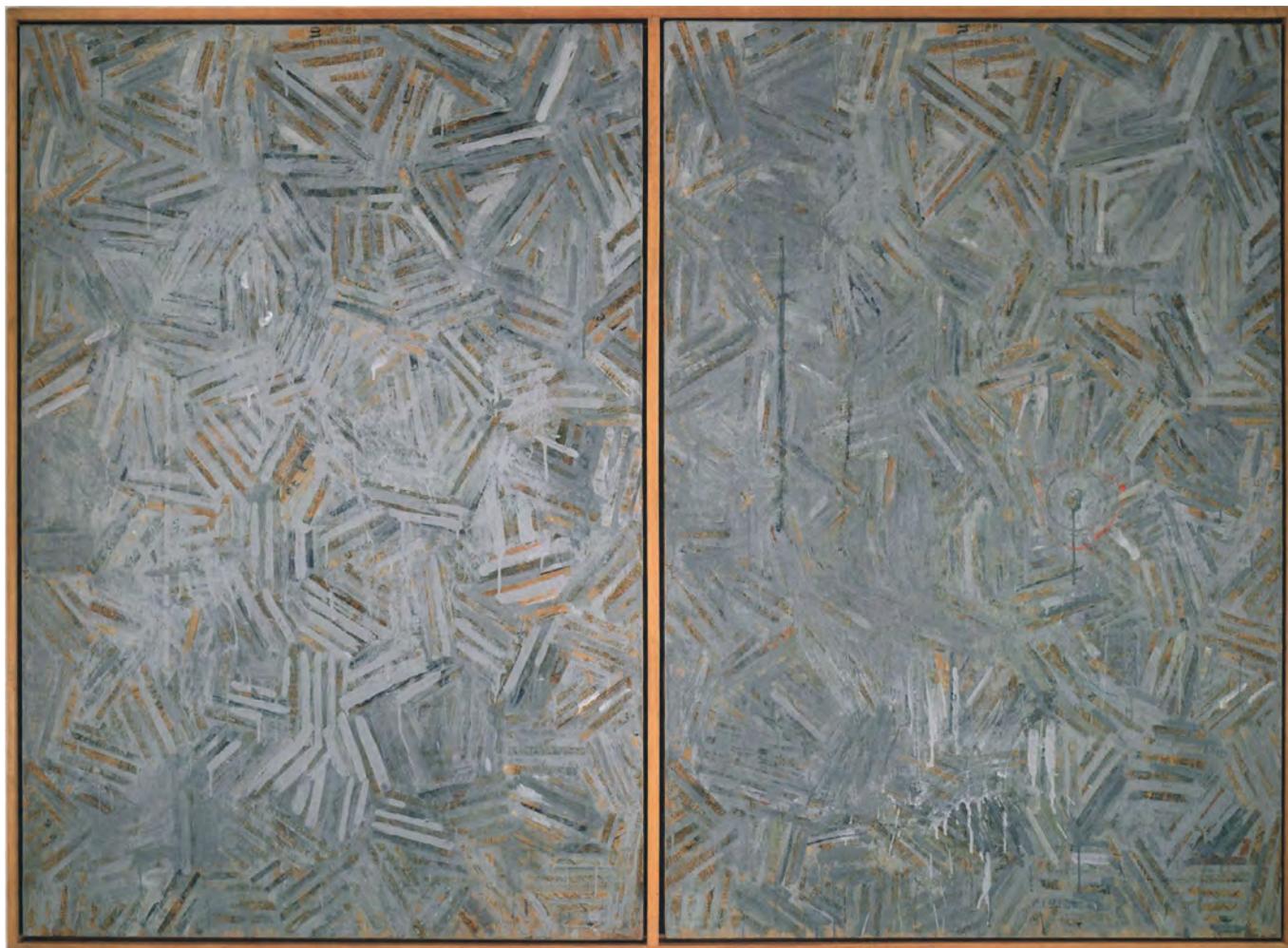


Jasper Johns / In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print

By Susan Tallman



Jasper Johns, *The Dutch Wives* (1975), encaustic and collage on canvas (two panels mounted together), 131.5 x 180.3 x 5 cm. Collection of the artist. Harvard University Art Museum. (Illustration from "Jasper Johns / In Press.")

The relationships between Jasper Johns' prints, paintings, words, and thinking have bedeviled critics and curators for decades. Given the recursive looping and nesting of motifs and processes that has characterized Johns' work for 60 years, it may seem unlikely that anything definitive or enlightening could be said within the confines of a couple of rooms, with fewer than two dozen objects, but that is precisely what this brilliantly faceted gem of an exhibition does.

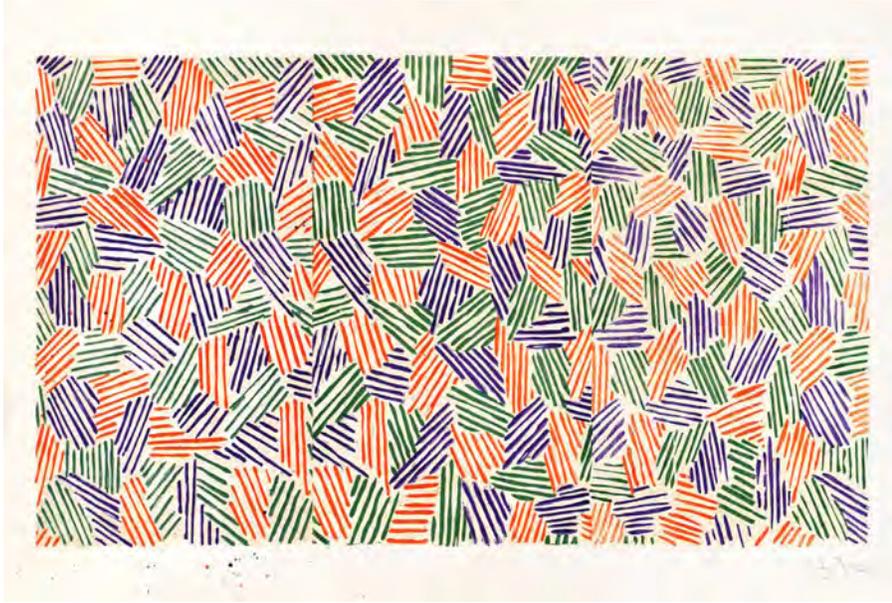
"Jasper Johns / In Press" focuses on one particular period of the artist's production, the "crosshatch" works of the 70s, whose apparently absolute abstraction baffled viewers familiar with the famous flags and targets. This exhibition successfully teases out the printerly thinking embedded in the works' investigation of space, perception,

corporeal experience and the inherently tragic human urge to make sense of it all.

This is an educational exhibition in the best sense of the term: the layout is clear, the works well chosen, the wall labels clearly written, and concisely informative. Both the show and its accompanying catalogues¹ are, in fact, byproducts of a tutorial organized by Harvard professor Jennifer Roberts for four undergraduates: Jacob Cedarbaum, C. Andrew Krantz, Mary Potter, and Phillip Y. Zhang. The idea was to begin with a single work and to investigate its themes and connections to other pieces in the university's museums. Roberts chose Johns' 1975 painting *The Dutch Wives* (loaned to Harvard by the artist). *The Dutch Wives* is a diptych in which two panels of grey hatch marks and collages strips of newsprint appear almost, but not quite, to repeat each other. In the

right panel, a thin red line circles a puncture in the canvas, a possible allusion to one interpretation of the title ("Dutch wife" can be a euphemism for a sex doll). The themes identified by the students—newsprint, duplication, repetition—pointed toward print, and the breadth of Harvard's collection meant they pursue these ideas by comparison with real objects, and to pass that experience on to the viewer.

The first room lays out the essential argument: that for Jasper Johns, print marks the juncture between the flat space of the picture and the experienced space of bodies; between the order of the archive and the flux of memory; between the world and the mind. One of the first works on view is *Scents* (1975), which, like many of the crosshatch prints, appears at first to be a simple rectangle filled with randomly scattered



Jasper Johns, *Scent* (1976), lithograph, linocut and woodcut from four aluminum plates, four linoleum blocks and four woodblocks on Twinrocker paper, 85 x 122 cm. Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum. (Illustration from "Jasper Johns / In Press.")

marks in three colors. A closer look reveals the subtle division into three vertical sections, one executed in lithography, one in linocut, one in woodcut. The marks behave in much the same way in all three panels, but as material things they are visibly distinct. It takes very careful looking (or the guidance of the wall label) to realize that the hatch marks are not random, but are patterned in a way that doubles up at the junctures. There is a visual stammer where the lithograph meets the linocut, where the linocut meets the woodcut, and (though this is still more difficult to detect) at the right-hand edge of the woodcut and the left-hand edge of the lithograph, so that if you rolled it into a tube, all the joins would behave the same way: ABC/CDE/EFA.

This explanation of structure is intriguing in a jigsaw puzzle kind of way, but the curators quickly tie this abstract topological game to Johns' more visceral concerns with the human body: *Scent* hangs opposite *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (1965) in which a similar left-right roll was executed by inking up the artist's own face and hands and leaning into the stone. Hanging on a wall between *Skin* and *Scent*, the multipart lithograph *Four Panels from Untitled 1972 (Grays and Black)* (1975) bridges body parts, crosshatching and cyclical repetition. Historical pedigree is added through the display of three Mesopotamian cylinder seals that employ both hatch marks and rolling repetition, and of Dürer's engraving of Veronica's veil, which echoes the acheiropoietic image-making of *Skin* and stands for the engraver's use of hatching to evoke three-dimensional form (though Dürer's marks don't actually look much like Johns's).

The seemingly banal hatch marks are

thus revealed as references to the body (most are finger-length, in groups of four or five) and as references to printing (the engraver's approximation of shadow and volume). They allow Johns to toy with the relationship between the flat object of the picture and the space of the real world as experienced through our bodies. Knit together, this turns jigsaw puzzle cleverness into something profound, a meeting-place of mind and body, mediated through print.

The second room, under the header "Sequence, System and Memory," sets Johns's strategies and procedures against the cleaner, less ambiguous explorations of conceptual art (given form here by a Lewitt screenprint from 1971). Prepped by what

has come before, the viewer is ready to slow down, to seek out and identify the cycling reiterations of works like the great screenprint *Usuyuki*, only to watch it unfurl itself with inexplicable lyricism. With Johns, unlike Lewitt, the system is always a bit of a feint.

In this context, the painting *The Dutch Wives* becomes literally more visible: we notice the repetition from one panel to the other, we engage with the game of sameness and difference. We may even notice that beneath the seemingly insouciant paint strokes, the strips of newsprint collage are identical between the two sides. Closely viewed, the red ring and hole in the right hand panel begin to suggest not only prurience, but difference and desire, vulnerability and consolation.

In "Jasper Johns / In Press," Roberts and her students have not simply pointed out parallels between print processes and painted image, they have gone some way toward explaining why in the hands of Jasper Johns the inclusion of such print processes and artifacts should prove to be so unexpectedly poignant. [At the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA from 22 May–18 August, 2012.] ■

Notes:

1. "Jasper Johns / In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print," essay Jennifer L. Roberts. 96 pages, 35 color illustrations. Published by Harvard Art Museums (Cambridge MA) and Hatje Cantz Verlag (Ostfildern, Germany), and the online publication, "Jasper Johns / In Press: Companion Essays," containing essays by Jacob Cedarbaum, C. Andrew Krantz, Mary Potter, Phillip Y. Zhang, with and introduction by Jennifer L. Roberts. 88 pages, 21 color illustrations. Published by Harvard Art Museums (Cambridge MA) and Hatje Cantz Verlag (Ostfildern, Germany). Free PDF download: <http://www.harvard-artmuseums.org/jasper-johns-digital-publication>.



Jasper Johns, *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (1965), lithograph from two stones on KE Albanese Engineer's standard form paper, 55.4 x 85.9 cm. Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum. (Illustration from "Jasper Johns / In Press.")