

Have We Been Misreading Jasper Johns All Along? Part One

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Jasper Johns, “Untitled” (2015), monotype on paper, 39 1/2 x 31 5/8 inches (© Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA, New York, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

Editor’s Note: This is the first section of a two-part essay on the work of Jasper Johns.

In a review, “Artist Jasper Johns on the Process Behind His Monotypes,” that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 9, 2016), Julie L. Belcove wrote:

When I visited Johns before *Regrets* made its public debut at MoMA in 2014, he told me he’d made an earlier attempt at a similar subject. He was characteristically loath to reveal anything. “I don’t know if I want to tell you about this,” he began. “I have another photograph from a completely different source, which I have tried to use as the basis of drawings, none of which has come off to my satisfaction. A similar mood is conveyed, and it also has to do with the face being buried, I think in the arm, but nothing to do with the art world.” He broke into one of his rare but hearty laughs. “I had to put the other away as a failure.”

Johns’s comment about “a completely different source” that has “nothing to do with the art world” deepened my curiosity about the new motif that I would see in his exhibition, *Jasper Johns: Monotypes* at Matthew Marks (May 5 – June 25, 2016).

I think it is important to point out that Johns’s comment suggests that he had originally tried to make drawings that were sourced in a photograph that had “nothing to do with art world.” This is what I wrote about the paintings, drawings, and prints collectively titled *Regrets*, which was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 15–September 1, 2014):

The inspiration for the series was a ripped, crumpled, and stained photograph of Lucian Freud perched on the edge of an iron bed, one leg tucked under the other, with his hand clutching his hair as he looks down and away. John Deakin took the photograph, which was commissioned by Francis Bacon, around 1964. Johns first saw the distressed photograph in the Christie’s catalogue announcing the auction of Bacon’s triptych, *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969).

I went on to say:

Of the ten Deakin photographs reproduced in the catalogue’s two-page spread, the only one that doesn’t show Freud’s face is the one that caught Johns’s attention. The pose suggests that the sitter is agitated, as if he is refusing to see or think about something; that he is in an introspective frame of mind and wants not to be seen; or that he feels exposed, instinctively withdrawing from the camera’s attention.

Johns’s statement to Belcove suggests that what moved him to use Deakin’s photograph of Freud was that it was another instance of “a face being buried,” rather than the well-documented visage of someone from the art world. Johns didn’t choose the Deakins photograph because the photographer’s subject was Freud, but because of what the subject was doing; he was turning away, both averting and covering his face.

As I see it, Johns's response to a photograph by Larry Burrows that first appeared in *LIFE* (April 16, 1965) paved the way for his reaction to Deakin's photograph of Freud clutching his hair. This is how the gallery's press release described the source for three monotypes (all dated 2015), in the current exhibition:

Among the exhibition's most recent works are three 2015 monotypes based on a photograph taken by Larry Burrows during the Vietnam War. The source image depicts a marine in despair after a failed mission, his posture echoing that of Lucian Freud in Johns's recent *Regrets* series or the figure in Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*.

As with John's use of Deakin's photograph, it is important to recognize the source but not to dwell on it, or on its connection to Goya's well-known image. The fact that the source was a crumpled photograph of Lucian Freud or a newsworthy one of a soldier during the Vietnam War isn't why Johns used them; it is because the image of a man with his face buried stirred something up him; he found that the image troubled him in a way that he could not quite comprehend, which is why he wanted to turn it into art. Before I say more about this, I want to cite something else that Johns said.



A spread of photographs by Larry Burrows in Life Magazine (April 16, 1965) (via studyblue.com)
(click to enlarge)

In a conversation that he had with Roberta Bernstein, speaking about his use of plaster fragments in early works, such as "Target with Plaster Casts" and "Target with Four Faces" (both 1955)", Johns stated:

Any broken representation of the human physique is touching in some way; it's upsetting or provokes reactions that one can't quite account for. Maybe because one's image of one's own body is disturbed by it.

Johns's answer suggests the following: he believes the viewer's response to a "broken representation of the human physique" is visceral, which further suggests that his primary concern, at the beginning of his career, was not art-about-art or witty demonstrations of such formal concerns as painting's flatness. Instead of making art-about-art, Johns's placement of plaster fragments of the human body or faces above a "target" adds up to a shattered individual who is both anonymous and a constant prey.

I think that the commonly accepted reading of Johns's career – that he rejected subjectivity, which we associate with Abstract Expressionism, in favor of detached objectivity – overlooks his interest in intuitive responses to life and art. As he has repeatedly stated, he had a dream in which he saw himself painting the American flag. When Johns made "Flag" (1954-55), he wasn't rejecting subjectivity so much as merging a visceral experience with objective detachment. This fusion of two distinct states helps explain Johns's use of preexisting things – or what he might recognize as objective counterparts for subjective states – as motifs throughout his career. Moreover, Johns's use of a "broken representation of the human physique," or a traumatized body, anticipates his manipulations of a crumpled photograph by John Deakin and a newsworthy one by Larry Burrows more than fifty years after he made "Target with Plaster Casts" and "Target with Four Faces."

To revisit a word that Johns used in his interview with Bernstein, he is clearly "disturbed" by the two photographs that he employs as source material in *Regrets* and in the three monotypes at Matthew Marks dated 2015: both bodies of work show a man with his face buried. One is sitting on a bed, while the other is collapsed on a trunk. As they cover their faces, both men tucked one leg under the other, their bodies twisted.

In the Burrows photograph – which is more extreme than the one taken by Deakins – the soldier is unable to support his head because he is so overcome by grief. While it is likely that Johns saw the photograph in the *LIFE* cover story of April 16, 1965, "With a Brave Crew in a Deadly Fight," it is also possible that the exhibition *Views of Vietnam* at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas October 10 – December 30, 2006), which included photographs by Burrows and prints by Johns, helped the artist recall this image.

Instead of focusing on the sources, as many critics did when writing about *Regrets*, our attention should be directed to the image of a man with his head hidden behind his arm and hand, and what Johns did to it. I also think that the motif of a man in such an extreme state conveys a challenge to many previous readings of Johns and his work, including the charges

that he is aloof, purely intellectual, and engaged in work that is needlessly opaque. Perhaps we have all been reading his work too narrowly since his first show at Leo Castelli (January 20 – February 8, 1958), more than a half-century ago.



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