

JASPER JOHNS

A PRINT RETROSPECTIVE

Already recognized as a painter, Jasper Johns made his first prints in 1961, when he was thirty years old. He led the way in what has been considered a renaissance in the art of printmaking in America, working in the European tradition with master printers to prepare and print his lithographs, etchings, and silkscreens. The stimulus of this collaborative method, and the enthusiasm of several publishers, encouraged Johns and other major painters to make prints of extraordinary quality.

Johns reinvented for his prints some of the imagery familiar from his unique works. Thus, the earliest lithographs have affinities with his paintings of targets and the American flag and his sculpture of two ale cans. With objects such as these he redefined the matter of art, presenting familiar, patterned signs as correlatives of nonobjective abstractions and common items from daily life as surrogates for figurative representations. In addition, by piercing the flattened picture plane, adding objects to its surface, or above and below it, and entrapping in deft brushwork a variety of imprints and proprietary marks, Johns has created a visual language that is at once engaging and perplexing. By juxtaposing similar images within a single composition or implying through various devices that a composition continues beyond its edges, he invokes the paradoxical character of ordinary human experience.

There are infinite possibilities of interpreting and enjoying the complexity of Johns's works, and to embark on one's own journey of discovery without further guidance is not only possible but rewarding. In the complex cross-hatched works of the 1970s, for example, the viewer is presented with what at first may seem like chaotic batches of parallel marks, which then evolve into appealing abstractions. But these crosshatches have a subtle order, as well—as fascinating as it is involved—that reveals itself through concentrated examination of the marks, their directions, and their interrelationships.

Prints represent a fundamental part of Johns's creative production, no less challenging than any other medium to which he turns his gifts. Although not particularly engaged by the multiple aspect of prints (many of his recent printed works are monotypes), he considers the proofs, successive states, and other physical vestiges of the creation of each print to be important in showing the evolution of his work and thought. By presenting the artwork as a discrete object rather than as a picture of something, by taking the process of art-making itself as a suitable focus for composition, Johns addresses significant contemporary artistic concerns. These and other subjects, often ambiguous and enigmatic, give his distinctive images their intense, enduring aspect.

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