

**JASPER
JOHNS**

M O N O T Y P E S

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JASPER JOHNS: MONOTYPES

Why does an artist make a monotype? The spontaneity of the process offers one of the freest and most immediately rewarding techniques available for creating works on paper. Energy, improvisation, speed, gesture, impulse, expressiveness, momentum, directness, sensuality and chance are all characteristics of this hybrid activity.

Monotypes are made by drawing or painting directly onto a flat surface (usually a glass, Plexiglas or metal sheet) with a medium that will transfer to paper under pressure. During the working process, the artist can easily erase anything simply by wiping it off the sheet. When the drawing or painting is completed, it is transferred to paper on a press, or by any means that will exert enough pressure to effect the transfer. A few further transfers may be made as long as sufficient medium remains, but each impression will differ from the first, and each will be unique. They may be left as they are, or reprinted with additional transfers.

The ink or paint used in a monotype is applied with a brush or rag or with the fingers, and will therefore vary in thickness and texture. The transfer to paper will reflect this diversity. The ink or paint may also spread or blur as it is blotted or absorbed by the paper. Usually, the paper is placed on top of the painting or drawing, and the transfer prints as a mirror image of the original.

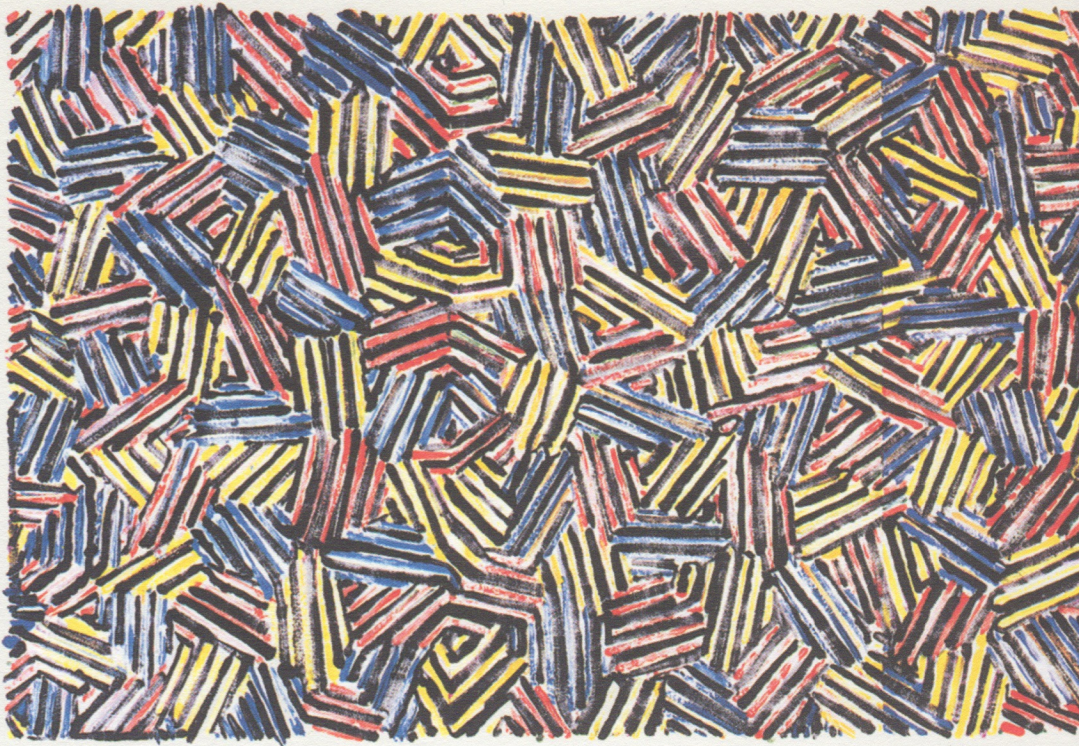
Jasper Johns's first monotypes, in 1978, incorporated lithographic plates intended for but ultimately not used in the series of six Savarin lithographs of the same year. The monotypes were printed on an offset proofing press, which transfers the ink to paper by means of a roller. This results in a double reversal, printing the drawing not as a mirror image, but in its original orientation. For the Savarin monotypes, the pressure was adjusted until the roller picked up only a thin layer of ink, making it possible to produce several unique impressions from each image.

For the first of the four images, the lithographic plate was inked in black and then painted over with colored inks. Two impressions were printed, on Japan paper. For the second image, the artist applied additional paint and his handprint over the ghost image of the first, and two impressions were printed on Twinrocker paper. The third image produced four impressions and one "cancellation," as did the fourth. These also employed the same method of adding color by hand to the inked lithographic plate, and were printed on Japan and Auvergne paper, respectively.



Savarin (1982) Monotype over lithograph, 50" x 38", 1/2

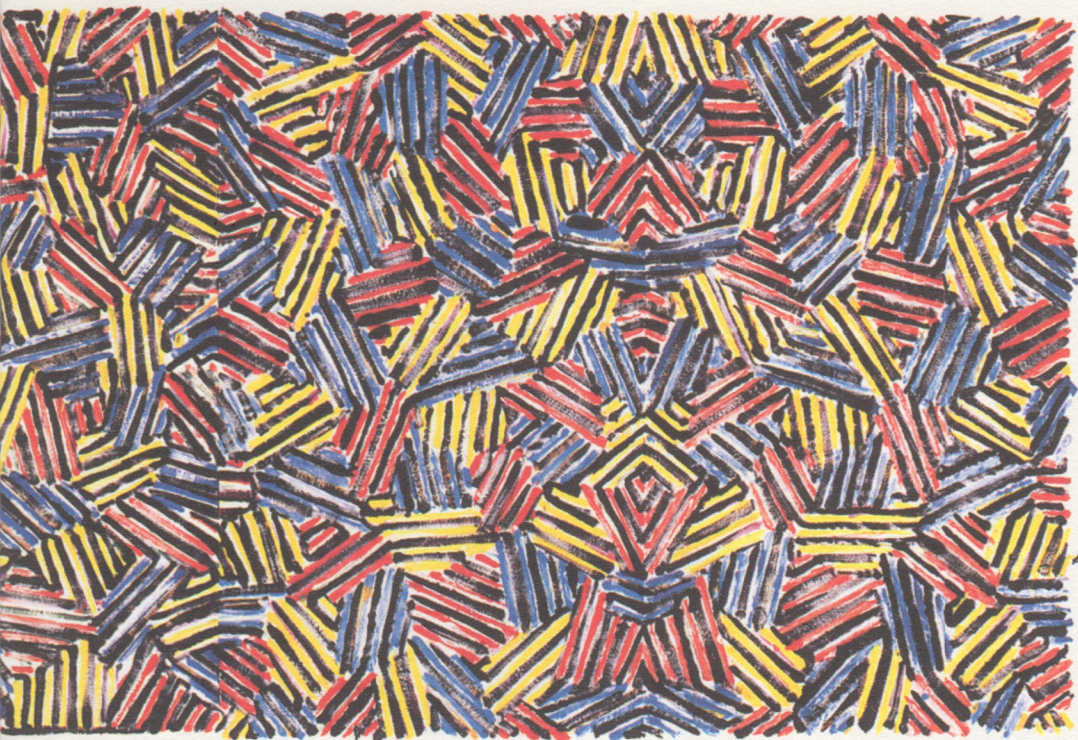
Four years later, Johns produced a series of thirty-three monotypes related to his large *Savarin* lithograph of 1981. Because of an unevenness in the paper's brightness, twenty-seven prints differed from the rest of the edition. Faced with the question of how to deal with these impressions, Johns chose not to destroy them, but to do something else, to transform them into monotypes. Working over a period of two weeks, using lithographic inks painted on Plexiglas, he created seventeen different images. Of these, eleven are monotypes printed over lithographs, with one to four variations printed from each image. Five are monotypes without the lithograph, and the last image of the series is a counterproof, produced by using the final monotype as a matrix, and transferring the drawing from paper to paper. As a result, this singular impression is printed in reverse.



Untitled (1983) Monotype, 37½" x 96½"

In 1983, Johns created a series of eighteen crosshatched monotypes during ten days of intense activity. Like the two previous projects, this series was produced at Universal Limited Art Editions in West Islip. An etching press was adapted with extensions to support the oversize sheets of paper, which measure 37½ x 96½ inches. Each monotype consists of five panels, each with a different pattern. Johns traced the patterns from his 1979 *Untitled* painting, and applied oil paint to Mylar sheets placed on top of the tracings. The five panels were printed in the same progression on all the monotypes; however, the first panel was printed on the first sheet of paper in the farthest left position, on the second sheet of paper in the next position, and so on, moving one position to the right on each additional sheet of paper. This movement of pattern was continued throughout the printing.

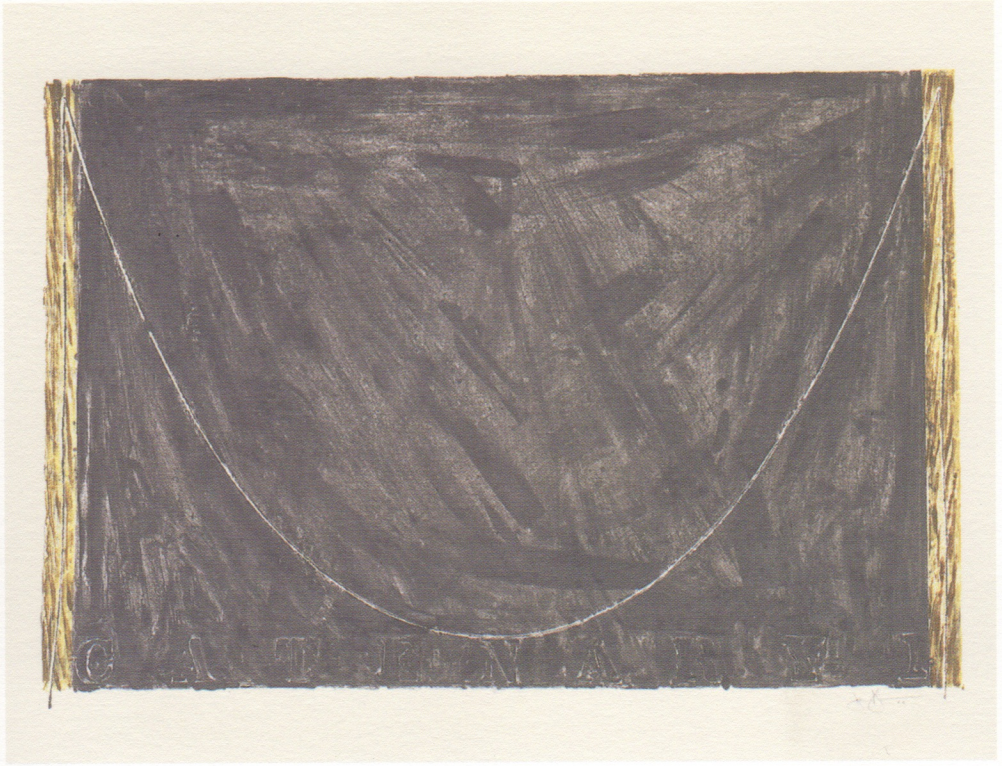
Simultaneously, the colors changed from monotype to monotype, from intense primaries to pale primaries, from intense secondaries to pale secondaries, and finally to black only. Black was also added as background to the hatch marks in several impressions, and gray and touches of opposing colors were added to specific areas. This complex system called for precise registration and attention to position, and required keeping the sheets in correct order. Color consistency had to be maintained within each monotype, and the printers carefully controlled and monitored the viscosity of the paint to achieve the desired density on each monotype. After the series was completed, Johns created a single monotype on a smaller scale using two of the five panels, painted in primary colors with a white background.



Untitled (1996) Monotype, 39" x 24³/₄"



Untitled (1996) Monotype, 41" x 23"



Catenary 1 (1999) Monotype, 27" x 37"

In 1996, Johns began to explore monotype techniques in his own studio. The first to be completed there were five monotypes incorporating a detail of the *Mona Lisa*. Similar details had appeared previously in other works, including three paintings, *Racing Thoughts* in both the 1983 and 1984 versions, and *Summer* in 1985. For the monotypes, the Leonardo image was silkscreened onto a Plexiglas plate that Johns repainted for each of the five monotypes.

In the same year, Johns created two monotypes that go far in blurring the differences between drawing and printmaking, in similar ways as the earlier monotypes blurred the differences between painting and printmaking. Both relate to the reflected *Green Angel* image in a 1994 pastel and charcoal drawing. A color version was drawn with water-soluble crayons onto frosted Mylar, the surface providing the necessary tooth to hold the pigment. Dampened paper under pressure activated the medium and caused the transfer. The black and white version was painted with a water-soluble ink that formed opaque puddles in places and was transparent in others, as in the artist's ink drawings on plastic. The transfer of dry ink to dampened paper achieved an effect that would not have been possible had the ink been applied directly to paper.

The most recent monotype to come from Johns's studio is titled *Catenary 1*, and relates to paintings completed in 1997 and 1998. A "catenary" is the curve assumed by a flexible cord or chain suspended from two points. Two small holes



Savarin (1978) Monotype, 26" x 21 1/2", B/B 1/2