

JASPER JOHNS

PART 3
T139

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JASPER JOHNS:

PAINTINGS AND RECENT PRINTS:

Introduction:-

In this essay I have attempted to discuss Johns through his work. I have talked about his critics and put forward my attitude towards them and Johns approach to his medium.

I have especially concentrated on his prints due to my familiarity with the medium as a printmaker. I find it easier and I feel I am more qualified to do the impossible as regards talking about Johns due to my connection with the graphics area. There is also an earlier introduction on his painting to supplement printmaking and this area serves as a history and background to Johns due to his reputation in those areas.

There is an introduction to Johns through a section on Post Impressionism and also a section on the Abstract Expressionists of his time.

The rest of the essay is broken up into

1. An Understanding of Johns.
2. Style.
3. Symbolism.

The bulk of the essay is given over to print making and I attempt to give an added insight into his work as an artist through two individual prints 'Bending Blue' and 'Bent Stencil'.

POST IMPRESSIONISM:

Van Gogh and Paul Cezanne both of the Impressionist period had something in common. Besides a great similarity in subject matter their paintings show a great awareness of structure and the pictorial interactions of time and space that occur outside the subject matter.

In Cezanne's 'Great Bathers' series he leads us to recognise the imagery. But when we forget about the bathers we can see the technically more complex make-up underlying the structure of the painting. Trees balance up areas, rocks add a stability to areas otherwise floating. Through all the painting occurs an intricate thought process. It is as if one is acquiring a faculty to see a changing in the seasons a depth otherwise not obtainable unless a use of three-dimensional cubes which are the integral structure of the painting are used.

In fact both Van Gogh and Cezanne painted space through the use of spacial elements such as the cubes already discussed and the impasto layers typical of Van Gogh's later paintings. In his painting the 'Cornfield' an incredibly dimensional effect is achieved by the use of his impasto layers. The corn is layered strand upon strand and even scraped in parts. Cezanne acquired his three-dimensionality by twisting and turning cubes around in the basic structure and layout of his painting before paint was put on canvas.

Jasper Johns' works are related more to Cezanne than Van Gogh due to the fact that both views on practical pictorial attitudes are outside the figurative and within the abstractions of paint and structure.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS

Pollock, DeKooning and Kline influenced Johns to a great extent. They lead Johns to conform to gestural painting evident in his earlier paintings, which showed splashes drips and spontaneous marks. Johns "Flags " series are a result of this gestural painting. His flag is not a flag but his feeling.

Rauschenburg Lichenstein and Dine isolate marks and brush strokes to define images., eg., the Coke Bottles and the JFK series by Rauschenburg show this. Dine uses strokes and marks to better define bulky images such as hammers, spanners or saws.

These three artists showed the public that brush strokes were not only just a device to express objects but are also an added element.

John's treats his medium very seriously. Its almost ironical due to his sixties subject matter. His almost laughable Target and Flags series do show this:-



The paint is carefully managed. The strokes seem very well thought out and deliberate despite the overall "slap dash" effect achieved.

Going back in history even Titian and Tintoretto of the Venetian School thought carefully about their own brush strokes. The direction taken and the coarseness of areas of a painting reflected this.

UNDERSTANDING JASPER JOHNS:

Some modern artists of today tend to have a cynical attitude to tradition. To be categorised as 'Expressionist' or 'Figurative' can be dangerous. For a critic to state that someone is an Expressionist could find himself in troubled water. That artist could quite as easily turn round and become an Impressionist over night. It is very difficult to pin down some artists to such a category. Because of the techniques available to the artists of today an almost cynical mannerism can prevail. Cross hatching in engraving is an example; it is used because of its ease of application on copper. Johns brush strokes are another example and his strokes although evident to some as trade marks of an expressionist could be quite easily a device for conveying an area of colour as quickly and as effortlessly as possible.

As with the Abbey Actor playing out a melod-romantic scene. You begin to wonder to what extent does the acting stop.

I feel Johns has a detachment that an actor should have. He seems to have a neutrality - a bluff if you like. His brushstrokes and colours are almost mere devices.

Johns' work stands out from the current N.Y.C style of abstraction. Should the images be given so much importance in his works. I feel until the categories barriers that art critics erect can be torn down Johns cannot be understood.

The mere presence of an object within an object or in a figurative painting is not in itself sufficient evidence that the meaning of the object is bound up with the meaning of the

painting. If the object is only referred to and not really painted in itself or as a rendition of itself by the laying of paint in contours, strokes or textures, then the object as a criteria should be discarded.

With a lot of 20th Century art the difference between what is firmly committed to paint and what is graphically indicated should be discussed rather than an overall taking-in of a painting with a view to decy~~ph~~erring its subject matter.

John's:-

"Sometimes I see it and then paint it, sometimes I paint it then see it. Both are impure situations and I prefer neither. (1970)".

From the above quote you can see how difficult it is to pin down Johns.

His circle of movement ideas (a treatise on colours, their primary and secondary colours. In relation to and opposition to one another) are expressed in this quote.

John's:-

"My work contains possibilities for the changing focus of the eye. Everything contains possibilities and looks very busy to me. I am opposed to a painting that contains or concerns itself with conceptions of simplicity."

Marcel Duchamp:-

"To reach the impossibility of a sufficient visual memory to transfer from one like object to another".

Leonardo DaVinci:-

"The boundary of a work is neither a part of the enclosed body nor of the surrounding atmosphere".

STYLE:-

Style seeks a coherent view.

Fashion in our society is another example of a coherent view on a particular style of clothing or a piece of design etc.

Style according to its dictionary definition is

1. a particular kind, sort or type.
2. a particular distinctive or characteristic mode of action.
3. a mode of living, a mode of fashion.

As regards art work style is a particular distinctive or characteristic mode or form of construction or execution in any art work.

Johns despite the art historians view on the matter is almost anti-style which can be explained in his flag series. The flatness and abstractness of the U.S. Flag was limited by a contradiction of the layers of encaustic and collage.

Lately his work has abandoned all elusive figurations. The four bounded edges and the overall flatness might be appreciable with style. The hatching produces edges and important pictorial elements such as in Stellas work.

Reflectivity was a theory practiced in his work, e.g. The Target series. The idea of reflectivity is that the eye is taken into the centre of the target and then taken out to the extremes and then taken in and out never letting the eye come to rest.

This of course corresponds to his earlier quote about work being busy.

It is no surprise that his self-portraits were attributed to a mirror. He's almost obsessed with the thought that everything can be done differently.

This series is a form of dispelling complexity and enforcing change but within a series. The series idea is one of freedom.

The space and time over any series of work allows an experimentation and more expression within a given media. A comparison of Johns early style and modern show that the early works were symbolic, demonstrated in Serial Change a series completed on numerals. The objectlessness of the number was contrasted with the graphic identity of the number. "The Good Time Charley" series, are more sophisticated and more complex and don't tend to fall into the trap of pure craftsmanship inherent in all avenues of printmaking.

SYMBOLISM:

The Flags, Targets and Maps of Johns earlier periods show a reflective structure. The Target leads the eye in and out. The eyes travel from left to right, right, to left. Crossing such a distance leaves one mentally exhausted. This also serves to put across the low key feeling in his work. A kind of subdued Expressionism. In the public outlets of the fifties a painting had to have "balls". According to one author he didn't.

Art at that time had to be aggressive, strong, totally committed have crude and forceful imagery or subject matter. Johns was characterised at that time by artists such as Sam Francis who made use of splashes and drips. Infact I believe he didn't belong in that particular grouping of people at all.

For example, two paintings that hung with the likes of Sam Francis' work were "Tennyson" (1958). Encaustic and Collage on Canvas and Device Circle (1959). Oil on canvas. Both were very much subdued in their gestural content and the gesture was far from the main ideology running through Johns work.

The 'Flag' and 'Target' design formats of that transient period of art shows a forceful, fres expressive centre that has

influenced so many others.

To class Johns as an expressionist would be legitimate but I feel his art work would have the last word.

PRINTMAKING:

As said before Johns prints are now more complex and sophisticated. This I feel is due to the acquiring of printmaking knowledge over time. In etching he has perfected the use of 'open bite' and has a sensitive control over acids in the bath.

In his lithographs he uses different printing techniques to determine separate parts of the print.

In serigraphy each mark is likened to the marks of a brush on canvas while thinking of the overall complex structure of his finished print.

There is a language of reproduction in his work any printmaker knows this. But that is an element that leaves the viewer to ponder.

John's concern is with the subject matter. Rauschenbury, Warhol, Hamilton, Freidlander, reflect the same in their prints. This I feel can be due to a technician printer printing their editions for them.

These prints of Johns question the observers perception of inner worlds. It is suggested that Johns prints are just copies of his paintings. But I feel printmaking imposes a totally different approach to the same ideology. They rephrase what has been said in the paintings.

John's:-

Being aware of our languages while we use them is perhaps the most difficult function of the mind, it involves a higher order of consciousness than the ordinary and habitual use of



DECOY II.

the language allows."

This above quote of Johns is an extremely important quote and subsequently an important statement. As an artist myself I find the exclusive hard to pin down in words. Johns obviously knows this.

Example: The Numeral series and the later prints Decoy I and Decoy II (1971 - 73). These prints have an emphasis on letters almost a continuation of the numeral series.

Johns has a habit of working on groups of prints repeating given procedures.

The resultant series have a linguistic unity, a sort of reproductive nature. In Johns words I feel that much of the modern art of today grows out of the making of and remaking of

Reworking, refocusing and inverting is a typical product of printmaking. You find a lapse in processing in printmaking every once in a while, and reassessments obviously take place pretty often. Johns performs an exploration of the process rather than the idle variation on a theme.

Today you can find many printmakers working in a flat technique of working on plates and stones but Johns doesn't fit into this area. The abstract graphic and textural systems that appear in his prints are more to arouse the interest than as a goal in itself. His prints are often a mapping of his paintings and sculptures. Such as 'High School Days'. A sculpture done on a lithographic stone of a mirror on a shoe.

Therefore, there is a multi-learning process of transforming planes. A mini language of reproduction obviously is evident here in his printmaking. In the "Black State" series his prints show a distinct flavour. There is a separating inner experience from the outside world. His world in printmaking can be fictitious.

Johns states:-

"that he no longer knew what reality was , that is what one could justifyingly call an object" (See earlier quote by Johns),

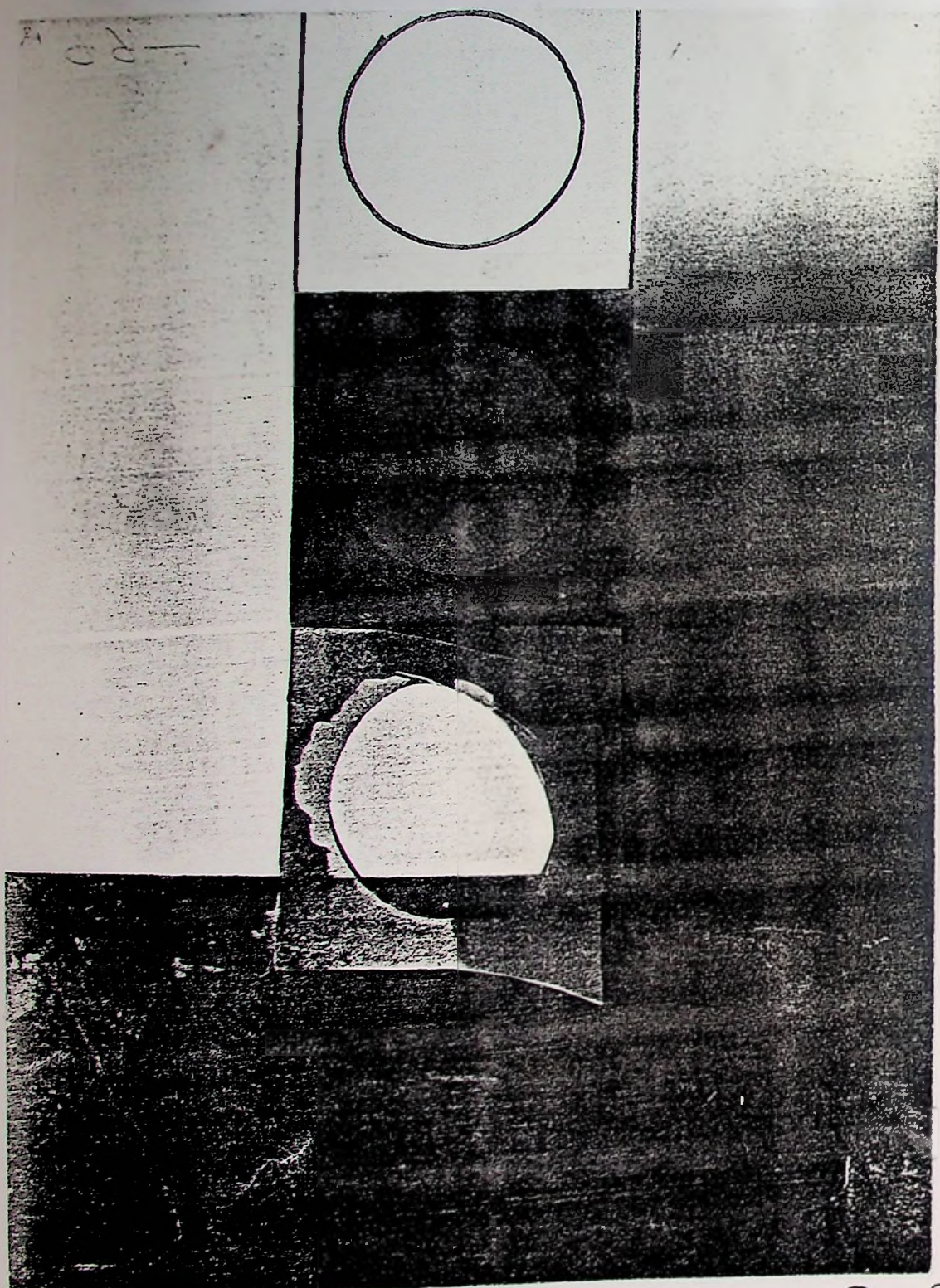
A unifying co-ordination was very apparent in Johns recent graphics. They show a trend of reprocesssing images already dealt with.

There is the same bold outline that appears in the printings but a biting away of the interior parts of the objects. As a result images were refocussed into a new individual way of expression. Images old and new are cast into other optical qualities e.g. "Land Reliefs" of 1969. The tendency to make individual prints dwindled in the 60's e.g. The Gemini series and in the 70's (Souvenir). This print marked a new dryness and contemplativeness. The prints seemed to lack that Johnsian touch. Most prints were invariably based on paintings. Passage (1966) and Souvenir (1970) were exceptions.

Both incorporated photographic passages. Content of the lithographs ('Fragments') containing hangers, stretchers, stencils, and letters were concerned with illusionism and are very uniform. The fragments series are diagrams of devices, systems, actions, and words. All these imply motion, shift of focus change and inherent movement. These prints are all very uniform. Although I am aware of the flatness of the lithos you have the feeling of looking into further space.

BENT STENCIL:-

This litho has a progression of circles within squares. The top of the print has a clearly drawn image, simple and diagrammatic. The middle consists of two darker flat grey areas that seems to share the flatness of the paper. The lower figure is an illusion of the stencil itself. The apparatus that was the template in itself. The illusion is enhanced by a halftone photo contrasted with dabs of paint and brush strokes. The third section is actually left incomplete



BENT STENCIL

another Johns device. It implies a measuring device - bending away from the rest of the paint and to give scale to the rest of the painting. In the painting the real stencil hangs over the bottom of the canvas. In the lithograph it overhangs a wash of colour.

The succession of events is linked to the movement of a band of grey to the right. The area of white on the left asserts the flatness of lithography.

BENDING BLUE:-

Is a bending of colour through pictorial space. It is a contrast of a blend of blue coming through the print with a painterly area of the letters. This implies a movement with the letters themselves which are all jumbled about.

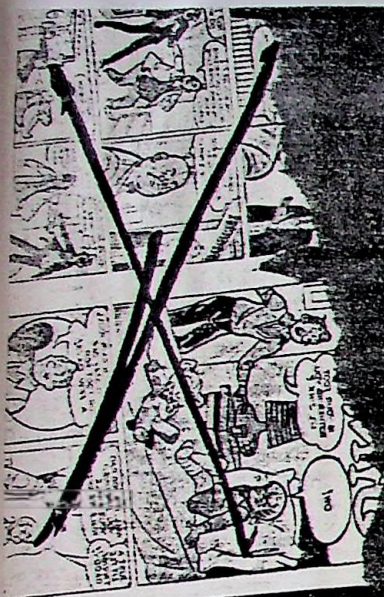
The actual bending of light is shown at the bottom of the print. A blend of the spectrum colours run from right to left, the nearest thing possible to bending light.

In the top right a comic strip has been worked into the print adding a contrasting special event.

There is an implied movement, illusionary devices, a fascination of the territory. Johns seems to be questing for the nature of objects of diagrams, of objects actions and the words of objects.

Johns:-

In terms of discrete operations and discrete objects this whole idea that anything can be onething is an idea that interests me. I like the idea of taking these discrete operations and using them in such a way that doubt is cast upon them and one is not sure what to regard as a discrete thing".



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BLUE
BRIEF

His Fragments series reflected this attitude. Firstly, they are fragments of the whole. Secondly, many of the events can be associated with discrete printmaking effects. The perfect execution of the limited range of printmaking techniques. The near metallic grey blends, the sensuous washes, the spectrum line that indicates a spacial axis and the addition of discrete bits of photo information.

Ludwig Wittenstein:-

"A normal discription of all Johns events could give us mental cramp".

There is obviously a notion of what can be said and what can be shown.

In Johns other prints e.g. Skull Untitled, a blended colour is used. This notion of blends originated as a commercial idea. Artists such as Rosinquist and Ruscha popularised this idea. They used commercial technology to produce their paintings and prints. Those artists influenced the likes of Warhole and Johns.

Warhole is an example of the commercial implication in art. His silk screen process in itself a commercial tool for marketing goods is used to portray cans of soup, cigarettes and movie stars. Off-set litho prints mass produce his images of the modern world.

The trouble is with our language; for example, if we said that one can bend colours, we cannot hope to mean it. Colours do not bend. In the commercial area of his prints this idea of bending and changing takes on a new dimensions because of the snazzy effects achieved through blends and in general the whole approach within the commercial reproduction area is manipulated to suit his aims.

To sum-up Johns role in printmaking he confirmed that the print was made up of different ways of doing things so that

the language becomes unclear. If you do everything from one position with consistency then everything can be referred to that point. You understand the deviation from one point to which everything refers. But if you don't have one point to which things refer then you get a different situation which is unclear.

Johns uses his printmaking as a means to explore, expand and develop ideas initiated in his paintings. The specific techniques of the media facilitate the superimposition of new complexities which far from being harmful to the finished work add an enlightening approach to his subject matter.

Each series of prints has given us a language enabling the viewer to decipher his ideas. I don't think there are many artists around today that are so able to change the given approaches inherent in the medium and yet achieve his goal. He unmistakably manifests the same keen mind in the act of probing the problems of art and life.