

CRITIC'S PICK

Jasper Johns Stays Divinely Busy

A gallery exhibition in Manhattan gives the truest picture of the artist, at 88, who is continuing to work and innovate.



Jasper Johns's "Untitled" (2017), acrylic over etching with collage on canvas. It's among the works in his latest exhibition, "Recent Paintings & Works on Paper," at Matthew Marks Gallery in Manhattan.

By [Roberta Smith](#)

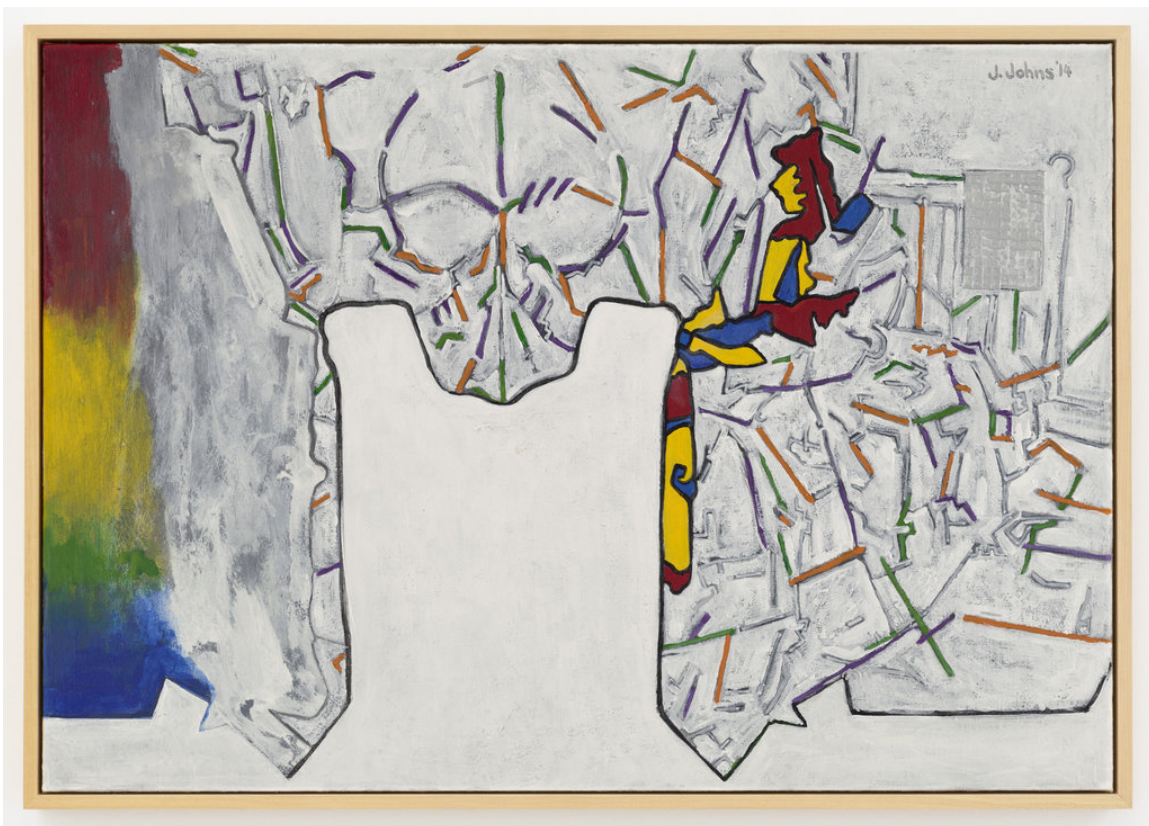
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At 88, [Jasper Johns is not slowing down](#). After spending more than six decades cultivating an extensive and influential body of work, he continues to be relentlessly productive and inventive.

His art has sometimes been described as somber or melancholic. His latest exhibition, ["Recent Paintings & Works on Paper,"](#) at Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, depicts moments of inconsolable grief and concludes with a gallery full of portrayals of skeletons, albeit ones wearing dandyish boaters.

Yet in its sheer variety and vitality, this exhibition is optimistic, and generous in spirit. It reaffirms Mr. Johns as, foremost, a painter's painter and a working artist rather than an art historical subject. In it he revisits three or four previous series — extending, editing or recombining their motifs — and introduces two new ones that more than meet the Johnisian standards of mystery, suggestion and painterly allure.

One group of the new arrivals consists only of three small, dense 2017 canvases painted in acrylic, their familiar but freshly arranged motifs in marvelous color schemes and featuring a new addition: a 1938 reclining nude by Picasso, upright and reversed. The other newcomer is based on a photograph taken during the Vietnam War, in which, as is his wont, Mr. Johns shuttles toward abstraction and back again, this time over the course of two paintings accompanied by a group of 11 works in ink on paper or plastic. Together in a room of their own, the drawings form the show's quiet center.



"Untitled" (2014), acrylic on canvas.

Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via Matthew Marks Gallery

Mr. Johns's last two solo exhibitions of new paintings in New York drilled straight down into the well of a single — and new — device or motif, yielding coherent, tersely titled ensembles of paintings, drawings and prints. His great "Catenary" works (1997-2003), unveiled at Matthew Marks in 2005, center on gray blackboard-like paintings, each with a fragile piece of white string drooping across its surface. Attached to either side of the canvas, the string forms a catenary, or a curve

essential in design — anything from roadways to artificial bodies of water — as implied by titles like “[Bridge](#)” and “[Near the Lagoon](#).”

In 2014, the “[Regrets](#)” series (2012-14) had its debut at the Museum of Modern Art. The title comes from a rubber stamp — “Regrets,” coupled with Mr. Johns’s signature — which he devised to decline social invitations.

In this series, “Regrets” turns dark, psychological and philosophical. They are among his first to be entirely photo-based, being derived from a damaged photograph of the British painter Lucian Freud, seated on a bed in his studio, hunched over, covering his face with his right hand. Mr. Johns took this seemingly anguished pose and amplified, fractured and distorted it by adding various patterns and combining the image with its reverse. This mirroring doubled the photograph’s deeply torn corner into a central shape resembling a tombstone. With very little encouragement, the stains and creases just above it emerged as a skull.



An installation view of the show.

Rather than drilling straight down, “Recent Paintings & Works on Paper” spreads out, like a free-form, multidirectional root system. Several paintings are uncharacteristically small for Mr. Johns, which gives the show a marvelous intimacy that calls attention to his different paint handling, and how it changes from series to series.

The best “Regrets” paintings may actually be here: four downsized canvases painted in acrylic, made since the Modern show and influenced by the prints from the series. (Their dimensions are the same.) In combinations of gray or white, primaries or

secondaries, their quasi-Cubist shatterings and flattenings create abstraction as a kind of mounting rubble, but Freud's face-shielding hand and arm are always discernible.



"Untitled" (2018), encaustic on canvas, is based on a photograph taken during the Vietnam War by Larry Burrows of Life magazine.



"Untitled" (2018), oil on canvas, displays a surfeit of greens — a color somewhat scarce in Mr. Johns's repertory.

Opposite the "Regrets" additions, the two untitled paintings that introduce what is likely to become known colloquially as the "Farley Breaks Down" series are isolated, side by side, on a wall. One is somewhat smaller than the other; both display a surfeit of greens — a color somewhat scarce in Mr. Johns's repertory. They initially appear abstract, with gentle push-pull tensions of plane and brushwork complicated by the imprints of steel mesh in three sizes (extra fine, fine and small). But the phrases stenciled across their top and bottom edges — "Farley Breaks Down/After Larry Burrows" — indicate an image, of Farley breaking down, made by someone

other than Mr. Johns. And so you sense, and then see, a figure, covering his face, slumped at its center and typically doubled because of mirroring.

Made in 2018, these paintings are based on a 1965 photograph taken in Vietnam by the Life magazine photographer Larry Burrows (1926-1971). Mr. Johns came across it in 2002, before the “Regrets” series. It shows a grieving American soldier at the end of an unsuccessful mission, collapsed on a trunk, with his face buried in his hands, which rest on the top of a suitcase. The man inhabits these works like a ghost, among the greens, browns and yellows of camouflage and jungle. An upright shell casing to his left is often expanded to form a vertical column, recalling the pieces of wood lathe used in several earlier works, and suggesting the base of a very tall cross with the mirrored Farleys recast as Mary and the Magdalene. In the smaller of the two paintings, a rough shape is visible through a door. It resembles a rock with an X-shape made of tape; it could also be the bandaged head of a corpse laid out and waiting for its coffin.

Toward the end of the show are three linocuts based on a wonderful painting at its beginning — a 2016 canvas dominated by an expanse of cerulean blue bordered by the artist’s lovely stretched-face scheme, more than 30 years old and inspired by Picasso. This consists of cartoon eyes with sunbeam lashes, bow-tie lips pushed to the painting’s edges and an inch-worm-like curl of nostrils floating free midfield. It seems to propose a painting as a sentient thing, if not quite a being, or a visual metaphor for thought (yours, mine, ours) reshaped by art.



"Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas. Cartoon eyes with sunbeam lashes are paired with an inch-worm-like curl of nostrils floating free midfield.

Jasper Johns: Recent Paintings & Works on Paper

Through April 6 at Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.