his previously dense brushstrokes with broader passages of paint in an airy composition. Direct impressions of an angled screen door and palmetto frond evoke the architecture and plant life of his coastal environs. The appendage of studio artifacts, including colorful cans for mixing paint and a used brush, make the canvas both an homage to Johns's workplace and an allegory of artistic practice.

Explore the allegorical meanings in this multipart painting.

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In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara, 1961
Oil on canvas with objects, two panels

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; partial gift of Apollo Plastics Corporation, courtesy of Stefan T. Edlis and H. Gael Neeson 1995.114.a-d

Johns made this intensely mournful painting in the wake of his breakup with Rauschenberg. He titled it after an elegiac poem by Frank O'Hara, which laments the death of former selves and emotions. A fork and spoon, perhaps symbolizing a couple, dangle precariously across the lonely gray expanse. The mundane cutlery, which became a recurring motif in Johns's work, recalls the quotidian details that O'Hara often observed in his poetry. The artist and poet met in New York in 1957 and maintained a friendship until O'Hara's 1966 death in an accident on the beach in Fire Island, New York.

Writer Brad Gooch talks about the poet Frank O'Hara.

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Skin with O'Hara Poem, 1965

Lithograph

Ed. no. 8/30

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Leonard A. Lauder 2020.13

Skin, 1965

Charcoal and oil on paper

The Menil Collection, Houston; promised gift from the collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim

To make the drawing *Skin*, Johns oiled his face and rolled it across a piece of paper, a process Ugo Mulas (to whom the work is inscribed) recorded in a photograph hanging nearby. Johns then applied charcoal across the surface, which stuck more heavily to the oily areas. The resulting image is a ghostly portrait of the artist, as though emerging from or trapped within the paper. Johns transformed another *Skin* drawing into a lithograph and appended a poem by Frank O'Hara. The print was produced for a special edition of the *Art Newspaper* exploring the relationship between painting and poetry, which has been a lifelong passion of Johns's, as evident in works dedicated to poets Alfred Lord Tennyson and Hart Crane in the first gallery.

Memory Piece (Frank O'Hara), 1961–70

Wood, rubber, Sculp-metal, lead, brass, and sand

Collection of the artist; on long-term loan to the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Although Frank O'Hara never visited Edisto Beach, a poem he wrote to Johns contains the line: "When I think of you in South Carolina, I think of my foot in the sand." *Memory Piece (Frank O'Hara)*, recalls this image through a rubber cast of O'Hara's foot that leaves an impression in sand originally from Edisto. Johns had made the cast with O'Hara in 1960 after sharing a sketch of the sculpture. He only completed the work, however, after the poet's untimely death, making the sculpture a memorial to fleeting life through its impermanent footprint.

Ugo Mulas (1928–1973)

Jasper Johns, Edisto Beach, 1965 (printed later)

Jasper Johns, Edisto Beach, 1965

Jasper Johns, Edisto Beach, 1965

Gelatin silver prints

Ugo Mulas Archive, Milan

Jasper Johns

*List of items lost in fire at Edisto Beach,
SC, 1966*

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC;
Leo Castelli Gallery Records, box 12, folder 41

Light Bulb, 1960 (cast and painted in 1964)

Bronze and oil paint, two parts

Ed. no. 4/4

Collection of the artist; on long-term loan to the Philadelphia
Museum of Art

Following his breakup with Rauschenberg in 1961, Johns purchased a home and studio on Edisto Island, South Carolina, where he subsequently lived and worked for months at a time. These images taken by the Italian photographer Ugo Mulas record Johns around his Edisto Beach home and studio, by the ocean, and also in New York. Some feature works shown in this gallery. In 1966, while Johns was visiting Japan, a fire destroyed the Edisto Beach property, along with many of Johns's own works and those by other artists. A list prepared for the insurance company enumerates the mundane and memorable items lost, from linens and appliances to antiques and a monkey cage.

Ralph Lemon unravels Edisto Island's complex history and its influence on Johns

Untitled (Halloween), 1998
Encaustic on canvas with objects

Collection of Marguerite and Robert Hoffman

Untitled (Halloween) belongs to a group of works begun in 1997 known as the Catenary series, named for the curve produced by a cord hanging freely between two fixed points. Here a string forms a catenary that swoops across the canvas, which critics have likened to the fragile arc of life. The dark painting suggests a fragmented nocturnal scene through images of the Milky Way and the Big Dipper, paired with references to his childhood trick-or-treating under the night sky. The colorful shapes at top center refer to the glowing cutouts of a lantern Johns made as a boy, while the design at right re-creates a Halloween costume above two semicircles indicating his feet.

Untitled, 1992–94
Encaustic on canvas

The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection

Although Johns avoided explicit references to his own biography in his early work, he began to introduce images that specifically alluded to his life and art in the 1980s. With its floating, collage-like organization, *Untitled* juxtaposes disparate motifs and marks, some dating back thirty years. The densely packed shallow field contains self-quotations, including the words for colors, a disembodied eye and handprint, art-historical tracings after Pablo Picasso and Matthias Grünewald, and the shadow of a boy. At left, a striking blueprint, drawn from memory, depicts the floorplan of his grandfather's home in Allendale, South Carolina, where Johns lived as a child. Painted bits of masking tape contribute to the illusion of reality, which slips away into the surreal misty space of dreams or recollections.

According to What, 1964

Oil, charcoal, and graphite on canvas with objects, six panels

The Middleton Family Collection

According to What brings together disparate motifs and techniques from Johns's previous works, including *Field Painting* and *Arrive/Depart* (both 1963–64), hanging nearby. The painting is jammed with subtle references, puns, and propositions about the very nature of a work's relationship to the world. Varied and contradictory modes of language and art making abut one another, such as printing, found and cast objects, and abstract brushwork. Similarly, colors and tones are applied in exuberant gestures, appear diagrammatically as a spectrum and grayscale, or are named in words. The process of perceiving, interpreting, and differentiating these systems and elements is, in part, the meaning of the work. This is also often the case in the art of Marcel Duchamp, who remains one of Johns's greatest inspirations. Johns nods to him here in many details, such as the color swatches and elements casting real shadows alongside rendered ones, as well as a profile of the artist concealed behind a panel at the painting's bottom edge.

Learn how this work contains an affectionate homage to Marcel Duchamp.

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Field Painting, 1963–64

Oil on canvas with objects, two panels

Private collection

Field Painting is one of many works Johns has made throughout his career that suggest tactile as well as visual interaction. Sometimes, as in the case of the hinged letters in this canvas and the dangling strings of the later Catenary series, the appended objects actually marked the painted surface. Johns amplified this idea here by using magnets to attach studio implements, such as a brush and a can for mixing paint, that played a part in the work's making and can be easily rearranged. Like the buzzy neon *R* that switches off and on, the whole painting thrums with a feeling of creative life and playful activity. Although these paintings cannot be manipulated while hanging in museums, they still radiate their openness to change.

Clockwise from top left:

Fragment—According to What: Leg and Chair, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 11/68

Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund (by exchange) and gift (by exchange) of the estate of Mrs. Charles M. Lea 1986-60-1

Fragment—According to What: Bent “U”, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 47/69

Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund (by exchange) and gift (by exchange) of the estate of Mrs. Charles M. Lea 1986-60-4

Fragment—According to What: Blue, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 8/10

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Print Committee, 2002.557

Fragment—According to What: Bent Stencil, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 11/79

Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund (by exchange) and gift (by exchange) of the estate of Mrs. Charles M. Lea 1986-60-2

Fragment—According to What: Coat Hanger and Spoon, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 56/76

Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of William Speiller 1986-37-1

Fragment—According to What: Bent “Blue” (Second State), 1971

Lithograph with newspaper transfer
Ed. no. 51/66

Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund (by exchange) and gift (by exchange) of the estate of Mrs. Charles M. Lea 1986-60-3

Fragment—According to What: Hinged Canvas, 1971

Lithograph
Ed. no. 21/69

Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of William Speiller 1986-37-2

Johns often revisits important paintings through drawings and prints many years after the original, as in this 1971 portfolio of lithographs zeroing in on elements of *According to What* from 1964. In the prints on view here, he tellingly emphasized the act of translation between three and two dimensions by selecting only sculptural details of the painting, which he depicted through various techniques, including perspectival rendering, gradient shading, and photography. This interest in different systems of representation echoes one of the key concerns of the painting in a completely new form, as does the unusual relationship between part and whole. As Johns explained, ordinarily artists “take a detail and study it in preparation for locating it in its proper place in a larger scene. But a lot of modern experience is of an opposite nature; you take a larger situation and extract from it some bit you examine with great attention.”

M.D., 1964

Collage and graphite pencil on stencil board

Collection of the artist

M.D. is a collage of a stencil Johns used to make the profile of artist Marcel Duchamp that is embedded at the bottom of *According to What* (1964). The image is based on a silhouette that Duchamp made from a photograph of himself that Johns then reinvented through a series of tracings.

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box), 1934

Box containing ninety-four collotype reproductions

Collection of Jasper Johns

In 1960, around the time he first met Marcel Duchamp, Johns acquired this copy of *The Green Box*, a facsimile publication of Duchamp's handwritten notes for his iconic and enigmatic work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23), which is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Shortly thereafter, Johns began keeping his own notebooks and incorporated ideas from the cryptic statements in *The Green Box* into his work. Duchamp's phrase "a painting that literally hinges on words" relates to the seam of hinged wooden letters found on *Field Painting* (1963–64) and *According to What* (1964). Over the years, Johns collected several more of Duchamp's works.

At center:

Painted Bronze, 1960 (cast and painted in 1964)
Bronze and oil paint, three parts
Ed. no. 2/2

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Leonard A. Lauder Masterpiece Fund

Johns has attributed the inspiration for *Painted Bronze* to a snide comment about his longtime dealer, Leo Castelli, made by the painter Willem de Kooning. As Johns recalls: “Somebody told me that Bill de Kooning said that you could give that son of a bitch two beer cans and he could sell them. I thought, what a wonderful idea for a sculpture.” To make the work, Johns created a mold from a Ballantine ale can. He then produced two nearly identical forms in bronze—one “open” at the top and hollow, the other “closed” and solid—and meticulously replicated the original can’s commercially printed label. The resulting sculpture comprises a pair of imperfect handmade copies of an object that is itself one of many mass-produced examples. Here Johns engages the traditional concept of art as an illusory mirror of the world, wryly scrambling the duplicative functions of industry and the artist as copyist, as well as his chosen process, casting.

Learn why curator Scott Rothkopf calls this work “deceptively simple.”

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Spring, 1986
Encaustic on canvas

The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

Fall and *Spring* are two panels from Johns's landmark series known as the *Seasons*, an allegorical subject that artists have long employed to represent the cycle of life. Psychological self-portraits, both paintings feature Johns's shadow, while *Spring* also includes that of a boy, suggesting ageing and rebirth. These figures are surrounded by objects from Johns's own collection along with new and older motifs, such as Duchamp's profile and the rotating hand of *Diver* (1962–63), seen earlier in the exhibition. The artist pairs opposing seasons compositionally, so that *Summer* (1985) and *Winter* (1986) (on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art) are variants on one another, as are *Fall* and *Spring*. These paintings dynamically articulate Johns's procedures of mirroring, splitting, inversion, and rotation, inviting one's gaze to ricochet within and between them. His play with reflections and reversals continues in perceptual tricks such as an outline that can be read as a duck or a rabbit and the contours of a vase that contains opposing profiles.

Hear about Johns's meditation on aging.

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Dancers on a Plane, 1979

Oil on canvas with partially painted wood frame
with objects

Collection of the artist; on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC

Johns adopted the crosshatch marks in this painting after noticing the pattern on a passing car and used them in numerous works throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Here the hatches mirror one another symmetrically across a central vertical axis in an arrangement that echoes the form of a human body. Close observation further reveals three horizontal seams spanning the canvas, across which the hatches shift color or seem to reflect themselves. Although carefully organized, the complex surface seems to vibrate restlessly with life. One of the largest of Johns's crosshatch works, *Dancers on a Plane* is an homage to his close friend, the choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham. From 1967 to 1980, Johns served as the artistic advisor for Cunningham's dance company and designed many of its sets and costumes.

Learn where Johns first saw the patterned motif in this work.

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Racing Thoughts, 1983
Encaustic and collage on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund; Leo Castelli; the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund; the Julia B. Engel Purchase Fund; the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund; The Sondra and Charles Gilman, Jr. Foundation, Inc.; S. Sidney Kahn; The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund; the Sara Roby Foundation; and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 84.6

With its complex accumulation of art historical and personal references, *Racing Thoughts* functions as a kind of symbolic self-portrait. The title refers to a psychological condition in which images and ideas run disjointedly through a person's mind. Set in the bathroom of Johns's former country house, the running faucet and hanging trousers suggest the artist might be musing in his bath. Objects belonging to Johns, including a puzzle-portrait of his dealer Leo Castelli, a lithograph by Barnett Newman, and a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, appear improbably affixed to the amorphous background with trompe l'oeil tape and tacks. On a wicker hamper sit a pot by ceramicist George Ohr and a vase with contours delineating the profiles of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. Johns also made a grayscale rendition of *Racing Thoughts* in oil paint, on view nearby, following his practice of making versions of paintings in different mediums and palettes to varied formal and emotional effect.

In the Studio, 1982

Encaustic, crayon, and collage on canvas with objects

Collection of the artist; on long-term loan to the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Here Johns pictures a scene from his own studio as an allegory of artistic creation. At the bottom, a blank canvas leans against the wall, as if beckoning the artist to begin. After decades of transposing and imprinting motifs flatly onto his canvases, this is the first time Johns employed perspective to create the illusion of depth. He filled this space with images that suggest an artist's craft, including examples from his own crosshatch works. A cast wax forearm hangs alongside its depiction in two dimensions, which is tacked to the wall by two nails. These nails cast rendered shadows in contrast to the actual ones created by the protruding wax arm and wood slat, adding to the work's complex interplay between reality and illusion.

The Bath, 1988

Encaustic on canvas

Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland; acquired with a contribution from the Friends of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Museum of Contemporary Art G 1988.21

This painting, like the two versions of *Racing Thoughts* (1983 and 1984) in the previous gallery, is painted from the vantage of Johns's bathtub. Segments of Picasso's *Straw Hat with Blue Leaves* (1936), a portrait of his lover Marie-Thérèse Walter, hover above the tap. Here Johns rendered the painting in encaustic and heated it so that the wax melted, as if dissolving over the steamy tub. The fragmented portrait appears taped to the actual surface of Johns's painting, which gives way to a luminous sky improbably speckled with stars and the faint tracery of a demon from Matthias Grünewald's sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece. *The Bath's* mysterious and perplexing mood derives from its incongruous amalgam of fantastical imagery with realistically rendered details, such as the woodgrain, faucet, and tape. This juxtaposition recalls strategies of Surrealism exemplified by Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and, at times, Picasso, in which artists attempted to visualize dreams and the unconscious.

Untitled, 1991
Encaustic and sand on canvas

The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection

The puzzle-like form at the center of this canvas is known as the Green Angel, after the title of the first painting depicting the motif, which Johns explored over several years in more than thirty works. For three decades, he refused to reveal the tracing's origins in a rebuff to critics intent on interpreting his work based on the identity of its sources. Instead, Johns sought a more dynamic relationship among the image, its viewer, and its meaning, so that looking and thinking remain open-ended. Here the painting itself seems to enact this curious form of observation, with multiple eyes from Picasso's *Straw Hat with Blue Leaves* (1936) staring at the inscrutable central form. In 2021, critic John Yau wrote an article sharing the insight of artist Cristobal Lehyt that the silhouette is that of a sculpture from around 1910 by the French artist Auguste Rodin depicting a minotaur holding the body of a female centaur with dangling arm.

Montez Singing, 1989
Encaustic and sand on canvas

Collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman

In *Montez Singing*, the cartoonish eyes and meandering nose from Picasso's *Straw Hat with Blue Leaves* (1936), along with a pair of stylized lips, attach themselves to the edges of the painting, so that it becomes a face peering in on itself. At the right of the canvas, mitered corners suggest a frame that dissolves on the left, while wispy strokes at the sides might read as hair and the circles below as breasts. Within this visage, Johns has inserted a childlike picture of a sailboat "hanging" from a nail and wire. This detail and the painting's title refer to his step-grandmother, Montez, who was fond of playing piano and singing "Red Sails in the Sunset" when Johns lived with her and his grandfather as a boy. The painting's ambiguous facial features may also evoke a landscape, with lips as mountain, nose as cloud, and eyes as radiant suns—a visual pun frequently employed by Surrealist artists in the first half of the twentieth century.

Explore how Johns plays with facial features in *Montez Singing*.

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Numbers, 2007 (cast 2008)

Aluminum

Glenstone, Potomac, Maryland

This sculpture is a near copy of the 1964 Sculpt-metal and collage painting *Numbers* at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. At that time, Johns was creating various paintings, prints, and drawings featuring different arrangements of numerals. Like flags and targets, numbers are common signs—what Johns once called “things the mind already knows”—and they have remained the most frequently occurring motif in his art to date. The architect Philip Johnson commissioned the original *Numbers* for the New York State Theater, home to the New York City Ballet. Johns nodded to the site by including an impression of the foot of the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham at the upper right. To make the recent version on view here, Johns recast Cunningham’s foot some forty years later, a direct reference to the passage of time and the enduring intimacy between friends.

Roberta Bernstein examines how Johns blurs the line between painting and sculpture.

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Catenary (I Call to the Grave), 1998

Encaustic on canvas with objects

Philadelphia Museum of Art; 125th Anniversary Acquisition; purchased with funds contributed by Gisela and Dennis Alter, Keith L. and Katherine Sachs, Frances and Bayard Storey, The Dietrich Foundation, Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, Mr. and Mrs. Brook Lenfest, Marsha and Jeffrey Perelman, Jane and Leonard Korman, Mr. and Mrs. Berton E. Korman, Mr. and Mrs. William T. Vogt, Dr. and Mrs. Paul Richardson, Mr. and Mrs. George M. Ross, Ella B. Schaap, Eileen and Stephen Matchett, and other donors 2001-91-1a-d

With their dusky tempestuous grounds and delicate threads, Johns's Catenary paintings evoke an air of stately sadness. The series takes its name from the curve produced by a string hanging from two fixed points, which Johns attached to the Catenary paintings and sometimes used to imprint their surfaces. Shaped by gravity and vulnerable to air currents and the potential movement of the hinged slats from which they dangle, the thin cords have been compared to the fragile arc of life. Across the painting's lower edge, Johns inscribed the words "I CALL TO THE GRAVE," a phrase uttered by the Old Testament prophet Job as he contemplates death in the face of great suffering. Johns stenciled his signature immediately after the distraught words, making the / vacillate ambiguously between the biblical prophet and the artist himself.

Hear how Johns uses form to suggest the passage of time.

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Catenary (Manet-Degas), 1999
Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects

The Newhouse Collection

Catenary (Manet-Degas) was made at the invitation of the National Gallery in London when it asked artists to respond to works in their collection. Its composition of collaged canvas rectangles on the surface of this work corresponds to the fragmentary reconstruction of Edouard Manet's painting the *Execution of Maximilian* (1867–68) in the National Gallery. After Manet died, his heirs sold off pieces of the painting, which were lovingly collected and patched together on a blank canvas by Edgar Degas in the 1890s. Although Johns's rainy grisaille strokes betray no hint of the original violent scene, the painting is suffused with a sense of loss—Manet's dismembered canvas and the murder it depicted—and of tender homage in the hands of Degas and Johns. The swooping catenary draws a line between the collaged elements and acts as a metaphorical bridge between the three artists, whose names Johns stenciled along the bottom edge.

Regrets, 2013
Oil on canvas

Kravis Collection; promised gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Regrets derives from a photograph of the British painter Lucian Freud perched on a bed, his anguished head in hands. A tracing of this figure is faintly visible on the right side of the painting, which Johns mirrored on the left. Ominously, this process yielded an abstract skull near the center of the canvas, above a dark form that suggests a gravestone. The title and Johns's signature appear in the top right corner, as a silkscreen made from a custom rubber stamp that the artist uses to decline invitations. Paired with morbid imagery here, the word takes on a more powerful existential meaning.

Untitled, 2018

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Untitled belongs to a group of works based on a 1965 Vietnam War photograph by Larry Burrows published in *LIFE* magazine. That photo pictures Marine Lance Corporal James Farley, alone in a storeroom after combat, crumpled in grief over the loss of a comrade. As in the large *Regrets* (2013) canvas across this gallery, Johns mirrored the image around a central seam and embedded the figure in patterning so that its details dissolve into an abstract emblem of despair. Johns has interpreted Burrows's photograph in multiple mediums, including the technically virtuosic ink-on-plastic drawings seen nearby. In these works, the tracery contours of the image contain tiny pools of luminous, semi-transparent ink reminiscent of stained glass, adding a religious aura to the sorrowful scene.

Untitled, 2018

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In 2018, the FBI returned to Johns a group of unfinished works, including this one, furtively stolen from him over many years by his longtime studio assistant. Johns reworked the canvas, originally related to the 1980s series the Seasons, by inscribing a skeleton within the silhouette initially traced from his own shadow. Other elements, including the silkscreened newspaper page with police blotter and dollar sign seem to allude to the crime. At once fearsome and funny, the skeleton grins menacingly beneath a shrunken top hat and wisps of hair. The skeleton appears in other works holding a skull, skipping rope, or leaning jauntily on a cane as if about to crack a joke or break into dance.

Slice, 2020
Oil on canvas

Private collection

Completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Johns's most recent major painting, *Slice*, juxtaposes an interior view of the human body with the breadth of the cosmos. At the right, Johns silkscreened an anatomical diagram of a knee, which he originally saw in his orthopedist's office, drawn and signed by a high school student named J an Marc Togodgue. Bones and ligaments exposed, the specimen floats on a speckled map of the universe by the astrophysicist Margaret Geller. Behind them unfurls an intricate radial pattern derived from a "knot drawing" by Leonardo da Vinci. Made the year Johns turned ninety and the world faced a deadly pandemic, *Slice* holds in balance the human, intimate, and ephemeral with the vast, ungraspable, and eternal.