



## On Fracture and Fraternity: The Many Faces of Jasper Johns

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Installation view of *An Art of Changes: Jasper Johns Prints, 1960–2018*, with *Untitled* (1988), *Untitled* (2016), and *Face with Watch* (1996) at left. Photo: Bobby Rogers, Walker Art Center.

Filed to Sightlines

It goes without saying, perhaps, that celebrated artists are interested in the famous artists that precede them and use their work as an occasion to affirm, extend, or violate their predecessor's contributions to the history of art. Jasper Johns, the only 20<sup>th</sup>-century artist whose output and reputation rivals that of Picasso, is no exception, and over the course of the '80s and '90s and 2000s, the Spaniard has loomed evermore large in Johns's oeuvre—appearing in his paintings and prints in more and less obvious ways. A full consideration of the relationship between Johns and Picasso in this context is obviously untenable, so my focus here will be deliberately narrow, concentrating on three works on view in *An Art of Changes: Jasper Johns Prints, 1960–2018* that appropriate aspects of Picasso's *Woman in a Straw Hat* (1936) over the span of three decades: *Untitled* (1988), *Face with Watch* (1996), and *Untitled* (2016).



Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1988. © Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Part portrait and part still life, Picasso's *Woman in a Straw Hat* consists of a book, vase, and female face whose features have been distributed to the margins of its distorted, breast-like forms. Aspects of this painting appear for the first time in Johns's work in an untitled drawing of 1986, the format of which Johns's reprises in an ambitious, untitled painting in encaustic the following year, which is itself followed by the print above, which is on view in the current exhibition. But, as the compositions of all these works straightforwardly insist, Picasso's distorted face is part of a larger nexus for Johns, taking its place alongside other images whose relation to one another is not immediately clear. Indeed, what is the connection between the Isenheim altarpiece—a traced portion of which forms the moody substrate of all of these works—and the three motifs that appear, in *Untitled* (1988), atop it, as if suspended by six *trompe l'oeil* nails?

Painted by Matthias Grünewald for the hospital chapel of a monastery specializing in the treatment of skin disease, the Isenheim altarpiece has been a rich source for Johns, and since 1982 he has incorporated figures from this nine-paneled, double-sided, 16<sup>th</sup>-century triptych into his work, albeit in ways that can be difficult to identify and decode. In *Untitled* (1988) he includes an inverted, reversed image of a demon from the *Temptation of St. Anthony* panel, but, notably, Johns chose the one demon who is inert and not actively engaged in the process of tormenting the saint. Isolated in the foreground of Grünewald's composition, this demon, in his posture and seeming repose, echoes the supine, vulnerable comportment of the saint, who remains calm and resolved in the face of torture. These affinities have the unexpected effect of making the demon a sympathetic character, but also a topical one, especially when considered in light of his dermic disfiguration. When Johns was creating this work in the late 1980s, the creature's skin lesions and ambiguous position as both monstrous tormenter and a tormented victim aligned him with the AIDS crisis and the unjust demonization it inspired within a homophobic culture that imagined itself the potential victim of an emergent "gay plague."



Pablo Picasso, *Le Chapeau de paille au feuillage bleu* (Woman in a Straw Hat), 1936. © Succession Picasso. Photo: Adrien Didierjean/Agence photographique de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux - Grand Palais des Champs Elysées.





Matthias Grünewald, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (detail), Isenheim altarpiece (closed view), 1515, commissioned to be presented in the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim, Germany, currently on view at the Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France.

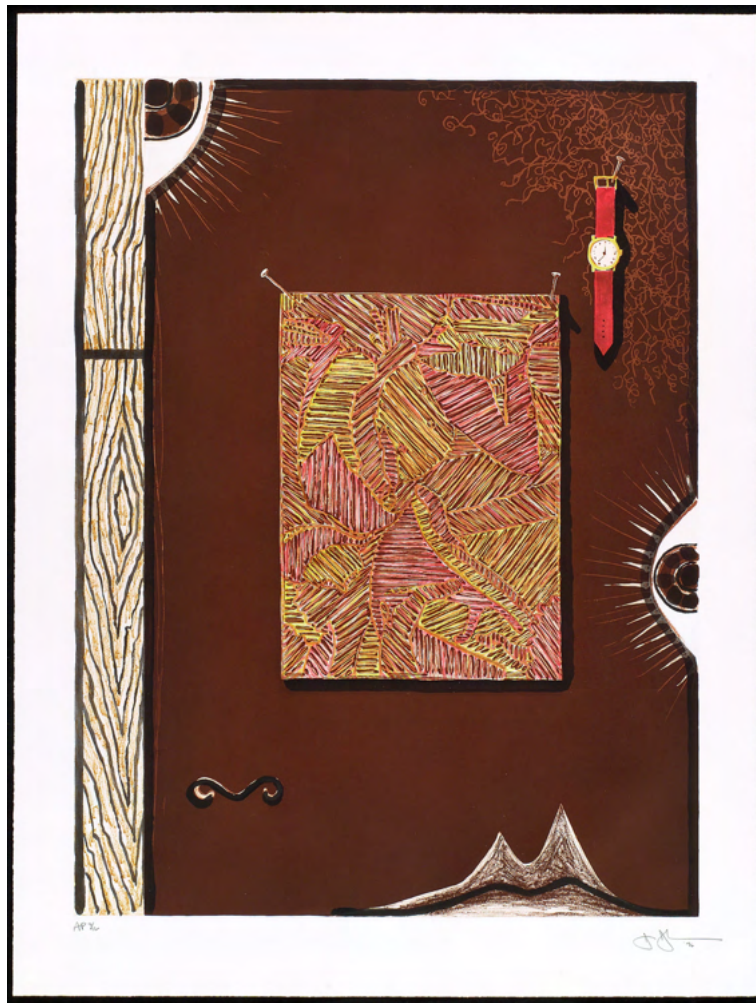
This, then, is the overdetermined backdrop of Johns's *Untitled*. Atop it, three renderings of women appear to hang, each on differently colored cloths: at left, the artist's rendering of a well-known image from the world of perceptual psychology that oscillates between crone and maiden, mother-in-law and wife; at center, a faithful, if stripped down, appropriation of Picasso's distorted face, and, at right, a still more exaggerated version of the same, with the face's cartoony, long-lashed eyes pushed all the way to the cloth's margins in ways that suggest the conflation of figure and ground, individual and image.

This decentralized image at far right, in turn, conjures another that's even more dispersed, but associated neither with the world of art nor the immediate context of the 1980s. Instead, it relates more readily to a crude, anonymous drawing of breasts and unmoored facial features (below right) that the artist encountered in the early 50s on the pages of an issue of *Scientific American*. Intriguing to Johns, but ignored for decades in favor of flags, targets, maps, and various experiments with abstraction, it aligns with Picasso's *Woman in a Straw Hat* in its treatment of human figure. For, as in Picasso's painting, the face's features are misaligned and scattered in relation to the body, with schematic renderings of female breasts again assuming particular importance and standing in for the figure as a whole. Thus, in contrast to conventional depictions of the body, no sense of identity forms, and the "face," if one can use such a word, is void of expression.



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From the beginning, Johns and his work have been accused of being unemotive and inscrutable, and, perhaps for this reason, the memory of this strange drawing stayed with him. In 1990, he tracked it down, finding it in an article by child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim entitled “Schizophrenic Art: A Case Study.” Drawn by a girl who developed schizophrenia after losing both of her parents, it ostensibly depicts a suckling child though, notably, there is no contact or differentiation between the bodies of the baby and mother. It first appears in Johns’ work in its essential, unaltered form in three untitled, monochromatic paintings of 1991, where it is inset—a picture within a picture—within a larger field. Importantly, this larger field is the radically dispersed face found on the yellow cloth in the untitled print of 1988. In this way, Johns acknowledges the connection between these images, and perhaps suggests that his interest in *Woman with a Straw Hat* resonated with extant ideas, rather than serving as a point of origin for thinking about the fragmented body and psyche, which is, after all, the subject of one of Johns’s earliest and most celebrated paintings: *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955).



Jasper Johns, *Face with Watch*, 1996, etching, aquatint on paper. Collection Walker Art Center. ©Jasper Johns and ULAE/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

But what are these extant ideas, exactly? And, to what end their dialogue with the Isenheim demon, who appears in both the untitled print of 1988 and *Face with Watch*, in which the traced demon comes to the fore and hangs, alongside a wristwatch, on a wall that is blank, save a familiar pair of eyes and lips that hover at or near its margins? In these two works and several others from the period, Johns turns repeatedly to the same constellation of themes and motifs, occasionally augmenting them with additional, related imagery—the watch, for example—that suggests his preoccupation with mortality, torment, and the specter of the body and mind in pieces. That these themes are also entangled with the idea of childhood—that of a schizophrenic child and, I suggest, Johns's own, less than idyllic start—seems important as well, for as the wife/mother-in-law cloth economically insists, youth and old age, beginnings and ends are entangled, even if, in perceptual psychology experiments, they might appear mutually exclusive.

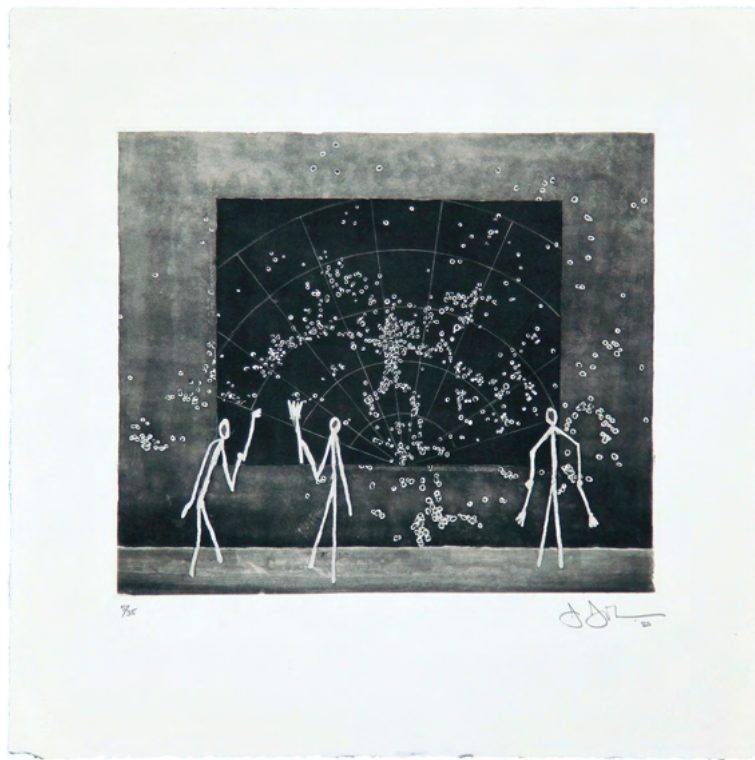
For those familiar with the artist's biography, there are compelling parallels between Johns's childhood and that of the schizophrenic child whose drawing he approximates and, ultimately, appropriates wholesale. For following his parents' divorce, Johns lived with his paternal grandfather and his second wife, Montez B. Johns, whose name appears for the first time in another work from this period that also features the dispersed face. Never diagnosed with schizophrenia, Johns seems to have identified with the bereft, artistic child in Bettelheim's article. But, in keeping with the idea of the fractured psyche, he seems also to identify with St. Anthony, a man fearless in the face of torment that takes the form of monstrous apparitions, some of which are assembled in *Untitled* (1988) and other, related works. Inspired by a 16<sup>th</sup>-century altarpiece intended to redeem, comfort, and cure, these images are, in their own right, modern-day triptychs that attest to art's capacity to heal.



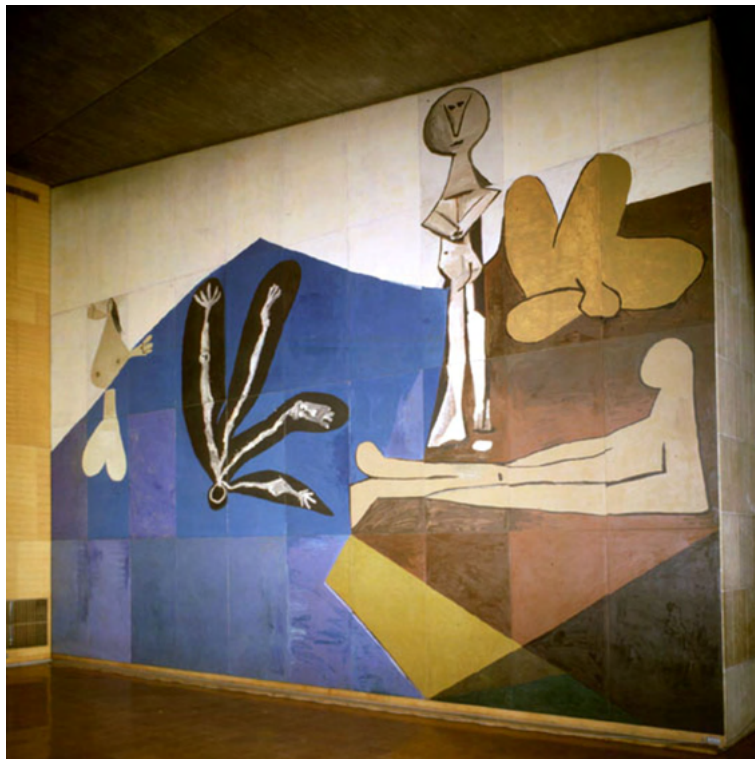
Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2016. Collection Walker Art Center, gift of the artist, 2017. © Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Some twenty years later, much of this imagery still resonates with the artist. In *Untitled* (2016), a remarkable linoleum cut on paper marked by passages of brilliant blue dotted with familiar eyes, lips, and schematically rendered nostrils, a Picassoid face comes into focus—perhaps more forcefully than in previous engagements with this motif. Anchoring the face is a small, crudely drawn ruler that might double as a nose, set above lips that sit, as before, on the page's bottom edge. On either side of the ruler, cartoony eyes have been placed, again, at different heights, marking the edges not of the visual field, but a white subsection of it, that reads as a totemic face. To its upper left and right, respectively, are a simulated photograph of a galaxy, whose lower right-hand corner peels up and away from the blue ground, and another black field, in which the big dipper hovers, inverted, above three stick figures. This last motif has appeared in Johns's oeuvre as early as 1982 and, as recently as this year, in a charming, untitled intaglio of 2020, newly acquired by the Walker.



Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, intaglio, 2020. Photo: John Lund. © Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Pablo Picasso, *The Fall of Icarus*, 1958. © Photo: UNESCO/J.-C. Bernath, Succession Picasso, 2012.

There, they appear as if actors on a shallow stage, performing before a galactic backdrop overlaid by a grid that suggests the longitudinal and latitudinal mapping of the earth's curved surface. A motif of unknown origin, the simplistic treatment of these figures nevertheless recalls Picasso's spindly rendering of Icarus in *The Fall of Icarus* (1958), which the artists cites more faithfully in various works from the early '90s where the theme of mortality is paramount. Holding something that reads as torch or brush—an ambiguity that highlights their shared status as instruments of illumination—Johns's crudely rendered Picasso-inspired trio appears in *Untitled* (2016) as if primitive men searching the night sky for meaning, writing into its constellations the traces of evermore complex myths about man's origins and place in the universe. Thus, as the face coheres and the sky goes dark, the universe opens around it, and Johns's work assumes an expansive quality, in which art joins with images of a more essential and enduring kind, written on the broad canvas of the sky.

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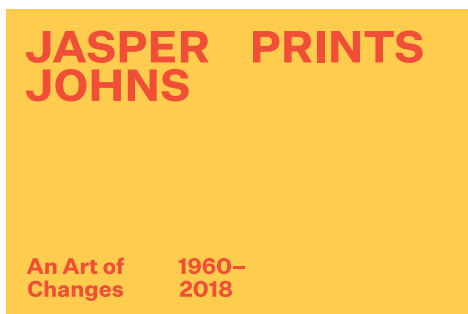


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