

Jasper Johns: Eyes in the Persistence of Form

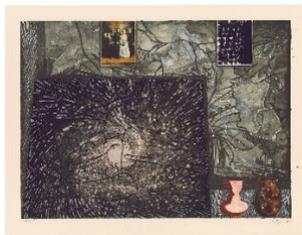
Fergus McCaffrey Tokyo

September 11 – October 16, 2021

“My work is largely concerned with relations between seeing and knowing, seeing and saying, seeing and believing.” —Jasper Johns, 1965¹

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present *Jasper Johns: Eyes in the Persistence of Form*, opening at the gallery’s Tokyo location, Saturday, September 11, 2021.

Concurrent with Johns’ forthcoming dual retrospective, *Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror*, at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York and the Philadelphia Museum Art (September 29, 2021 – February 13, 2022), this exhibition will focus on the semiotic storm of ocular freedom pervading the artist’s prints, spanning the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Conceived between the East coast and the hurricane-prone island of St. Martin, these works evoke seeing and seasonality, deploying the corporeal and metaphorical figure of the eye, both human and of the storm.



While Johns’ earlier works are rightly lauded for their internal semiotics—the matrix of what the “mind already knows”—these later works chart an equally impressive course into a more mysterious domain, one devoid of the intuitively identifiable—a nameless galaxy swirling with marks unknown yet overflowing with meaning. Indeed, that this referential storm is ordered by the Johns’ eyes unravels slowly, and only to the most attentive of observers. In another sense, accessing an expansive trove of meanings embedded

therein requires us to deploy more than meets the mind. Even the eye of one of Johns’ most perceptive critics, poet John Yau, required direction—in the form of an email from another artist—to spot Auguste Rodin mythologically peering past Johns’ *Green Angel* and *Green Angel II* (on view in this presentation).²

While his signature motifs of flags, targets, letters and numbers, and his style of cross-hatching, dominated much of his practice of the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, the artist’s later works captured memories, both biographical and historical. According to Jasper Johns scholar Roberta Bernstein, this period marked a “commingling of various periods and styles of art within a single work, and the adaptation of sources rife with spiritual content”³ within Johns’ practice. Johns’ allusion to personally mnemonic perception reveal their meaning only upon sustained waves of meditative attention.



In his similarly galactic works such as *Untitled*, 1992, *Untitled (American Center)*, 1994, and *Untitled*, 1995, the artist references and incorporates Matthias Grunewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512–16); Barnett Newman drawings (pulled from Johns’ own personal art collection); Pablo Picasso’s *The Fall of Icarus* (1958); a George Ohr vase; a Jubilee mug; a family portrait (c. 1905); the wooden edge of a mirror, building upon the semiotic conceptions of Cubists and Surrealists to imply reflection. Each of

¹ Bernstein, Roberta, *Jasper Johns: Redo an Eye* (New York: The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, 2017).

² Yau, John, “Jasper Johns: Hiding in Plain Sight,” *Hyperallergic* (Hyperallergic, May 29, 2021), <https://hyperallergic.com/649178/jasper-johns-hiding-in-plain-sight/>.

³ Bernstein, *Jasper Johns: Redo an Eye* (2017)



these works is anchored by a galactic force that immediately draws in the eye upon first observation—a force that can be easily interpreted as the eye of a storm, a cyclone.

A similarly ocular tone pervades Johns' more literal works of this time. A spliced eye aligns the right and left edges of works such as the three 1995 *Untitled* prints, *Face with Watch*, 1996, and *Untitled*, 2016, all featured in this exhibition. Upon deeper meditative contemplation, one will also notice that in these works lies the entirety of a disjointed rectangular face; a "hanging picture" of another disjointed face, derived from a 1952 *Scientific American* article by child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (all of Johns' works with corporeal eyes have a face); the tracing of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*; breasts signaling a sense of maternity; letters lining the bottom edges likely spelling out something that is currently unknown to us.

All of these aspects are drawn together by the artist's own eye, resulting in almost "collaged" works that are overtly cryptic. Johns' interest in sight, in how and why we see the way we do, and his use of the eye "establish the idea that what we perceive does not directly correspond to reality, being instead a subtle blend of the external world and the lessons of our experience."⁴ We see what we believe.

Jasper Johns & Japan

Johns' initial introduction to Japan was in 1952–53, while stationed in Sendai, Japan during the Korean War. Later, upon returning to Japan in 1964, and making frequent visits to the country, he exhibited extensively at Minami Gallery, Tokyo, throughout the 1960s and 70s. By 1979, Johns embarked on a series of paintings, drawings, and prints, titled *Usuyuki*—meaning "thin or light snow" and inspired by Japanese culture and Kabuki theater. A selection of these *Usuyuki* works were featured in the gallery's 2019 presentation, *Jasper Johns: Usuyuki*, at Fergus McCaffrey, Tokyo. Johns has been the subject of several major retrospective exhibitions in Japan, including: *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective* (Whitney Museum, New York, 1977-78; traveled to The Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo, 1978), *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1986; traveled to three venues in Japan in 1988); *The Jasper Johns Print Exhibition* (Isetan Museum of Art, Tokyo, 1990); and *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1996–97; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1997).

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Kazuo Shiraga and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists including Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke and Carol Rama. In keeping with the gallery's commitment to Japanese art and culture, McCaffrey opened its Tokyo outpost in March 2018 with an exhibition of paintings by Robert Ryman. The gallery's 2019–2021 program featured exhibitions by Matthew Barney, Carolee Schneemann, Kazuo Shiraga, Min Tanaka, Jasper Johns, and Richard Serra, among others.

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⁴ James Rondeau, *Jasper Johns: Gray* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Images:

1. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1995. Lithograph in 8 colors on Torinoko paper, 41 3/8 x 53 1/4 inches (105.1 x 135.3 cm). Edition of 49 © Jasper Johns and ULAE/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Published by ULAE
2. Jasper Johns, *Green Angel 2*, 1997. Intaglio, 48 x 24 7/8 inches (121.9 x 63.2 cm). Edition of 13 © Jasper Johns and ULAE/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Published by ULAE
3. Jasper Johns, *Face with Watch*, 1996. Intaglio in five colors, 42 x 31 7/8 inches (106.7 x 81 cm). Edition of 50 © Jasper Johns and ULAE/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Published by ULAE

Note to Visitors

In compliance with the government's health guidelines regarding social distancing, and to promote and protect the safety and well-being of our staff, artists, and community, visitors are asked to wear masks and sanitize hands before entering the gallery, contact-less temperature will be taken upon entrance, and a capacity of four visitors will be allowed at one time. We request that you please refrain from visiting the gallery if you have symptoms such as a fever or cough.

Map (Omotesando station A3 exit):

