

Jasper Johns: Gray

Essay by Morjorie Welish

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

New York

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Originating at the Art Institute of Chicago, this is a fascinating exhibition, not only for fanatics but also for sceptics with a genuine interest in studious painting. A retrospective with a focus, 'Jasper Johns: Gray' shows the artist at work, which for him is a deliberative process concerning the mark and its relation to literal pigment on one hand and virtual representation on the other. Since the beginning of his career the semantic meaning of the mark through kinds and degrees of re-presentation has been an abiding concern; so the tonal spectrum of grey indicates.

Fundamental to understanding Johns's art is his orientation in the conventional nature of colour, a received cultural sense that prevails over optical phenomena. Thus the exhibition begins by pairing *False Start* with *Jubilee*, both from 1959. Paintings done in all-over abstract expressionist brushwork made standard, these canvases are structurally the same while differ-

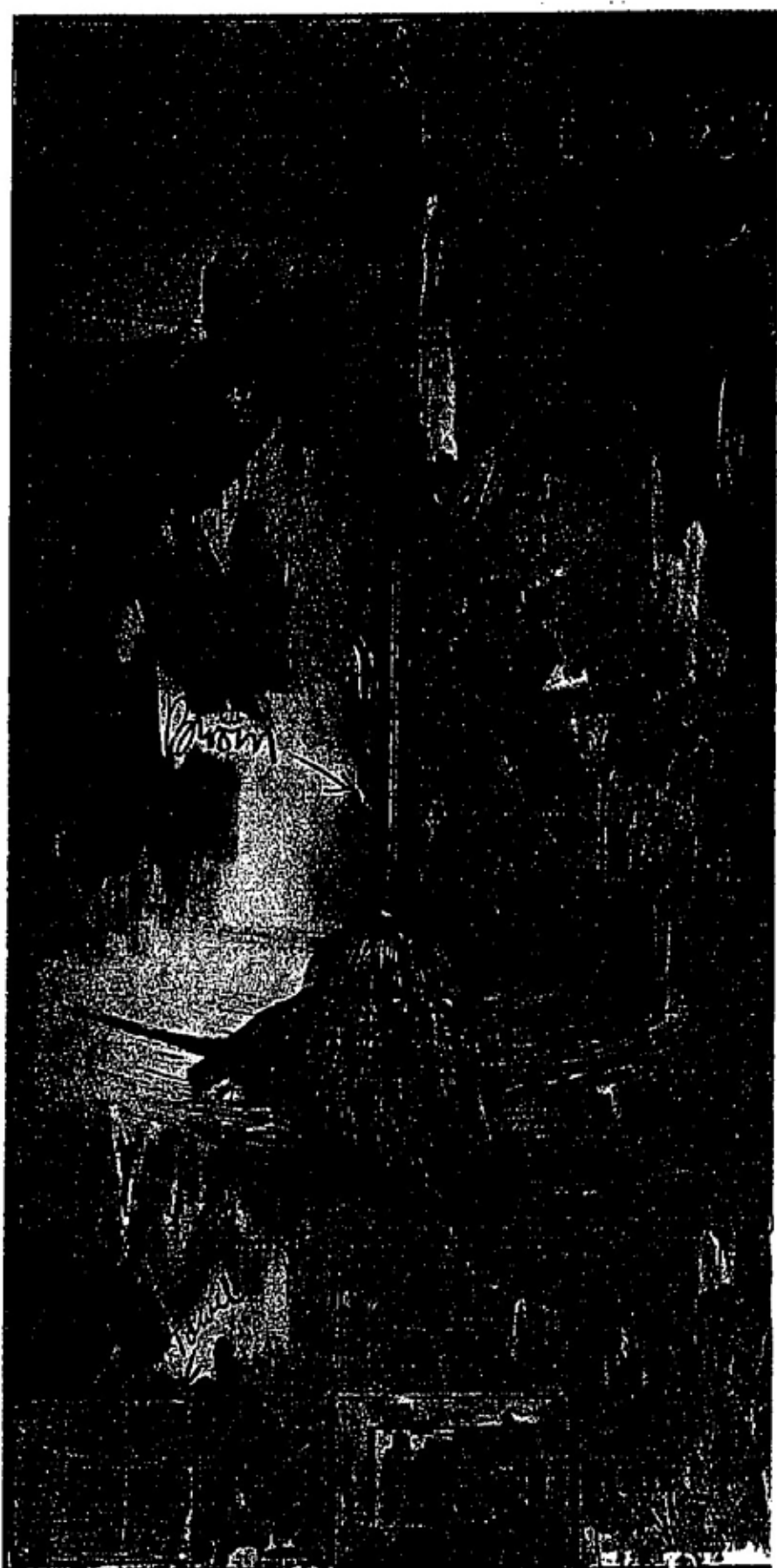
ing in palette: red, yellow, blue in the first instance; black, white and grey in the second instance. A curatorial masterstroke, this pairing at once orients the viewers as to what they need to know on entering into the artistic mentality of Johns and establishes a point of reference for how to interpret the show, which dilates on grey as a convention and as more besides.

Relative to the polemic of black and white, grey is the zone of the in-between states of affairs, and of the slippage of sense by which the object being named remains elusive – even its spelling ranges between North America and Britain. This zone of signification remains one of Johns's preoccupations, and utilising grey calligraphic strokes to elide the difference between flat canvas and sculptural object by virtue of any common utensil hanging off it or anything inserted is one way that he teases the categories called drawing, painting and sculpture. The exhibition gathers a generous sample of the early artefacts from the 50s and 60s which, together with Robert Rauschenberg's own bold practice then, derive their authority from challenging the key terms of Abstract Expressionism with sharp counter-examples to expose flaws in the aesthetic polemic. What remains salient is that in so doing, Johns (and Rauschenberg) made a heretical claim: that pictorial art with its extra-curricular subjects and concerns could usurp the authority of pure painting. The 'colour' grey has much to do with changing the nature of the (linguistic) game from the New York School's subjective expression to an objective semiotics and neutral cultural stance.

Given the importance of technique for Johns in constructing sense (and in deconstructing meaning), one welcomes the opportunity to scrutinise how the works were made. Much has been written on what one can see being played directly, as against what one must surmise by virtue of a thing's being hidden, and the material aspect of knowledge by experience versus knowledge by acquaintance being in full view. Grey here plays a crucial part as facture yet also as *matière*, or raw stuff, that reads as material pigment rather than as optical planarity. The material fact of grey is that it is impure – being a blending of white into black or, as Johns himself points out, a brew of colours. As such, matter does not disallow that grey encaustic can be made translucent as well as opaque, and so allows indirect knowledge of the under-layering of newsprint, for instance, or of once obliterated primary colours, to have registered their contribution to the final constructed surface. The exhibition abounds in art that draws one's attention to its built artefactual condition for which grey contributes its substance.

In interviewing Johns some years ago, I asked him why mid-career he seemed to be giving up constructed painting, that is for a world entirely dwelling in virtual representation. 'Because it's harder to do,' he said. Jasper Johns is perhaps the only American art celebrity who has the grit to pose problems so difficult that he may indeed fail. That is to say, he does indeed investigate problems and also does indeed invest in procedures that satisfy the archivist in him concerned to compile visual memories sooner than they please the viewer. (In his early 'Numbers', the rule of series yields much better results for Johns than does superposition.) What he has done to investigate the grey scale is a case in point. If in *Diver*, 1962, and other works from the 60s the grey scale appears as an enlarged photographers' strip along with a kind of colour wheel and other templates of conventional visual knowledge,

Jasper Johns
Fool's House 1962



and in *The Dutch Wives*, 1975, as in other excellent works from the 70s grey has become the inflected painterly all-over field version of 18th-century mechanical hatch-work to demark patches (that read as figural-subtext-within-fields), then in the 80s grey is conspicuous for a kind of precision not seen before in Johns. In the grisaille version of *Racing Thoughts*, 1984, grey becomes nothing short of encyclopedic – the painting performs the complete semantic range of which the painted mark is capable. On display is a fanatical set of discriminations operating simultaneously, a hermetical game that would please Raymond Queneau or Umberto Eco.

And yet such careful parsing of grey produces some awkward or tedious work – work that would be academic if it weren't also instancing a process to investigate the idea of representation mapped onto a still life of the artist's studio practice.

Even so, it is a measure of Johns's integrity that a retrospective on grey, as sign and as technique, shows the work as work in process and as a testament to Johns, one of the few American painters to have contributed significant matter to the history of 20th-century art. That the Art Institute of Chicago initiated such a demanding show and installed it well should set an example for other museums, all too eager to please. ■

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