

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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LUSH SHADES OF GRAY EXPLORED IN MAJOR JASPER JOHNS EXHIBITION

Art Institute Organizes First Exploration of American Master's Use of the Color
Exhibition Premieres at the Art Institute November 3, 2007

One of the most important and prolific American artists of the 20th century, Jasper Johns is best known as the creator of the flags, maps, targets, and alphabets now recognized as iconic modern American works. Not surprisingly, Johns is also one of the most studied American artists, the subject of exhibitions and books as well as a major influence on artists, writers, and composers. But despite all of this scrutiny, a signal aspect of his production has never before been the subject of an



exhibition—his use of the color gray. Gray is just as central to his work as targets and flags, and it has been a consistent thread in his practice for decades. Johns has worked through all of his series in gray; he produced many paintings only in gray; he translates paintings from color into gray; he experiments with gray materials such as Sculpt-metal, lead, and silver; and he worked from gray paintings to color versions of the same theme.

Jasper Johns: Gray, which opens at the Art Institute of Chicago on **November 3, 2007**, is a radical new take on the work of an American master. Viewers of the exhibition will see, for the first time, how gray functioned for Johns over time as its own material, as a philosophy, as a mood, as a concept or indication of a concept. They will also see the wide range and mood of Johns's gray—warm and cold, light and dark, disciplined and lush, closed and expansive—across many different media. The exhibition, consisting of 138 works—including paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings—encompasses all periods of Johns's production, beginning in 1955 and running up through the present, including several works never publicly exhibited before. *Jasper Johns: Gray* sheds light on an aspect of the artist's career that has been hiding in plain sight for decades.

"I think viewers of this exhibition will be able to experience the great potential and meaning that gray has for Jasper Johns," said James Rondeau, Frances and Thomas Dittmer Chair of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago and co-curator of the exhibition. "Gray is much more than a color to him. It is an analytical tool, a measure of distance and separation, and a means of getting to the heart of his practice as an artist. Through such a close exploration of a subtle and restricted range, Johns is able to make abundant and commodious discoveries. We are honored to be able to bring these discoveries together for the first time."

Johns (b. 1930) emerged in the 1950s as one of the leading artists of the generation that followed the Abstract Expressionists in New York. Eschewing the highly subjective and expressive themes and techniques of artist such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, Johns, along with his contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, turned to a more conceptual approach to painting, incorporating elements of popular culture,



language, and everyday objects into his work.

Widely recognized for his long series of encaustic (wax) works using the American flag, the alphabet, maps, and numbers, Johns used these emblematic forms and shapes as vehicles to investigate representation, the act of cognition, and the nature of language. But, as this exhibition convincingly

demonstrates, while Johns is best known for his imagery executed in color, monochrome works—particularly those in gray—are critical to his practice. That color, for Johns, is a means of stripping his ideas down to their essentials and finding infinite variety within a formal limit.

Johns was working in gray as early as 1955, but it was a few years later that the full implications of the color assumed a central role in his career. Thus the exhibition begins with an early and definitive statement: the pairing of the lavish work *False Start* (1959) and *Jubilee* (1959), two visitations on the same theme. *False Start*, recently purchased by Chicago collectors Kenneth and Anne Griffin and rarely exhibited, announces a major new direction for Johns, evident in its non-referential title, its medium (oil rather than encaustic), its exuberant brushwork, and its text, in which colors are named but not labeled. *Jubilee*, executed shortly after *False Start*, appears to be a gray interpretation of the earlier painting. Here, at the juncture between *False Start* and *Jubilee*, Johns's lifelong exploration of this color—as concept, as means, as practice—emerges on a monumental scale, and the pairing of the paintings sets the themes that are traced through a dozen sections devoted to Johns's work. Creatively and vigorously investigating Johns's use of gray, these sections elucidate the ideas that occupied the artist and their different

manifestations: signs and symbols; paintings that function as objects; crosshatch paintings; autobiographical (and more representational) works; parts of his recent Catenary series, one of his largest self-contained series and an emphatic declaration of his commitment to the color; Johns's sculpture; new works; and more.



Jasper Johns: Gray includes a number of paintings that are very rarely exhibited as well as many of the artist's signature works, such as his images of maps and targets, alphabets and numbers. Viewers will find here the first "map" work Johns created as

well as the rarely seen *4 Leo* (1970), which has been in the private collection of dealer Leo Castelli. Johns's works *Coat Hanger* (1949) and *Portrait—Viola Farber* (1961), included here, have not been shown publicly in decades, and several works from 2007 have never before been exhibited. In addition to bringing many of these works on view, the exhibition also features such defining pieces as *Tennyson* (1958), *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara* (1961), *Winter* (1986) from *The Seasons* series, and the Art Institute's own *Near the Lagoon* (2002–03). Thirty-six works in the exhibition, including many prints and drawings, are from the Art Institute's permanent collection, and twenty-four works are from Johns's personal collection.

In a recent interview published in the exhibition catalogue, Johns remarks, "I don't know how much I've used [gray]. I mean, I guess I'm going to learn, from this exhibition."

Jasper Johns: Gray reveals this undiscovered aspect of the work of this landmark American artist with a dazzling collection of paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture. The

exhibition brings together both monuments of Johns's career and intimate experiments, complementing the familiar with the newly uncovered, and offering viewers a new lens through which to see some of the most iconic works of modern art.

Jasper Johns: Gray is organized by the Art Institute of Chicago, in cooperation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition is curated by James Rondeau and Douglas Druick with the assistance of Mark Pascale and Maureen Pskowski. James Rondeau is the Frances and Thomas Dittmer Chair of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Douglas Druick is the Searle Chair of the Department of Medieval to Modern European Painting and Sculpture and the Prince Trust Chair of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Mark Pascale is associate curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Maureen Pskowski is departmental exhibitions manager in the Department of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The exhibition is made possible by Kenneth and Anne Griffin. Major funding is generously provided by the Harris Family Foundation in memory of Bette and Neison Harris.

The New York presentation of the exhibition is made possible by United Technologies Corporation.

The project is also supported by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes a great nation deserves great art. An indemnity is provided by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

A stunning exhibition catalogue, including essays by James Rondeau, Douglas Druick, Mark Pascale, Barbara Rose, Richard Shiff, and conservators Kristin Lister and Kelly Keegan, and an interview with the artist by Nan Rosenthal, is available through the Museum Shop.

IMAGE CREDITS

Jasper Johns. *Near the Lagoon*, 2002–03. Encaustic on canvas and wooden boards, hinges and string. 118 7/8 x 78 3/4 x 4 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Muriel Kallis Newman in memory of Albert Hardy Newman. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY Photo: Jamie M. Stukenberg/Professional Graphics Inc., Rockford, Illinois.

Jasper Johns. *Target*, 1958. Conte crayon on paper, 15 1/2 x 15 in. sheet. Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Saul. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Jasper Johns. *Map*, 1962. Encaustic and collage on canvas. 60 x 93 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Marcia Simon Weisman. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Brian Forrest.

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MAY 31 TO AUGUST 31

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

10:30 a.m.–9:00 p.m. Thursday and Friday. Target Free Summer Evenings after 5:00 p.m.

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday.

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The Art Institute of Chicago is a museum in Chicago's Grant Park, located across from Millennium Park.