

Fiona Donovan



Mona Lisa

JASPER JOHNS

Pictures within Pictures

1980-2015



Thames & Hudson

JASPER JOHNS



1 *Perilous Night*, 1982
Encaustic on canvas with objects
67 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 96 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
(170.5 x 244.2 x 15.9 cm)

JASPER JOHNS

IMAGE AND OBJECT

FIONA DONOVAN

 **Thames & Hudson**



2 *Nothing at All* Richard Dadd, 1992
Graphite on paper
41¼ × 27½ in. (104.8 × 69.9 cm)

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN SOMETHING IS NEW TO US, WE TREAT IT
AS AN EXPERIENCE. WE FEEL THAT ALL OUR SENSES
ARE AWAKE AND CLEAR. WE ARE ALIVE.

JASPER JOHNS, 1969

This book is a study of Johns's art from 1982 to the present. Although more has been written on Johns than possibly any other living artist, there is no comprehensive text on his art since the 1980s. And while there have been exhibitions of this work, the scholarship on this period of Johns's oeuvre is fragmentary. Three museum exhibitions have been devoted to aspects of his art of this era. Mark Rosenthal's cogent survey of Johns's work from 1974 to 1987 was the American selection for the 43rd Venice Biennale in 1988 and traveled later to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The catalogue for that exhibition, completed while Johns was at work on the *Seasons* series, provides a thorough consideration of that thirteen-year period of Johns's work and a critical contemporary perspective. Another exhibition initiated in 1999 introduced the *Catenary* series, which Johns began in 1997. That catalogue includes important essays by three noted Johns scholars. A third exhibition originated in 2003 focused on the artist's pictures from 1983 to 2002, with a catalogue featuring three distinctive idiosyncratic texts.¹ Given how well-known much of Johns's art is, it is surprising that the public is not better acquainted with his pictures of the late twentieth century and that there have not been more opportunities to see this compelling and varied work.

Since his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1996, Johns's work has also been the subject of several thematic exhibitions with in-depth catalogues.² Johns's few published texts and his sketchbook notes, along with his many published interviews, manifest his thoughtful engagement with those interested in his work. Johns is an astute and absorbed conversationalist on a wide variety of topics, including art, movies, politics, gardening, the environment, food, and developments around the world. His understated sense of humor and hearty laugh inflect most exchanges. While Johns's remarks are for the most part open-ended, they provide key articulation of his ideas and outlook, while offering informative anecdotes about his art and life.³ Compelled to experiment with a range of artistic practices and styles, Johns has provided a model for artists today whose practice blurs the boundaries between genres or who work simultaneously in a variety of forms and media.

During the 1980s and 1990s, bookended by two periods of abstraction, Jasper Johns (b. 1930) made some of his most inventive, involving, mysterious and strange pictures. Moving away from the more familiar iconography of his early flags, targets, and numbers, Johns included in this new work imagery found in his studio or home as well as appropriating pictures or fragments by artists he admires. *Racing Thoughts* (1983; fig. 5), for instance, features a photo puzzle of his long-time dealer Leo Castelli,

³ *Savarin*, 1981
Lithograph: seven aluminum plates
50 × 38 in. (127 × 96.5 cm)
Edition of 60

a lithograph by the Abstract Expressionist artist Barnett Newman, and a decal based on the *Mona Lisa*, as well as a schematized tracing of a diseased demon from Matthias Grünewald's early sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece. Johns also turned to familiar imagery when treating the passage of time in the *Seasons* series.

Johns made a group of works during this period representing a bizarre stretched face, based on a portrait by Picasso, and included in some of these an image made by a schizophrenic child in the 1950s. In 1990, he made *Green Angel* (fig. 17), an ambiguous picture with abstracted imagery traced from a source that Johns has not identified. Some of these pictures are composed of tough surfaces of wax encaustic mixed with sand, others are deep dark purple or oddball bubblegum pink, while some have the feel of age-old parchment or vellum. One doesn't find resolution in these complex works, but Johns's masterful paint handling and mix of imagery generate a rare beauty and expressive power.

Looking primarily at the artist's paintings and works on paper, with the benefit of his words and previous scholarship, this book aims to offer a broader context in which to examine his work from the early 1980s and 1990s, through to the 2000s, when representational images began to emerge from the more purely formal crosshatch pictures of the 1970s and his work took on a new visual and iconographic complexity. The iconography of his work through these decades has ranged from images with some personal significance (as opposed to the collective subject matter of his earliest pictures) to a broader humanist discourse as he explores themes of suffering in the art of Grünewald, Picasso, and others. His absorption with appropriated and abstracted images - along with imagery from perceptual psychology and the inspiration he finds in his immediate surroundings - springs from his enduring curiosity. Over sixty years of making art, Johns has remained interested in "how we see and why we see the way we do."⁴ During this time, he has painted in encaustic and oil, made sculpture and works on paper, mastered myriad methods of printmaking and casting, and worked with collage and assemblage. He has also explored formal and iconographic concerns in a succession of highly original abstract and representational modes.

Since 1982, the ground in his pictures has often been figured as a wall, a nod to traditional painting as he investigates the art of the past. Johns's work, more so than much current art practice, is best interpreted using classic art-historical language: his sophistication as a colorist, attention to form, structure, and process, and of course his iconography. Calvin Tomkins observed in 2007 that "not many young artists today seem influenced by Johns, in the way that so many used to be in the nineteen-sixties, and so many are still influenced by Rauschenberg and Warhol. Johns has become like an Old Master - but one whose work continues to change, double back on itself, contradict expectations, and disturb."⁵ And yet, Johns's work has affected the artistic practice of a broad range of younger artists, from Mel Bochner to Elizabeth Murray and Bruce Nauman and many others.⁶ From his painting style, in which even his tightly controlled yet sensuous brushstrokes fail to contain the artist's presence, to the personal scale of his work, to his use of imprinted body parts and his infusion of memory as well as the recycling of his own and others' artwork, an acknowledgment of the human condition is always apparent in his art.

The connections that Johns forges between the images in a given work allow for a range of meanings. Meaning is embedded in Johns's layering and serial approach, his repetitions and reinterpretations. From his fresh contemplation of space in *In the Studio* (1982) to the personal references and appropriation in *Racing Thoughts* to the increased lyricism of the *Seasons* (1985-1990) and his return to a more abstract vocabulary in the *Catenary* series (1997-2000), Johns's art of this era encourages exploration and



4 *Three Flags*, 1958
Encaustic on canvas
30 5/8 × 45 1/2 × 4 5/8 in.
(77.8 × 115.6 × 11.7 cm)

reflection. Taking into account the artists – from Leonardo to Duchamp, Grünewald to Cézanne and Picasso – and the works of art and other images that have influenced Johns and that he has made use of in varied ways, this book will consider his unique use of appropriation and why it has figured so significantly in his imagery. Looking also at the work of artists whom he has in turn influenced, whether conceptually or more viscerally – artists as different as Richard Prince and Kiki Smith – will further illuminate his art. Like that of many American artists, particularly of the nineteenth century, Johns's work bears elements of the transcendental, primarily in its poetic symbolism. His deep interest in poetry is lifelong. This book will look at specific and more general associations between poetry and Johns's art.

Charged with the creative energy of youth, the radical elegance of Johns's early flags and targets seem to be the work of an artist fully formed – his sense of integrity raw but clear – one who appears to have shortcut the 10,000 hours of practice we are told today that mastery of any field requires.⁷ Johns was twenty-four when he made his first flag (1954–55). In the mid-1950s, Johns's sophisticated intelligence and curiously inventive manner found a way beyond Abstract Expressionism. His tactile sensuality and iconographic restraint integrated the revolutionary refinement of early twentieth-century Parisian modernism with American literalism. The straightforward ease and common vocabulary of his early pictures spoke to a generation on the brink of challenging the middle-class stability of American society following World War II. The agitation, particularly among America's youth, sparked radical political activity, the civil rights movement, the sexual liberation of the sixties and the advent of feminism, environmental concerns and opposition to the war in Vietnam. Johns's iconic images anticipated the American optimism of the 1960s that brought about the US space program, the boom in advertising and economic expansion, as well as its modish and freewheeling countercultural spirit. His first flags and targets distinguished him – but they did not satisfy his relentless inclination to experiment again and again with new techniques, materials, and forms.

It was in the early 1980s that Johns's compositions became increasingly complex, with a range of images and a mix of abstraction and representation. At this time, the artist expanded his single focus to multiple viewpoints that require shifts in attention, from direct experience to the infiltration of memory. This era saw the beginning of an increasing economic gap between rich and poor in America, followed in the 1990s by the advent of the culture wars that polarized conservative and liberal politics and culture over such issues as education, sexual orientation, abortion rights, gun control, and the separation of church and state. Throughout these years, while addressing such abiding themes as spirituality, life and death, and the ages of man, Johns found a way to make vulnerable and emotionally complex work. Johns's art of the 1980s and 1990s has a dignified, timeless, interior character that suggests a corrective to the public and political moralizing and self-exposure rampant in America at that time.

Between the mid-1950s and early 1980s, Johns evolved from an ingenious, ruminative young artist to a more unpredictable, profound and lyrical one. It was as if, as he grew older, he sought something more enigmatic and multifaceted than his earlier iconic imagery. To find meaning in Johns's work of the 1980s and 1990s requires a willingness to forge connections between Johns's imagery and forces in our own lives. Without being didactic, his art reminds us to pay attention and to look instead of know. It offers an uncommon interpretive fluidity. Kirk Varnedoe acutely observed in the catalogue that accompanied Johns's 1996 MoMA retrospective that “from the outset [Johns] has seen art's goal as that of making life memorable – of impressing vividly on the mind things one might otherwise look at and forget.”⁸ Johns's art focuses attention



5 *Racing Thoughts*, 1983
Encaustic and collage on canvas
48 1/8 x 75 1/8 in. (122.2 x 190.8 cm)



6 *Untitled*, 1984
Encaustic on canvas
50 × 75 in. (127 × 190.5 cm)



7 *Untitled*, 1987
Encaustic and collage on canvas
50 × 75 in. (127 × 190.5 cm)



8 *Untitled (A Dream)*, 1985
Oil on canvas
75 × 50 in. (190.5 × 127 cm)

and intensifies life in the present, stimulating memory and heightening the doubt, uncertainty, and hope with which we anticipate the future.

Johns's work deliberately, yet actively, pursues experimental and technical refinement and invention. It is abstract and representational, conceptual and sensual. In 1973, Johns described how his work is "in part concerned with the possibility of things being taken for one thing or another - with questionable areas of identification and usage and procedure - with thought rather than with secure things."⁹ It is perhaps the contradictions embodied in Johns's work that activate the viewer's response and have been its most defining characteristic over sixty years. They are perhaps also what lend the work its sense of humanity. In 1977, Michael Crichton described Johns's character thus: "On the one hand, he is coldly rigorous, formal, adult, intellectual. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to be playful, punning, literal, even childish. He is detached, and he is emotional. He is calculating, and he is impetuous."¹⁰ Thirty years later, critic Holland Cotter used these words to characterize the artist: "I would call him a metaphysical artist, in the way that the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne is a metaphysical poet. Like Donne's poetry, Mr. Johns's art is equally about body and mind, sensuality and reflection. It is unmystical, unromantic, unnostalgic but obsessed with transcendence and the reality of loss."¹¹ The paradoxes in Johns's work root its meaning in ambivalence and allow for a range of interpretations.

Since his first solo exhibition in 1958, Johns's works have been seen as changing the way that we think about picture-making and encouraging us to pay closer attention to the world around us. Their carefully built-up tactile surfaces emphasize compositional structure, objecthood, and the relationship between sight and mind. Concerned with formal issues as much as iconographic ones, the resulting combination invites us to stretch our minds, hearts, and eyes as we forge connections between these pictures and our own lives.

According to Johns, he began drawing when he was three and hasn't stopped since.¹² Born in Augusta, Georgia, in 1930, Johns was shuttled around to the homes of various relatives in South Carolina after his parents divorced when he was a small child. He developed interests in poetry and art early on, in part fostered by his aunt, who taught all grades in a two-room school called Climax in a small district called The Corner. Johns graduated from Edmunds High School in Sumter as valedictorian. He went on to study briefly at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.¹³

Johns told critic Grace Glueck in 1977 of his early inclination to be an artist, describing impishly how "no one in my immediate family was involved with art (I had a grandmother who painted, though I never knew her) but somehow the idea must have been conveyed to me that an artist is someone of interest in a society. I didn't know artists, but at an early age I realized that in order to be one I'd have to be somewhere else. I always had a tendency to try to be somewhere else."¹⁴ In 1948, after one and a half years of college, Johns moved to New York. He attended Parsons School of Design for the spring term in 1949, after which his money ran out and he briefly turned to work as a messenger and shipping clerk. During the Korean War, he was drafted and served in the army in South Carolina and in Japan from 1951 to 1953.

In 1954, Johns returned to New York, where he made the decision to commit himself to being an artist.¹⁵ At that point, he destroyed all his artwork (except for a few pieces no longer in his possession) and shortly afterward made his first *Flag*. As has often been noted, the imagery derived from a dream Johns had in which he saw himself painting a large American flag. "Using the design of the American flag," he

said, “took care of a great deal for me because I didn’t have to design it. So I went on to similar things like targets – things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels.”¹⁶

In addition to targets, Johns also turned to the alphabet and numbers for imagery. In contrast to the flag image, these subjects are inherently more abstract. He added objects and words to his canvases over the next few years. Johns’s paintings of flags and targets question the traditional relationships between figure and ground, and illusion and reality, that are intrinsic to painting. Is it a flag or an image of a flag? Are object and image the same thing? Johns’s solitary images beg our concentrated attention. By taking a readymade object as his image – “things which are seen but not looked at, not examined”¹⁷ – Johns’s work urges the viewer to take notice of an extremely familiar motif that is rarely given close thought.

The pictures Johns made between 1954 and 1958, treating common subjects with a tender poignancy, established the tone and conceptual concerns he has engaged with ever since. In his early pictures, Johns approached issues that would become central to key artistic developments of the 1960s, in Pop art, minimalism, and conceptual art. These include the synthesis of two modes until then largely considered incompatible: representational art and abstraction. Johns addressed the relationship between figure and ground by denying illusion, carefully building up his picture surfaces with layered newsprint and encaustic and a multitude of drawing and printmaking media. In probing whether or not his works were flags or targets or images of them, he questioned the nature of representation. His predilection for subjects “seen but not looked at” may have given rise to Pop’s iconography, but most radical and inventive was his innovative fusion, following on the heels of Abstract Expressionism’s spontaneous angst, of deliberate abstract modeling with representation, in works in which a picture’s subject determined its structure. Since Cubism fractured illusionistic space in the early twentieth century, developments in art had been largely reductive, exploring different approaches to abstraction. By equating image and object, Johns tested the limits of likeness in art in a novel way.

Johns had little formal art education, but once in New York, he came into contact with a community of creative people, most significantly the composer John Cage, the choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, and the artist Robert Rauschenberg.¹⁸ Johns says he “thought of John [Cage] as a sort of teacher/preacher/soldier. His curiosity seemed wide-ranging and athletic, and he was able to connect his work to other fields of thought – to nature, philosophy, science, and whatnot. He was generous in his willingness to explain these connections.”¹⁹ When asked later about Cage’s influence on him, Johns responded: “I don’t usually think in terms of influence. I feel that only things one is insensitive to are not influences. John Cage had a serious concern for philosophical ideas and he was able to consider judiciously a number of complex ideas at the same time. From such practice, he seemed to gain abstract and practical insights which reinforced his music, his philosophy, his ambitions. Art and life structured by principle seemed the suggested norm.”²⁰ The constructive nature of Johns’s relationships with these friends and colleagues proved to be formidable.

In 1954, Johns moved into a loft on Pearl Street in New York. The next year, Robert Rauschenberg rented the loft upstairs from a mutual friend. According to Johns, Rauschenberg was “the first person I knew who was a real artist.”²¹ While they shared southern backgrounds – Rauschenberg was from Texas – as well as artistic ambitions, attitudes, and endeavors, in character they could hardly have been more different: Johns tended to be deliberate, precise, elegant, even diffident; Rauschenberg, five years older than Johns, was full of energy, provocative, and outwardly engaging. While

9 *Untitled*, 1991-94
Oil on canvas
60¼ × 40 in.
(153 × 101.6 cm)





10 *Summer, 1985*
Encaustic on canvas
75 × 50 in. (190.5 × 127 cm)

11 *Fall, 1986*
Encaustic on canvas
75 × 50 in. (190.5 × 127 cm)



12 *Winter*, 1986
Encaustic on canvas
75 × 50 in. (190.5 × 127 cm)

providing encouragement to each other at a time when both lacked support from the art world, they developed similar beliefs that ultimately rendered the Abstract Expressionist years obsolete.

It was through Rauschenberg that Johns met Leo Castelli. In 1958, Leo Castelli held Johns's first solo exhibition. The Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired three of his paintings. Ironically, this was just as Abstract Expressionism was beginning to receive widespread attention. Johns, however, along with Rauschenberg, was already reshaping advanced ideas about art. Both artists chose imagery and drew on familiar objects from everyday life; their works reminded the viewer of how often we look at objects without really seeing them; and Rauschenberg's combines and Johns's hybrid works broke down the traditional notions of artistic genres, erasing the boundaries between painting and sculpture and print media as well.

Around 1960, when Johns turned from flags, targets, and numbers to an expanded iconography unconstrained by flat images and readymade compositions, his style became more fluid and gestural. As if in response to his early success, his paintings of 1959 and 1960 featured a new sense of expansive, penetrable space. Working in thick and sometimes drippy encaustic, or more frequently in oil on canvas in bright primaries or shades of gray, Johns formed vigorously worked pictures using carefully separated strokes of the brush, seemingly to call attention to the difference between what he was doing and the more random all-over execution of the Abstract Expressionist painters. Johns's increased use of oil paint in place of encaustic at this time suggests he sought a change from the wax medium's relief properties. These images were made in a less obviously cerebral vein than his earlier work.

13 Edvard Munch
*Self-Portrait: Between the Clock
and the Bed*, 1940-42
Oil on canvas

14 Pablo Picasso
L'Ombre (The Shadow), 1953
Oil and charcoal

