

Art History Thesis

JASPER JOHNS  
HIS RETURN TO THE OBJECT

submitted by  
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His classifications range from a Pop or Neo-dada artist to a Post Abstract Expressionist painter. He is Jasper Johns, and where this somewhat obscure symbolist falls into the scheme of modern art history may be a mystery. When asked what is Pop art, Johns says in his interview with G.R. Swenson from American Artists on Art, "I am not a Pop artist! Once a term is set, everybody tries to relate anybody they can to it because there are so few terms in the art world. Labeling is a popular way to deal with things."<sup>1</sup>

Often art history sources classify Johns as a Pop artist when in fact many of the works he made in the early 60's went against the basic fundamentals of Pop. Pop art is considered by most to be a rebellion against Abstract Expressionism and what it stood for; a movement which elevated the everyday object to an art icon. Johns, on the other hand, seemed to make paintings which in no way glorified their subjects. Instead Johns reduced the object to nothing more than a tool with which to construct his paintings.

These early paintings celebrated line, surface and the mark making process in general, not the objects these marks made up. Many of the combine paintings done by Johns and his colleges seem to not only combine several mediums but also to

join the two major movements of their era... Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

In Johns' Fool's House or broom painting (pl.1), for instance, the artist combines an everyday object, the broom, with an otherwise Abstract Expressionist painting of gestural brush strokes. This combination of movements seems to be a logical next step in style for Johns. His target and flag series, though representational, have been done with an abstract painterly hand, in much the same way de Kooning executed his women series.

In an interview with Walter Hopps, Johns explained "The target seemed to me to occupy a certain kind of relationship to seeing the way we see and to things in the world we see, and this is the same kind of relationship that the flag had... They're both things which are seen and not looked at, not examined, and they both have clearly defined areas which could be measured and transferred to canvas."<sup>1</sup>

By using these objects of clearly defined areas and by transferring the objects directly onto the canvas, Johns established, within his work, a new found freedom in the creative process. He could now focus on what most definitely is his main obsession in painting, the surface activity. These early object pieces seem to be detached from meaning.

Even though symbols like the flag can be said to hold a great level of emotional reference for its viewer, seeing one of Johns' flags one gets the distinct impression that the emphasis here is not on the symbology of the object but on the object itself. This is a treatment of the subject that will change in years to come when Johns can no longer distance himself from meaning.

Robert Rauschenberg, a close friend of Johns, was one of the first painters to incorporate the everyday objects of Pop art and the painterly slashes and sweeping brush strokes of Abstract Expressionism's action painters into a single work. Rauschenberg's art certainly influenced Johns in that both artist's works are arrangements of objects which transcend their original purpose and take on a separate and new meaning.

About the two, Rauschenberg and Johns, Jack Hobbs writes, "In discussing their work, Rauschenberg and Johns have tended to discourage the search for special meanings for their objects and images. Yet their inspired combinations do breed interpretations: Rauschenberg's rapid flux of images and surface effects can easily be seen as a reflection of hectic times; Johns' quieter, often ironic images are suggestive of contemporary myth.

"The works of both artists implicitly challenged the premises of Abstract Expressionism without entirely breaking away from the movement; hence they are looked on as transitional between it and some of the major developments of the next decade."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most written credit Johns has to his name is that his work has a great power to change the way the viewer sees his surroundings and the world in general. He has managed to reduce everyday objects such as coat hangers, targets, letters, numbers and beer cans into pure drawing for his viewers. His flag series is a classic example of his ability to transcend the familiar dealing with it on a much more visual level.

In his book Jasper Johns, Max Kozloff, who is one of the leading authorities on Johns and his work, notes "He has created an art of which one major premiss is that "things" have no intrinsic value. Like reflective mechanisms, his works give back to the spectator a spectrum of alternatives by which they may be viewed-without, in fact, containing any "message" in their own right. But to choose among these alternatives, or even to judge what they might be, becomes an experience of imaginative self-discovery which Johns' creations are designed to test."<sup>4</sup>

Jasper Johns' early emphasis on (things) and repetition of an otherwise common-place object had a profound influence on the Pop art world of that time. Because his subjects superceded the object and because they were recognized common place things the artist could dismiss the emotional charge of the object and deal with it on a more intuitive level. This approach made the content of Johns' art that much more illusive to the general public and added to the mystery of Johns ironic handling of the otherwise over looked object.

The 80's decade brought to the art world a new Jasper Johns; a man who seemed to focus his work on growing old and ultimately on death itself. Although he has almost always used symbols in his work, other than the cross hatch paintings of the 70's, these recent paintings are obviously much more about Johns own personal symbolism than past work. A man who used to dismiss symbolic interpretation of his work now seems to be entirely consumed by the artistic language he has created in his lifetime. In a great number of ways Johns has come full-circle in his approach to the making of art. His first paintings of any notoriety were, like his current works, made up of things (objects). Now however these things take on a new different meaning for both the viewer and the artist. Where he once chose everyday objects because of their lack of message, he now combines objects in a narrative frame work.

These new paintings have evolved directly from a retrospective evaluation of the art Johns has been making over the past thirty years. They appear to be a collaboration of the common elements of his earlier work. This again seems to be a logical step for Johns since working with the common or familiar has always been central to his aesthetic approach. These new works have been created by a much more refined artist. A Jasper Johns who, perhaps for the first time feels better in control of his art than of his life, yet is still searching for the right subject. The eclectic iconography of his earlier pieces are here again introduced in a new and different arrangement. Like the original paintings from which these images were borrowed, the new works are about arrangement of the familiar. It's as though the artist is attempting to organize time or at the very least record it.

One can not look at this recent body of work without feeling that this is in some way a changed man. Perhaps for the first time in Johns' life his paintings are about the personal meaning of these icons and not about the collective use of the common place to facilitate his personal obsession with pattern, line and surface. Although this concept of allowing us, the viewer, to see the working process of Johns' paintings and drawings is still evident in these works there is something else, something new in these paintings.

It may come from knowing what has come before in his art but somehow the story isn't as mysterious in these paintings as it has been in past works. There is a logical order about these paintings. The ironic nature that is typical of Johns work surfaces in this new body of work not in the objects themselves but in the placement and combinations of things within the picture frame. These paintings are scattered with images from drawings and paintings Johns made in the past. Here are works by an artist who can no longer be indifferent to his emotion-laden objects. The entire body of work conveys a strong feeling of sadness. Certain symbols appear again and again: renderings of flags, ceramic pots, cast arms and other body parts. One constant, in this Untitled series (pls.11-16) is the running bathtub faucet in the lower right corner. Another consistently used image is the wicker laundry basket to the left of the faucet. In most cases a porcelain vase sits atop the basket while other objects come and go from one painting to the next.

The artists pattern and cross hatch paintings of the early 70's are also recalled in these pieces but here they have a new twist. Strategically hidden within the pattern panels, usually found on the left half of the painting, are images Johns has borrowed from art history.



It is a strange if not very interesting combination of artists he brings together in these works, a Barnett Newman lithograph is joined in a single painting by an altered, copy machine like poster of da Vinci's Mona Lisa. In the same piece, Racing Thoughts (pl.2) there is a fully assembled puzzle of Leo Castelli, John's art dealer, and hidden in the background is a detail from Matthias Grunewald's The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1513-15 (pl.3). This is surely a painting about some of the people Jasper Johns admires... Castelli, da Vinci, Duchamp and Newman are plainly recognized in this arrangement. His message seems much more straight forward than the works of a younger Jasper Johns. The artist now uses the puzzles and hidden images to test his audience.

Perilous Night (pl.4), another painting in this series clearly deals with death. In this painting are the familiar cast body parts but this time arranged in order of size from the arm of a small child to that of an adult. Below the arms, on a nail, hangs a handkerchief borrowed from Picasso's Weeping Woman 1937 (pl.5).

Hidden like a puzzle on the left half of the painting is a detail, again from Matthias Grunewald, of The Resurrection. Johns also depicts one of his many early crosshatch paintings. This painting seems to be about the process of growing old. Johns refers to images from art history as well as images from

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his past to create this image of the present. Objects are no longer simple compositional elements with which to create an art of texture and surface. There is real meaning here and Johns has only begun to push this new direction.

In the painting Ventriloquist (pl.6), Johns again reaches back into the history books borrowing the wood engraving of Barry Moser entitled Moby Dick (pl.7) and once more a Barnett Newman print. Here too are the standards in this series: the gushing faucet and the porcelain vase which like many of Johns' puzzle pieces can be seen as two different objects. When viewed as a positive shape, it is a vase yet, when seen as a negative shape, it becomes two human profiles looking towards each other.

There has been much speculation about the symbolism of objects found in these paintings. In particular, the images found again and again like the running bathtub faucet and linen basket found in the lower right. Why is it a man noted for his privacy, as Johns is, would invite the spectator into the most private of places, his bathroom? Could it be to create the atmosphere of vulnerability he now feels as an aged artist? Mark Rosenthal writes, "Plumbing makes a wonderfully apt image for the erotic machinery of the human being. The sexual references in Johns's work have been masked in a similarly slang fashion elsewhere; recall again Painting with

Two Balls (pl.8). Although the faucet in Untitled (pl.9) is ejaculating, it can be construed as a male or female characteristic, as might the skull; but the precedent in Tantric Detail (pl.10) of the juxtaposition of skull and testicles suggests a consistently male identity."<sup>5</sup>

Although Rosenthal presents a valid argument for the sexual references in Johns' paintings, the running faucet could also be construed as a visual metaphor for the passage of time. So many of the puzzles in these paintings deal with challenging the viewers participation. There is a positive/negative vase, a drawing that can be seen as a duck or rabbit, and possibly the most telling image, of his obsession with age, the mistress/wife drawing which depicts either a beautiful young girl or a pitiful old woman depending on how it is viewed. This series of untitled paintings, with its funeral references, masculine icons and American flags, is full of imagery which points to the death of an American male. Four Seasons (pls.17-24) is the most recent group of paintings and prints from Jasper Johns. This series of four paintings and four prints points most overtly towards the artists obsession with mortality both metaphorically and visually.

Spring (pl.17), a painting about birth, depicts the spirit or shadow of a small boy below the artist's shadow cast on the

canvas. Indicating the passage of time, is the artist's hand and arm print in a clock like circle. This hands of the clock concept is reminiscent of Johns' Device Circle (pl.25) of 1959. Life bringing rain covers and unifies the composition.

In Summer (pl.18) the painted foliage, like the metaphoric summer of life, is in full bloom. The aging process has already began in that the cast shadow grows thinner.

Fall (pl.19) tells the story of old age and dying. The artist's shadow becomes even more transparent and objects begin to wither and break.

Finally, in Winter (pl.20) a painting almost completely void of color, the foliage has died. Johns' shadow has deteriorated to the point it is almost nonexistent. The overall scene is one of ruin. Objects are broken and scattered throughout the chaotic composition and covered with snow.

How can a man deal with the same objects for 40 years and still maintain a high level of freshness about his work? possibly by constantly creating new meaning for these icons. Jasper Johns truly has created his own language of symbols and has treated his viewers to a front row seat from which they can witness the ongoing dialogue between artist and art. Like

the hand of the clock in the Four Seasons series Johns too has returned to a point from which he started. This man who found a rascination with objects as pure subject and not as a vehicle for meaning has returned to the object. Yet after years of dealing with the same subject matter, he has attached his personal feelings, ideas and meanings to these things creating a specialized hieroglyphics understood by a select few. With this new language he returns to the canvas, this time to tell a story about an American artist and the passage of time.

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PLATE 1



PLATE 2









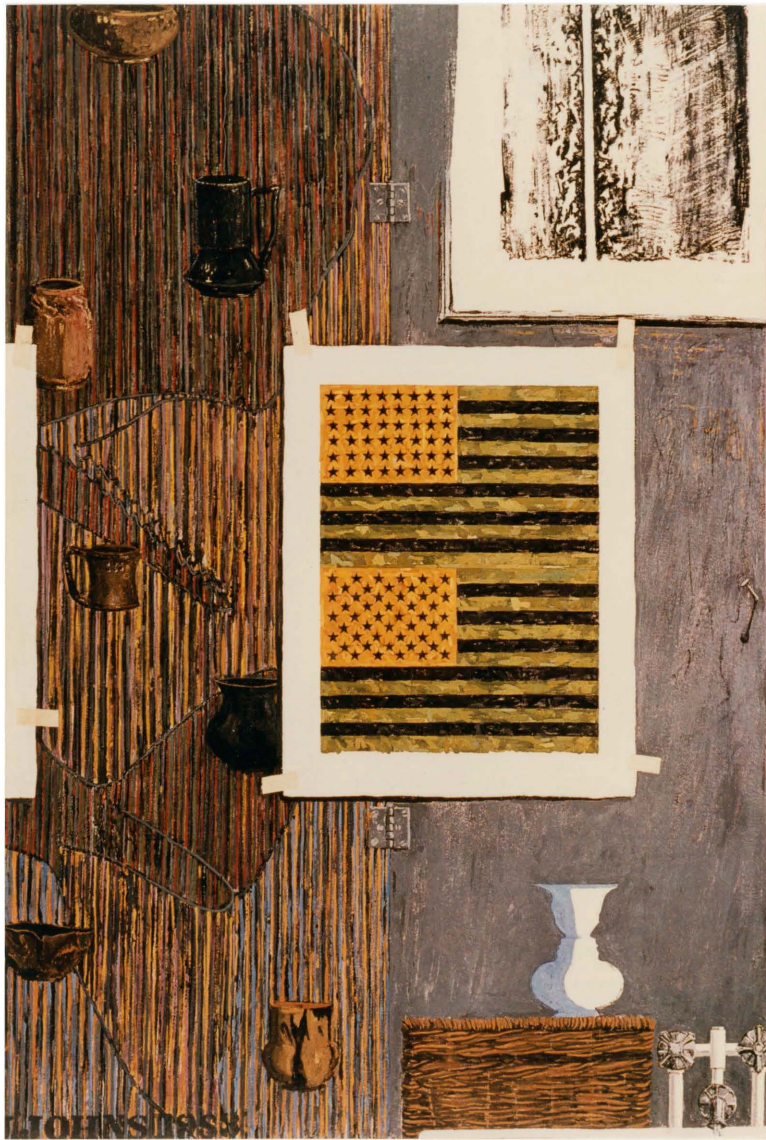




PLATE 8









PLATE 11



PLATE 12



PLATE 13

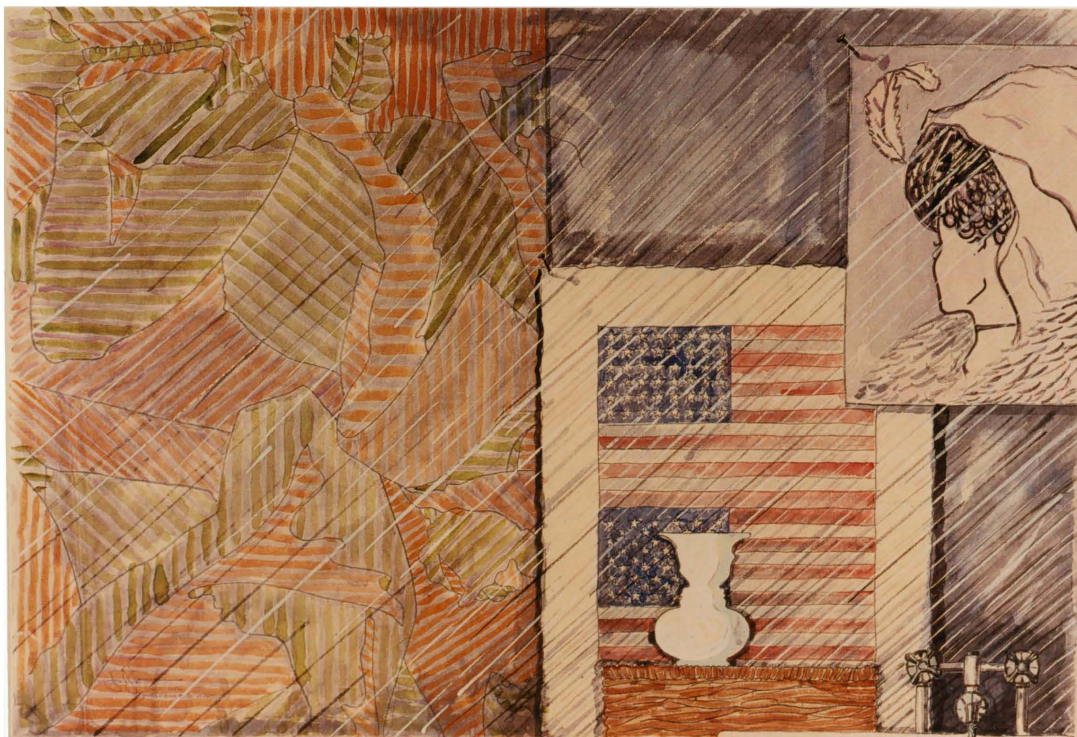


PLATE 14



PLATE 15



























## Bibliography

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ellen H. Johnson, American Artists on Art, New York, 1980, p.80
- <sup>2</sup> Howard Smagula, Currents, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1983, p.113
- <sup>3</sup> Jack A. Hobbs, Art in Context, New York, 1980, p. 274
- <sup>4</sup> Max Kozloff, Jasper Johns, New York, 1967, p.9
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