

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality

In these works, we are looking at a merging of organization and dissipation, an image of our destiny.

John Yau

Years ago, while speaking to Roberta Bernstein about his early works, “Target with Plaster Casts” and “Target with Four Faces” (both 1955), Jasper Johns stated:

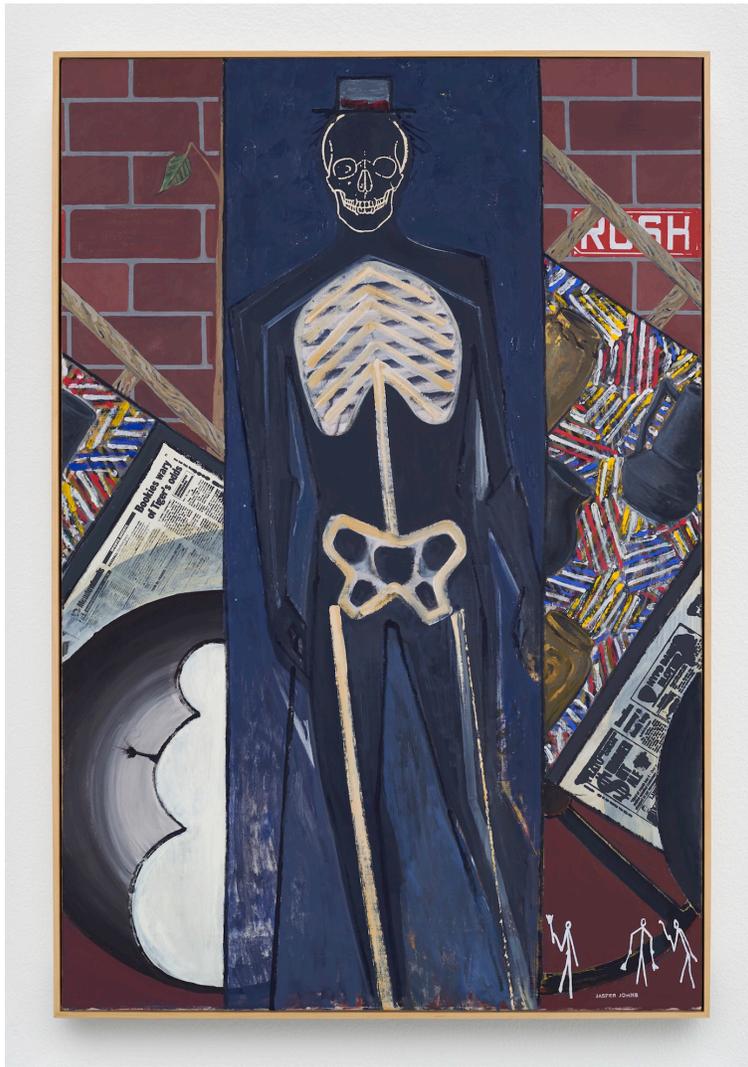
Any broken representation of the human physique is touching in some way; it's upsetting or provokes reactions that one can't quite account for. Maybe because one's image of one's own body is disturbed by it.

In his current exhibition, *Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper*, at Matthew Marks Gallery (February 9–April 6, 2019), which includes much but not all of the work the artist completed between 2014 and 2018, viewers are invited to contemplate Johns's latest examples of “broken representations of the human physique,” among much else.

By applying different processes and techniques to these and other representations, Johns has found a way to continue being candid about aging, mortality, and the dead selves we leave behind. The works in this exhibition constitute a deeply felt, intellectual inquiry into what it means to exist, to live with one's memories, to grow old, and die.

What the exhibition should settle once and for all is that Johns's greatness did not end with his formal innovations of the mid- to late '50s, or with his exploration of the crosshatch in the 70s; instead, he has broadened and deepened his thinking over the entire course of his career so far.

The relentlessness we feel pulsing through his work — his “take an object / Do something to it / Do



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2018), oil on canvas, 50 3/4 x 34 1/8 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, all images courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

something else to it” aesthetic — is the fusion of emotional urgency and formal concerns with intellectual curiosity in the service of discovering the limits of what one is actually experiencing.

Approaching 90, Johns has not settled into a style or mode of production, nor has he become wistful or nostalgic about his past. Rather, he has found a way to keep moving forward while living in the present and what it gives to him — be it a photograph of a helicopter crewman, Lance Corporal James Farley, taken by Larry Burrows during the Vietnam War for a photo-essay in LIFE (magazine); a reproduction of a torn and wrinkled photograph published in an auction catalog; or the FBI’s return of a painting that he had abandoned and asked his former assistant to destroy.

There are 38 works in the exhibition. One is a suite, “Untitled” (2018), which consists of 24 sheets, each of which measures approximately 11 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches. The sheets are divided evenly between those done in ink on plastic and those done in ink on paper, and each group is sequentially numbered in the upper right hand corner, like pages from two different but linked books.



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2018), ink on paper or plastic, 24 sheets, each approximately: 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

The recurring motif in all the sheets is a new one for Johns: a jaunty skeleton wearing a porkpie hat, sometimes sporting a cane and sometimes holding a skull in front of his crotch. In one of the paper works, Johns has juxtaposed the skeleton with his motif of a catenary line, so that it appears as if he is skipping rope. Johns's mordant humor is just one of the many pleasures of this extraordinary exhibition.

Thematically speaking, the exhibition can be divided into five groups, each of which centers on a carefully arranged constellation of motifs or a preexisting image. Along with the new motif of the spry skeleton, there is a vertical, ink on plastic, "Untitled" (2016), which seems to be an outlier, not a part of any group. Materially speaking, the works range from paintings to linoleum prints to a small etching done on confetti paper.

Johns's sensitivity to materials coupled with his willingness to try different resources, processes, and surfaces, is largely unrivaled. The paintings are done in acrylic, oil, and encaustic, with some augmented by silkscreen. There is a large etching of a skeleton holding a skull in front of his crotch that was printed on Egyptian papyrus.

What stitches these disparate works together is Johns's interest in seeing with one's own eyes, guided by the mind's eye — the everyday world and the insights one might gain through the imagination in pursuit of a larger truth: the effect of time on us all.

This concern is immediately apparent in a large, square blue painting, "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 40 by 40 inches, 2016) on the front wall facing the gallery's window, looking onto the street. Johns did this



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

"Untitled" in response to a similar "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 44 x 66 inches, 1997), which he made nearly 20 years earlier and I don't believe has ever been shown.

Both paintings have the same motifs: a pair of cartoon-like eyes staring into the painting; a curlicue line that can be read as the bottom of a nostril; a pair of lips that can also be read as mountain; a trompe l'oeil image of a ruler; a trompe l'oeil "poster" of the Milky Way's dense swirl of stars, paired with a "poster" of the Big Dipper, which is shown upside down and in reverse, from right to left, with a white line connecting the seven stars. This reverse direction is echoed by the three stick figures below, which are also moving from right to left. They seem to be holding large brushes.

Are the disembodied eyes looking at the world or are they looking inward and remembering the past? Are these ways of looking and remembering completely separate from each other?

Like the stick figures, which we might regard as representations of our ancestors, we can draw a line between stars to make a constellation, but can we comprehend the actual distance between them? The ruler that Johns has depicted alongside the poster of the Big Dipper is an inadequate instrument to address the actual distances, though it can be used to tell us the poster's height and width. How do we measure

what cannot be measured? In Hart Crane's poem "Cape Hatteras" — to which Johns has referred in a number of works from the early 1960s — the poet asks:

Seeing himself an atom in a shroud —
Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!

“ — Recorders ages hence ” — ah, syllables of faith!
Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity
Be still the same as when you walked the beach
Near Paumanok — your lone patrol — and heard the wraith
Through surf, its bird note there a long time falling ...

What about the link that Johns establishes between the landscape (mountain) and the human body (lips)? Are the inward-looking eyes pondering our destination, as part of a landscape that is itself a minute speck within something unfathomable (the Milky Way)? Why is the painting's ground largely blue with hints of orange peeking through? Why has the right edge of "poster" of the Milky Way started to curl up? Was the proportion of the older painting — whose dimensions convey landscape — what bothered Johns? Is this why he made his response on a square, or abstract, format?

Regardless of whether the viewer knows about the earlier painting or not, what "Untitled" conveys is a curiosity about looking, both as an outward act and an inward one, in pursuit of some understanding of



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2017), acrylic over etching with collage on canvas, 19 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

Yau, John. "Jasper Johns's Messengers of Aging and Mortality." *Hyperallergic*, February 17, 2019.

our material relationship to time, space, and the world we inhabit. What is the connection between them? How might we see ourselves in the world we must let go of, in the end?

In almost all of the work in this exhibition, we see figures looking at us or looking away. There are the faces in profile, where the negative space between them forms the silhouette of a stemmed vessel; there is a tormented figure derived from a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's "Reclining Nude" (1938), which had printed upside down; and a ripped, crumpled, and stained photograph of Lucian Freud taken by John Deakin.

The photo of Freud shows him perched on the edge of an iron bed, one leg tucked under the other; his right hand clutches his hair as he looks down and away, while the other hand reaches toward the camera, as if to block its gaze. The Larry Burrows photograph of Lance Corporal James Farley in Vietnam shows him covering his face and sobbing into his forearm, one hand held up, shielding his face from the camera's inquisitive persistence. Elsewhere, nimble skeletons look at us, mocking our infirmity.

Despite their differences, these motifs are examples of what Johns defined as "broken[s] representation of the human physique." So while we can track down their diverse origins – and there is a deep and satisfying pleasure in doing so – I don't think that is Johns's main intention. He is not the obscurantist many have accused him of being. Rather, he seems to prefer that viewers open themselves up to the possible meanings evoked by the "broken representation" in front of them. What we must see is the work and the context that Johns has established for it, just as he did for "Flag" (1954–55).

When Johns sections off the image of Freud and his surroundings, taking his lead from the creases and tears in the photograph, or when he echoes and extends the camouflage pattern on Farley's uniform, he is dissolving the boundaries separating figure and ground — something that has interested him since his first alphabet and number paintings in the mid-1950s. Whereas these earlier paintings were seen as grids and all-over compositions — which were favored over all else at the time — what mattered to Johns was the complexity that could be yielded from the figure/ground relationship.

This formal interest in the figure/ground relationship can be traced from his early works right up to the present. Johns's absorption with "broken representations of the human physique" also runs throughout his career, starting at the very beginning, which suggests that those who see a division between his early formally innovative paintings and the work he began doing after 1981, when he said that he "dropped his reserve," miss the point. Moreover, the art world's voyeuristic obsession with whether or not Johns is revealing something of his private life seems to me terribly misguided.

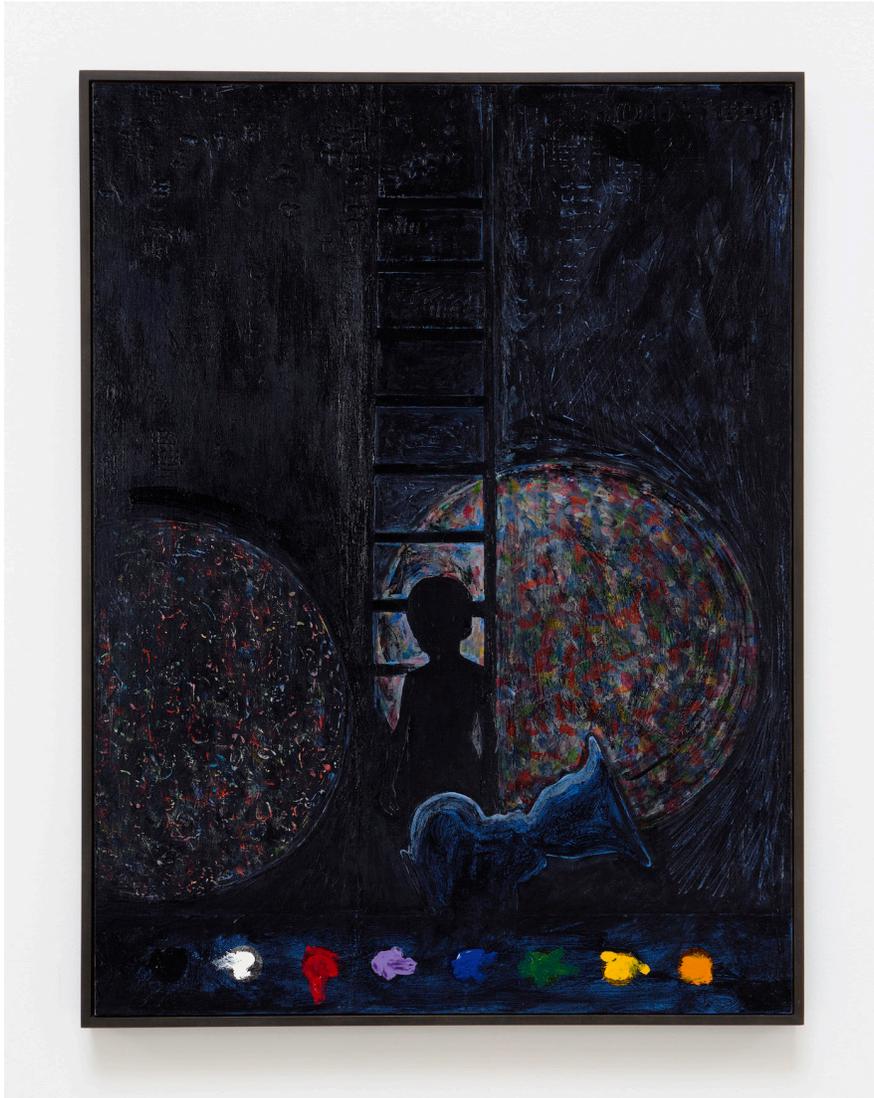
The "broken representations" that we encounter in "Target with Four Faces" (1955); "The Bath" (1977); the paintings and prints from his "Regrets" series; and the works based on the Burrows' photograph are not about the artist in a limited "I confess" sense. They are about loss and unavoidable decline and decay; they are about us in so far as we will grow old and die.



Jasper Johns, "Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows" (2014), ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

I want to stress that, out of the 20 photographs of Farley that appeared in the LIFE photo-essay, Johns especially chose the photograph of him covering his eyes. When he uses a stencil to spell out the phrase "Farley Breaks Down," Johns is not quoting Burrows, who wrote "The mission over, Farley gives way, from Yankee Papa 13" on the back of the photograph. Johns recognizes that the photograph shows Farley breaking down emotionally, but he also recognizes that he is breaking down physically.

This is where Johns's technique and materials have taken him. In the ink on plastic works depicting Farley, the dried vacuoles are puddle stains tainted with dust. The swirls of dust are evidence of desiccation, of the body dried out — materials that evoke our common physical destination after we die. And yet, looking at the stains, aren't we fascinated by the patterns and configurations their drying makes? But their natural beauty is not all that Johns is inviting us to ponder, is it?



Jasper Johns, "Untitled" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 27 inches (© Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

In these works, we are looking at a merging of organization and dissipation, an image of our destiny. Johns can imagine this outcome, but the figure in the work has turned his face away and covered his eyes. Is it because he is afraid of what will happen to him? Is it because he cannot actually see himself in this state of disintegration? Or is it because he knows that one of his selves has died and will forever be stuck in this moment? Is life an accumulation of — to cite Johns's title — regrets?

Johns's merging of techniques and materiality — the ink, brush, and sheet of clear plastic — is unrivaled. And yet this is not all that he does. Look at the various densities of his blacks, and consider the range of emotions spreading across a congregation of them. The blacks he gets in the Regrets series are significantly different from those in "Untitled" (2014), a haunting painting of a silhouetted child standing by a ladder, a large dark blue vase (with two faces in profile across from each other) falling in front him. Could this image be an elegy to what has been erased by time?

The new motif of the skeleton is funny and unsettling. The skeleton is leaning to the left in both paintings

in which he is featured, and wearing a porkpie hat painted red. The hat, too small to fit the skull, is perched precariously on his head. Is death cheery because it never dies? Can we look at this and not think of our own past and future — what we might endure until we reach the end?

Is the skeleton standing in an open doorway, with the night outside? On either side of him, we see a broken cart carrying examples of Johns's work and a profile of a snowman — both are motifs used by the artist in "The Seasons," his four-part encaustic from 1985-86 — peering out from behind the skeleton. Among other things, a snowman is an impermanent form and a reminder of childhood. In one of the skeleton paintings, we glimpse parts of a crosshatch painting with images of George Ohr pots floating in front of them — juxtaposing these two motifs together for the first time.

There is so much to look at and think about in these paintings and works on paper that you might never get to the bottom of them. They ask viewers to slow down and consider how they live in time.

This is the space Johns opens up for us. The question is whether or not we can enter it, how long can we stay there, and what deep and real pleasures we might glean from looking at these contemplations of time's ravenous hunger and transformative power.

Johns has given us messengers of aging and mortality. These are not private musings, but intensely introspective works about death's anticipated arrival. They are full of silences, wan light, somber darkness, acerbic humor, and signs of disintegration. Standing before them, we should ask ourselves: are we ready to receive all that they bring to us, go in whatever direction they suggest, no matter how distressing?

Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper *continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 6.*