



Figure-Device Artworks of Jasper Johns: Abstraction and Figuration of the Haunting Body

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A survey review of Jasper Johns typically only looks at the flag and target work of his early years. Following these more commonly known pieces, the artist included new visual themes to his repertoire, one of which was the "device."⁽¹⁾ This mechanically produced agent first appeared in 1959, in his *Device Circle* (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: *Device Circle*, 1959, 101.6 x 101.6 cm (40" x 40") encaustic and collage on canvas with object, Andrew and Denise Saul.

In this painting, as is typical of his drawings and paintings in which he uses the device, the mechanical arm--usually a wood strip of some sort--is used to scrape the paint in an arc shape--in this case curving into a complete circle with the arm still attached to the canvas. The development of the device theme in Johns' work progressed to incorporate other themes, such as the abundant use of text⁽²⁾, but eventually including the new theme of the body imprint, alluding to "an overarching allegory of art as of and from the body."⁽³⁾ This mixing of the device action and body imprint is evident in works such as *Periscope (Hart Crane)* from 1963, in which Johns uses the imprint of his arm over the device-arm's scrape, giving the impression that the artist's arm functioned as the device-arm. Similar figural function with scrapes and imprints is found in *Diver* from 1962-3, a post-production study of a portion of a much larger work from the previous year by the same name, in which he uses many themes seen throughout his early years. Johns' work combines imagery of abstraction and figuration, taking each to an avant-garde level and dismissing previous conventions about both. Jeffery Weiss, curator and head of the department of modern and contemporary art for the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., explains, "he reinvent[ed] figuration as a manifestation of mechanical process alone, reimagin[ed] a place for the body in pictorial art."⁽⁴⁾

Johns also took the idea of the figure as a device to its outer limit with his *Study for "Skin"* series (1962; collection of the artist), the images of which were intended as pre-production work for an unrealized sculpture. In the "Skin" series, he used his own face and hands in a stamp-like fashion to record on a flat plane the round of his face. This method was also used in later works, like *Skin with O'Hara Poem* of 1963/5, and in some of which he imprinted other portions of his body as well. Largely through imprints, and in the works *Diver* (1962-3), *Periscope (Hart Crane)* (1963), and *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (1963/5), Johns presents the artist's body as another artistic device, not much different from the brushes and charcoal he also used, and, in the process, brings the figure into a realm of fragmented abstraction.

Jasper Johns first entered the art scene in 1957 with *Green Target* (1955; Museum of Modern Art, NY), and during the following year, the New York gallery owner Leo Castelli granted him with a solo show, bestowing him with instant success.⁽⁵⁾ Johns had long aspired to be an artist, and in 1954 he made the commitment that changed his life; he said:

Before, whenever anybody asked me what I did, I said I was going to become an artist. Finally I decided that I could be going to become an artist forever, all my life. I decided to stop *becoming* an artist and to *be* an artist.⁽⁶⁾

His artistic devotion landed him in an art scene that was well established in the Abstract Expressionism movement, but despite his process-evident works and dream influences, he did not have the violent application of emotional paint and the truly abstract nature of these predecessors. Rather, his work brought the object back to the canvas and attempted to leave the personality out of it, presenting the world instead.(7) Due to his use of collage, encaustic painting, and sculpture casts on his work, Johns' early style came to be known as Assemblage Art, but another, commonly used term, that also seems to cover his later works as well, is "Neo-Dadaism." (8) He and Robert Rauschenburg--contemporary, companion, and artistic influence--were labeled this together due to their shared artistic ideas:

These attitudes included a belief that art sprang from life experiences, but that the painter was not obliged to be "self-expressive" in the manner then popular; a belief that the commonplace should be incorporated into art; a belief that looking at art, you should see whatever you ordinarily saw; and a belief that the hard distinction between representation and abstraction overlooked an ambiguous middle area of great interest to them both.(9)

It is this collision of abstraction and figuration, along with the created ambiguity, typical of his works of the 50's and 60's, which is evident in his figure-device works.

Before moving on to examine these works, it is important to note the significant role of the viewer to Johns' art. He shared Dada artist Marcel Duchamp's idea that "It is the spectator who makes the pictures," meaning that the painting, as an intercessor between the artist and viewer, gains meaning from what the artist does with it *and* how the viewer perceives it.(10) In a 1964 interview, Johns, himself, said: "What it is--subject matter, then--is simply determined by what you're willing to say it is. What it means is simply a question of what you're willing to let it do." He goes further to say that after a painting is revealed by the artist, the viewer plays a huge role, and "the work is no longer [the artist's] 'intention,' but the thing being seen and someone responding to it." (11) The viewer's interpretation plays just as large a role in a work's meaning as the artist's creation and intention of it--characteristic of the ambiguity espoused in his work and evident in his talks about them.

In Johns' *Diver* (fig. 2) of 1962-3, the division of the two panels bisects the image vertically in the middle of the piece, and in the process, creates a line of approximate symmetry. In the top center of the image a pair of footprints points upward, one on each panel, on a strip down the center, which is lighter than the surrounding background area. In the bottom middle of the work a set of downward facing handprints is located at the end of two sets of sweeping marks, appearing as if it were the hands themselves that made these scrapes. One set of the marks arcs outward, curving up and out, to about one third the way up the panels, and ending in an upward pointed arrow tip; the other set of marks extends upward from the hands and out at about a 20° angle. A little over half way up the canvas, this second set of scrapes ends in another pair of handprints, these facing upward, with a downward arrow extending from each hand. The 'background' area of the image is filled with scribbles and smudges, most of it appearing to have been made with the broad side of a charcoal stick. The media used gives this piece a gray and black monochromatic scheme on a brown plane. In the very left-bottom corner, there is the stenciled word "DIVER" in charcoaled letters over the rest of the image.



Fig. 2: *Diver*, 1962-3, 219.7 x 182.2 cm (86 1/2' x 71 3/4'), charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on paper mounted on canvas (two panels), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In looking at *Diver*, semiotic meaning can be derived by examining the purpose of the symbols and signs in the painting. The most obvious interpretation of the painting comes from the title, which is, as Johns himself has said, "the idea of the swan dive."⁽¹²⁾ From the painting, this impression is evident--the straightness of the body in the middle portion, the movement and sweeping of the arms in the handprints and scrapes. Richard Francis observes, "The implication of the figure (absent but traces out) in the *Diver* pieces (1963), for example, is that he had dived into the painting, broken its surface, shattered its flatness."⁽¹³⁾ An unobservant reading might suggest that the image depicts a diver having just left the diving board, and that the board exists within the middle portion of the piece, but an internal ambiguity lends problems to this idea. Looking at the footprints, a very noticeable aspect is that they are facing upward, not in the position to be jumping off a diving board and into the rest of the image. It is this ambiguity that is created by the existence of only a figural reference, the absence of a clear depiction of the figure. I see the upward direction of the footprints as a blatant indication that the figure, or this idea of a figure, is in fact, not on a diving board. Instead, the diver has already left the board and is plummeting, unhindered, into the water, his hands already entering the water; hence, they are the most clear form, and the dark, perilous water parts as his body enters the depths. ⁽¹⁴⁾ The image becomes very clear, and this reading is harmonious with the artist's original dedication. *Diver* was dedicated to Hart Crane, an American poet--with whose writings Johns seems to identify, because of the repetitive appearances in his work, including this piece, *Periscope*, and a few others--who in 1932, committed suicide by jumping from a ship and into the ocean.

⁽¹⁵⁾ So, with this dedication in mind, I believe the image of a diver, having already left his platform and is clearly plummeting into the water, to be most evident. In this dedication by Johns, not only does he elevate the poet in honor, but he also elevates the figure in a manner unique to this work. The figure-device depiction of *Diver* is Johns' only depiction of the entire, ghostly body, indicating that with "the whole body perish[ed] in the dive with Hart Crane,"⁽¹⁶⁾ leaving only fragments in the work to follow. Through a reading of the symbolic meaning in the image, it is clear that Johns, in *Diver*, has used the figural reference as a tool or device to hide, as well as, convey his message and meaning.



Fig. 3: *Periscope* (Hart Crane), 1963, 170.2 x 121.9 cm (67' x 48''), oil on canvas, Collection of the artist.

Similar to *Diver* in its arcing scrape-marks associated with the figure and reference to the American poet, is *Periscope* (Hart Crane) (fig. 3) from 1963. This composition is divided horizontally in thirds. Overlaying these divisions and located on the right side of the canvas, there is an area of scraped paint, in this case, a half circle starting in the upper right corner and ending a little over halfway down the right side of the canvas. Located on top of the scraped, gray-colored, half-circle arc, there is an imprint of the artist's hand and arm in black paint, another impression that the artist's hands were the tools for scraping. Each of the areas of division of the rest of the canvas are dedicated to a different primary color, but in signifying name only, due to the fact that each is of the same gray color scale as the arc. The top section is labeled "RED" with black-stenciled letters in the center of the panel. There are also portions of the word in gray colors strewn throughout the section. The center panel is treated in a similar manner, except with the dark gray label "YELLOW," and the slight inclusion of what appears to be red and orange paint smudges on the "E." The extra visible word portion is "EY," which works as the word "YELLOW" in reverse, set beside the correctly ordered word and running off the left side of the canvas. The bottom-most panel resembles the other two in style and treatment, except with the use of the label "BLUE" in, foremost, light gray. Also, in the BLUE section, located underneath the device-arm and its scrape, is a downward pointing arrow. The background areas of each of the three sections are individually and fully covered with quick and dripped brush marks enveloping the area in black, grays, and white with a visually balanced distribution.

A semiotic reading of this painting cannot avoid the reference to Crane in this work, largely due to the title. The title, itself, comes from a passage in the poem "Cape Hatteras" from 1930, by Crane:

The captured fume of space foams in our ears--

What whisperings of far watches on the main
 Relapsing into silence, while time clears
 Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects
 A periscope to glimpse what joys or pains
 Our eyes can share or answer--then deflects
 Us, shunting the labyrinth submersed
 Where each sees only his dim past reversed♦(17)

This portion of the poem is discussing the theme of memory, which I believe seems applicable to this scenario--Johns preserving the image of a passed hero and referencing a work of his. I can see clear similarities, both in image and theme, between this piece and another work around this time, *Land's End* of 1963 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)--in that they both reference Crane, particularly his death and the story of his arm rising out of the water before he drowned, and the stylistic themes Johns used in both. Large differences lie in the fact that in *Periscope* there is a limiting of color and the inclusion of illusion of the artist's arm as the device-scraper. Johns' references to the death of

Crane are the largest significations in *Periscope* (Hart Crane), clearly seen in the extended arm directed to sink away and the ghostly, ethereal appearance of this painting when compared to others like it, achieved through the use of thinned paints,⁽¹⁸⁾ giving the impression of the dim memory referenced in the poem. Grand importance concerning *Periscope*'s meaning resides in the device-figure arm, because it is the symbol that signifies the entirety of the man truly no longer there and symbolically destined to disappear. The colors of the arc, and the painting as a whole, produce clear images of water--cresting, clear, and deep--and the sinking poet is signified by the sole disappearing arm. Again it is here, with the device-arm, that I see the figural ambiguity--the impression is that the arm has created the scrape, but it is quite evident that this is not the case.



Fig. 4: *Skin with O'Hara Poem*, 1963/5, 55.9 x 86.4 cm (22' x 34'), lithograph National Gallery of Art Washington

Continuing the theme of the body imprint, and with the interest in American poets, but in a different manner, is the lithograph print *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (fig. 4) of 1963/5. This image treats the figure-device in the same stamp-like manner used in the paintings, but without the scrape markings of the other works. In this image, the artist's handprints are set on either side of the composition. Running across the center is an imprint of the artist's face, rolled across the image plane in order to capture the back, side, front, and side of his head, and obviously due to the functioning of imprinting, only the high areas of his face and head were printed, leaving the concave areas of the eyes and ears vacant. This, like his *Study for "Skin"* series, appears as if Johns placed the flayed high areas of his face onto the paper, a look achieved when he rubbed charcoal over the oiled pressings of his face and hands. In the case of *O'Hara Poem*, this look was obtained by preparing the lithography matrix to appear in this manner. Also like *Study for "Skin"* series, Johns printed this on drafting paper, so that there exists a pre-printed labeling area in the right bottom corner. On the right side of the print there is the inclusion of the poem "The Clouds Go Soft" from 1963, appearing roughly as thus:

the clouds go soft
 change color and so many kinds
 puff up, disperse
 sink into the sea
 the heavens go out of kilter
 an insane remark greets
 the monkey on the moon
 in a season of wit
 it is all demolished
 or made fragrant
 sputnik is only the word for "traveling companion"
 here on earth
 at 16 you weight 145 pounds and at 36
 the shirts change, and less procession
 but they are all neck 14 sleeve 33
 and holes appear and are filled
 the same holes anonymous
 no more conversion; no more conversation
 the sand inevitably seeks the eye
 and it is the same eye⁽¹⁹⁾

With the exception of the poem's addition, *Skin with O'Hara Poem* appears similar to the pieces from the *Study for "Skin"* series, particularly the first of the series.

A semiotic look at this work also requires us to recall another American poet, Frank O'Hara. During his career, Johns created multiple works related to the writings and memory of O'Hara, including *Memory Piece* (1961-70; collection of the artist) and *In Memory of My Feelings--Frank O'Hara* (1961; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago).⁽²⁰⁾ In the work *Skin with O'Hara Poem*, the image of the artist trapped in the paper, within his work, cannot be avoided. With his hands pressed against the picture plane of the image and his face stretched between them, I cannot help but get a sense of longing anguish and absurdity. Add to this the ghostly appearance from the rubbing marks of the charcoal and the vacancy of the eye area, and these sensations cannot be ignored. That is one of the reasons why this image, dredging up a sense of melancholy, pairs so well with the O'Hara poem, "The Clouds Go On."⁽²¹⁾ But with this one too there is a sense of that ambiguity with the presentation of the figure as another artistic device, which can be seen in the blankness of expression and no concrete link between the image and the poem. As an artistic tool, the figure, in this instance, is used as a stamp for the artist's recording of the state of a face, not the rendering of it, so that the physical presence is presented, but "while at the same time negating the effect of a palpable face or body,"⁽²²⁾ presenting the ambiguity of the device-figure.

Looking at some works of Jasper Johns' early career--*Diver*, *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, and *Skin with O'Hara Poem*—the artist's use of the figure within realms of abstract creation, as an artistic tool and device through the act of imprinting, is paramount. Semiotic analysis of the works delivers clarification to the pieces and the signs within them, which Johns' abstraction makes ambiguous. Johns' use of the body presents the human form in a new manner of both abstraction and figuration, treating it as just another artistic tool. His complex and compelling masterpieces are expressions of great innovation in the artistic presentation of the figure as a tool and are the epitome of symbolic expression of meaning in aesthetic creation.

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(1) Johns' use of the term "device" is most evident in his selection of titles for the works. Johns himself said: "I have always loved it when works could be called what they really are." See Kirk Varnedoe, ed. *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 169. In the case of *Device Circle*, the first of his device works, Johns' actual notation on the backside of the canvas appears as: "*Device (Circle)*." Also the inclusion of the text "DEVICE CIRCLE" across the bottom clearly indicates that Johns saw the work, and later works including the term "Device" in the title, as a piece relating to the use of the scraping tool that he utilized. See Jeffrey Weiss, *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965*, exhibit pamphlet (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 8. Also in a 1963 interview Johns said: "The more recent work of mine seems to be involved with the nature of various technical devices." See Varnedoe, 85.

(2) The use of text in Johns' work of this time appears commonly as the labeling of colors, particularly "RED", "YELLOW", and "BLUE", as he did in *Periscope (Hart Crane)* and many other works, both in painting and printing. Also, it is not unusual to see these colors appear in a pigment different than that of the word presented.

(3) Weiss, 209.

(4) Ibid., 3.

(5) Richard Francis, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 19.

(6) Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 29.

(7) Francis, 21.

(8) Neo-Dadaism, a term applied to artists such as Johns and Rauschenburg by critics and writers of the time, can be seen as the revival of some of the Dadaism tenants and ideas. Dadaism was a short-lived movement in the early twentieth century, primarily in France, Germany, and Switzerland, which intentionally questioned the established ideas of art and beauty with much cynicism and irrationality, a stance that was in direct reaction to a war that brought doubt about the illusions of all kinds of progress, extending even into the art world. See Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1989), 123-7. The seeming revival of this movement in the late 1950's is limited, because those labeled "Neo-Dadaist" certainly did not espouse all of the Dadaists' positions. The connection was largely based on challenging ideas of American high art, by artists like Johns, who clearly was not an Abstract Expressionist, the major art movement of the time. (Ibid, 283-4). I think this classification also has to do, in large part, with the need to label, as is

evident in the multitude of art movements and sub-movements throughout history. As Johns said: "Labeling is a popular way of dealing with things." See Varnedoe, 92. Johns' own commentary does not tie him to the movement; in fact, upon first hearing the term, he stated that he had not heard of it. See Francis, 69.

(9) Crichton, 33.

(10) Ibid., 83.

(11) Varnedoe, 93. This comment by Johns sounds much like the ideas of French, Post-Structuralist philosopher Roland Barthes in his "The Death of the Author" (1977) a work that would not be written for over ten years after Johns' 1964 comment, illustrating that the idea of the reader's, or, in this case, the viewer's, importance over the creator existed before Barthes recorded it.

(12) Weiss, 191.

(13) Francis, 51.

(14) Weiss, 192-5.

(15) Roberta Bernstein, *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974 "The Changing Focus of the Eye"* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 109.

(16) Weiss, 222.

(17) Bernstein, 110.

(18) Weiss, 255.

(19) Bernstein, 86-7.

(20) Francis, 54. As a contemporary and friend, Johns even endeavored to work on a collaborative project with O'Hara, but this was not finished before O'Hara's death due to a car accident in 1966. Their friendship also illuminates the reasoning behind the multiple works by Johns that reference O'Hara, like this last one, *In Memory of My Feelings--Frank O'Hara*, which comes from a poem by the same name from 1956.

(21) Bernstein, 86.

(22) Robert Rosenblum, *On Modern American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 156.