

Art

Smog Alert

The Metropolitan Museum of Art takes a long look at Jasper Johns's 'Gray' matter

'Jasper Johns: Gray'

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
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BY R.C. BAKER

Before you see "Jasper Johns: Gray" at the Met, make a detour to the museum's Egyptian wing and look at the 1,900-year-old mummy painting *Portrait of the Boy Eulyches*. Note the layered translucency of the encaustic brushstrokes, the transition from white to soft gray behind the youth's head, and the enigmatic text on his tunic. Nearby lies an intact mummy in striking crisscross wrappings, the portrait panel of the deceased wreathed with golden blobs of the thick, waxy encaustic. Much about these two boys' society has been lost to the fractures of history and the crowbars of grave robbers, but their astonishingly fresh portraits tug at us over millennia.

Next, take another warmup excursion, to the modern wing, and stand in awe before Jasper Johns's 1955 *White Flag* (hand on heart, if so inclined). Marvel at the contrast between gelatinous encaustic and scruffy passages of oil paint, at the amber glow of the yellowed newsprint ground; behold not only a gorgeous painting but also the tomb of abstract expressionism's macho passions.

American art after Johns was dominated by pop's brashness, minimalism's astringency, and conceptualism's conundrums, all of which radiate from the seminal field of this luscious 10-foot-wide canvas: pop art in the co-opting of the flag (a thing, Johns pointed out, "the mind already knows"), minimalism in the drained color and emphasis on materiality, and conceptualism because *ceci n'est pas une flag* but a painting of a symbolic abstraction of a nation. For this early triumph and its smaller incarnations—a triple-decker red, white, and blue version feels as dense as plutonium—Johns revived the ancient medium of pigment mixed with melted wax, and he owns it in modern times. Even his close colleague Robert Rauschenberg shied away from encaustic after these astonishing flags (and targets and layered numbers) burst out of nowhere midcentury, earning Johns (b. 1930) numerous accolades, and enmity from a number of hard-core abstractionists. But the critical miasma that has long surrounded the brainier bits of Johns's oeuvre obscures the many clunkers to be found in this big, color-specific retrospective.

False Start (1959), one of a related pair of paintings that opens the show, features brushy patches of oil mislabeled with stenciled color designations: "RED" on a blue swatch, for example. The wall label discusses "virtuoso" painting, but it's the idea—color as word, as thought, as firing synapse that may or may not be related to a chromatic event of light and matter—that is scintillating, even as the graceless brushwork falls flat. The canvas can be read as a reaction to (or parody of) abstract expressionism, a movement driven by the emo-



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tions that Johns famously avoided. Pollock once asserted, "I am nature"; several years later, Johns stated, "I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I have done is not me—not to confuse my feelings with what I produced." Yet *False Start's* bright contrasts and slathered surfaces invite comparison to those artists who do more with oil paint's corporeal presence—think of de Kooning's virtuosity—which Johns here renders prosaic and inert. And even he doesn't consider himself much of a colorist: "I used gray encaustic to avoid the color situation," he once related. His close friend John Cage noted that Johns was "the only painter I know who can't tell one color from another." Which perhaps explains *False Start's*

Visual grit: *Celine*, 1978

accompanying grisaille twin, titled, with mild irony, *Jubilee* (also 1959). Here we get more brushy oil patches and stenciled names of colors, but in varying grays, yielding a morose canvas bested by a more interestingly abstract charcoal version executed a year later. Such circularity as creating monochrome versions of more colorful works and doing drawings after his own paintings sets up reverberations throughout Johns's oeuvre. Motifs resurface endlessly—the American flag appears in this show in different media from different decades. The craggy gray surface of a diminutive 1960 sculp-metal variation, which takes the flag image even further

from its source, startles anew when recast in silver in 1987. The gloppy, molten presence of this shiny object is ugly but precious, like the nation itself. Conversely, a muddy acrylic canvas from 1994 is cata-tonic, an utterly exhausted concept.

Notions such as painting the back of a canvas gray although it will never be seen by anyone but curators and collectors, or hanging an actual (gray) steel hanger from a knob mounted on a gray canvas so that it casts a—wait for it—gray shadow, gets the old gray matter wheezing, but the eyes can feel shortchanged. For all of the hullabaloo about Johns's endless permutations of the color—mixtures of black and white, of primaries and secondaries—his grays often collapse into desiccated tracts. A painter such as Mondrian found more tactile drama in just the white sections of his small canvases—the quietly livid brushstrokes exquisitely tuned to their own widths, textures, and abutments—than Johns conjures from acres of gray. It's spooking that, when compared with his earlier bolts of insight, Johns's later tropes—rulers swiping paint in windshield-wiping arcs, stenciled words that bend back upon themselves, letters of painting titles interwoven with those of the artist's name—feel like grad-school japes. Johns also hides silhouettes of other artists' profiles or shapes cribbed from classical art in his compositions. Initially, searching out these enigmas can be interesting; over decades, it becomes as rote as following the trail of red herrings in an Agatha Christie novel.

Still, the occasional gem shines through. In 1978's *Celine*, Johns leavens two favorite motifs—crosshatch and flagstone patterns—with his oft-used hand-

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prints, which are reminiscent of those in Pollock's effulgent *Number 1A*, 1948. Here, the upstart resolutely strips his elder's flash of ornery ego down to a snazzy design element. Snippets of orange and green spike *Celine's* mauve-tinged grays, while literal and painted fractures between its two joined canvases create lovely visual grit—painting for the gut, not just the cerebral cortex. But then we come to *Winter* (1986), part of Johns's "Four Seasons" quartet. In this encaustic painting, a silhouetted figure is surrounded by mundane objects, a handprint making a gestural arc, and a cartoon snowman. Illustrational and as blunt as a comic book, it has none of that genre's brash flair and little of the élan the artist once brought to his signature medium. This is high-end product, its themes ticked off in some mental register like options for the hubcaps and interior of a luxury sedan.

The final gallery surrounds you with hulking canvases from Johns's "Catenary" series (named for the curve made by a cord hanging from two horizontally aligned points). Drooping arcs of actual string and their painted or deeply scored echoes span these large encaustic fields. Move in close and the variegated grays completely fill your vision, but the sensation is of sclerotic smog rather than the numinous moral, aesthetic, and intellectual provocations of *White Flag*. These closing curtains, like too much that comes before, feel shriveled and enervated—a mummy's tomb with the good stuff already looted.