

Exhibition: **Jasper Johns. The Traces of Memory**
IVAM (Institut Valencià d'Art Modern)
1st February – 24^h April 2011

Curator: Martine Soria

Organized by: IVAM (Institut Valencià d'Art Modern)



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The IVAM presents an exhibition of the painter, sculptor and graphic artist Jasper Johns (Allendale, South Carolina, 1930), one of the most important figures of the art of the mid 20th century and who has been recently awarded the Julio González International Award.

The exhibition gathers over one hundred of works that range fifty years of one of the most exciting and acclaimed careers in the world of contemporary art. Works come from American and European museums such as the National Gallery of Art, Washington; MFAH, Houston ; Whitney Museum, New York ; The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica; Milwaukee Art Museum ; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris ; Tate, London, amongst others, and from private collections which show the evolution in the oeuvre of the artist. An important loan from the artist that includes his biggest sculpture made in 2007 and never before exhibited can also be found.

The catalogue of the exhibition contains the works displayed and texts by Consuelo Císcar, Martine Soria, Daniel Abadie and Luciano Caprile.

On the occasion of the exhibition, the IVAM has organized an educational workshop about encaustic and wax techniques employed by Jasper Johns in his series of numbers.

The exhibition has a retrospective nature specially dedicated to the writing, a recurrent topic in his work. The typographic symbols have a leading role in this selection of paintings and engravings. Jasper Johns painted familiar symbols such as dartboards, American flags, numbers and letters of the alphabet, which

were in the popular imagery, but were renewed in his own style by applying large layers of paint to convert the painting in an object and not only in a reproduction of recognizable objects. This idea of interpreting the art as an object became a powerful influence in later sculpture and painting and has been specially significant for the history of contemporary art.

Ink on plastic and drawings complement this exhibition that would be incomplete without the group of engravings that accompanies it. Jasper Johns' graphic oeuvre, including etchings on copper and lithographs, is really huge. Following Picasso and Matisse, printmaking is an omnipresent feature in his everyday activity and, as an eminent printmaker, he has gone beyond and altered the limits of all the techniques that he has employed. Many of the works – a mixture of all techniques – showed in this exhibition focus on the symbols of non-verbal communication that have appeared recurrently in his work.

Jasper Johns (Allendale, South Carolina, 1930), grew up in the heart of the southern United States, lived in Allendale and other towns of South Carolina after his parents got divorced. There, he started a degree, but in 1949 he moved to New York and entered in Parsons School of Design. Enlisted in the army, he was posted to Japan where he stayed until 1952. Even if some traces of the Japanese influence can be seen in very late works, they are more possibly due to the artist relationship with John Cage, one of the greatest exponents of the American avant-garde and whose interest in zen Buddhism is well known. In 1954 he had met Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage, both of them having a great influence in his artistic career and putting him in contact with some of the most important figures of the international artistic scene, such as the choreographer Merce Cunningham or even Marcel Duchamp.

After getting settled in New York in the early fifties, he quickly got recognition for his innovative pictures of flags, dartboards, alphabets and numbers. From its origin, Jasper Johns' oeuvre sets a distance between the painting and its representation. Consequently, he develops a common reflection in his flags and dartboards. Flags, represented in the classical dimensions of cloth flags, could be also described as the alternation of thirteen red and white stripes with a blue rectangle in the canton bearing fifty small, white, five-pointed stars. Likewise, we recognize the dartboards by their concentric circles, and both the picture and the title leave no doubt about it. The interpretation of Jasper Johns' oeuvre has been always conditioned by this ambiguity.

The acquisition by Alfred Barr of the painting *Flag* (1954-1955) in 1958 for The Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of the first exhibition of the painter in the Leo Castelli Gallery demonstrated it. The critics, collectors and general public couldn't see anything but an icon of the American way of life, but MOMA founder immediately perceived its double dimension: the criticism towards the abstraction defended at that time by Clement Greenberg and the pictorial invention that recovered the old wax painting technique to offer an unknown and outdated picture of the most immediately recognizable object for any American. The Dartboards, painted in line with the Flags, also set out this question, but with a referent less evident as a part of the abstract painting uses, since the end of the fifties, a vocabulary similar to the concentric circles one.

However, from the very first works of Johns, it can be appreciated a voluntary imperfection which makes it possible by different means to measure the distances between the object and its name, between the means of representation and the mental image that it is referred. Jasper Johns tries to find a limit, a critical instant in which the significance persists although there is anything that justified it anymore. He looks for the consecutive situations in which the image, while losing its integrity, remains perceived as such. The extraordinary invention showed by the pictures painted in the fifties about flags and dartboards is a perfect demonstration of what has just been said and prefigures the researches of the later conceptual artists. The figures and alphabets were born for this reason. Johns engraved letters or figures in regular boxes, which were a result of the methodical division of the area of the picture, and he did it with templates, avoiding any research about the spelling in the same way that the alphabetical and numerical parade challenges any idea of the speech shaping this way a kind of visual neutrality.

Johns chooses some elements of the language which enable to describe the world to make it evident the rejection of showing in his pictures any obvious message. It is the obviousness and the everyday banality what makes commonplaces of them. There is no trace of the ego of the artist, of his concern for transmitting and impressing the audience, and there is no sign of his inner word or feelings, unlike what the artists of the abstract expressionism did in the previous decade.

During the following years, the works of the artist were determined by the introduction of colours, but not by areas as in the Dartboards, but in red, blue and yellow layers, as the previous generation would have done it. This apparent freedom of the gesture, so antithetical with the wax technique, is for Johns a new way to cheat : a slow, demanding technique that looks spontaneous.

This analytical ability, which is the driving force of the theory of the distance, has enabled Jasper Johns to tackle the content of art history, from Duchamp to Picasso, from De Chirico to Dalauy, in the same way that he had studied in the seventies the painting techniques in works as *Corpse and Mirror* in which the image itself, symmetrically reflected, was different depending on whether it was painted in oils or with wax. All these approaches point to the relativism of the content, recalling that the painting is the most important part of the message and it is in its practice where reality can be found.

During his long artistic career, Jasper Johns has explored, with equal virtuosity, the painting, the drawing, the engraving and the sculpture, and many exhibitions about his oeuvre have taken place in museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art (1977), the Kunstmuseum Basel (1979), the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1986), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1988) and the National Gallery, Washington D.C. (1990). He is one of the most important American artists of the century and this became evident with the great reception of his new works in the Biennale di Venezia in 1988, and with the wonderful retrospective exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1996.