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Public Programs

Lecture by John Yau

Wednesday, January 9, 7 p.m.

Main Building

The poet and art critic John Yau is author of *The United States of Jasper Johns* (1996), *A Thing Among Things: The Art of Jasper Johns* (2008), and a book of poetry (one of more than thirteen) titled *Corpse and Mirror* (1983).

Curator's Talk with Kelly Montana

Sunday, January 13, 3 p.m.

Menil Drawing Institute

Assistant Curator Kelly Montana will speak on Jasper Johns's *Untitled*, 2015, an ink-on-plastic drawing based on a Vietnam War-era photograph. The talk will be in the exhibition gallery.

Presentation by Roberta Bernstein

Wednesday, January 23, 7 p.m.

Main Building

The Jasper Johns scholar Roberta Bernstein is author of the catalogue raisonné of Johns's painting and sculpture and the extensive monograph *Jasper Johns: Redo an Eye* (both 2017), and was co-curator of the 2017–18 retrospective of Johns's work seen in London and Los Angeles.

The above programs are free and open to the public.

Menil members enjoy additional events.

Visit the museum or menil.org to join or for more information.

The Condition of Being Here

Drawings by Jasper Johns



cover Jasper Johns, *Periscope*, 1977. Ink, watercolor, and graphite pencil on plastic, 36 3/4 x 27 1/2 in. (92.4 x 70.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Bequest of David Whitney.

Photo: Jamie Stukenberg/Professional Graphics Inc., Rockford, IL

Artwork © Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

November 3, 2018–January 27, 2019

THE MENIL COLLECTION

The American artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930) has created an extraordinary body of work that echoes the fragmentary yet immersive quality of being present in the world. He does this through his keen attention to the relationship between the tangible, the perceptible, and the way that experiences in one's life recur without necessarily repeating. Grouping together shared images and motifs that reappear across time, *The Condition of Being Here* spans almost the entirety of Johns's continuing career: the earliest work is a rare drawing from 1954, which the artist marks as the first year of his mature production, and there are three examples of a body of work begun in 2002 and picked up again in 2014, the most recent one from 2016.

This inaugural exhibition of the Menil Drawing Institute is dedicated to Johns's work as a testament to the joys and possibilities of committing a mark to paper. The de Menils purchased their only Johns work on paper, *Two Flags*, 1969, the year after it was made, and over the last twelve years, gifts of drawings promised to the museum by Janie C. Lee and Louisa Stude Sarofim, added to those in the bequest of David Whitney, have significantly increased the museum's holdings of Johns's work. The present display comprises these gifts augmented by loans from the artist.

The title of the exhibition comes from a sketchbook note Johns made in 1968:

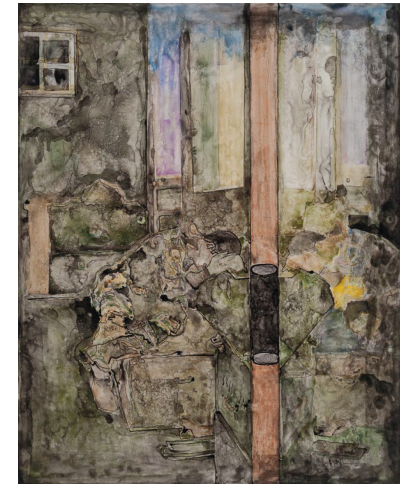
One would like not to be led. Avoid the idea of a puzzle which could be solved. Remove the signs of "thought." It is not the "thought" which needs showing. The application of the eye. The business of the eye. The condition of a presence. The condition of being here.

The through line of this presentation is formed by drawings of now-canonical Johns motifs such as flags, numbers, and targets—images the artist called “things the mind already knows.” In Johns's hands, however, symbols destabilize and become unfamiliar. In *Flag on Orange Field*, 1957, close looking reveals a remarkable diversity of mark-making. There is an abundance of short, stand-alone lines, the stars are uneven, almost casual, and little attention is given to keeping colors within the carefully laid demarcations. This flag does not cohere; it is only habitual ways of seeing that make the image a commonplace and presumably knowable symbol.

Flag on Orange Field relates to an eponymous painting from the same year; however, this drawing was done after the work on canvas—not a study, but an instance of an artist observing his own work. Studies made in advance of a painting or sculpture are rare for Johns and often are schematic or even mathematical in character. In one example, *Sketch for Numbers*, 1957, Johns worked out a pattern within a rectangle that would produce diagonal lines of the same digit. His notebooks also tend to be filled with written texts.

About 1960, one such idea that Johns noted in a sketchbook was to “take a skull, cover it with paint, rub it against canvas,” rendering the three dimensionality of a head flat against the picture plane. In *Study for Skin I*, 1962, the artist employed his own body in a similar way. One of many instances where Johns reconfigures autographic means to reference his presence in making a work, here he covered his head and hands in oil and impressed them onto the surface of the paper—an uncommon, true-to-life scale for a drawing. Going over the sheet with charcoal made the residual imprints visible.

In *Farley Breaks Down*, 2014, and two untitled drawings, Johns explores one of his most affecting motifs to date, the soldier James Farley demoralized after a combat mission. Based on a photograph published in a 1965 *Life* magazine feature on the Vietnam War, Johns's first related drawings were made after it appeared in the 2002 book *Larry Burrows: Vietnam*. Johns chose an unabsorbent plastic sheet for these images; the liquid mediums slick and thin across the surface until they dry, abstracting what was a highly detailed tracing of the photograph. The artist has considered the composition of the image to be malleable, applying to it simple operations such as copying and transposition. In the 2014–16 drawings, the cylindrical canister that paralleled the magazine spine's crease is doubled and/or elongated, creating an off-center column across which the collapsed figure is mirrored. For Johns, it's yet another strategy that gives equal weight to how the eye apprehends the world and how the body feels its way through it. His art refuses to coalesce such discontinuous perspectives, bringing us into closer contact with the present—with the here—and with the possibility of seeing it all anew.



Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2015. Ink and watercolor on plastic, 37 x 29 5/8 in. (94 x 75.2 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift from the Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester