

**PHILIP GUSTON / JASPER JOHNS**



## JASPER JOHNS AND PHILIP GUSTON!

Until recently this would have been an almost unthinkable pairing. After all, was it not Johns who froze the febrile gestures of the Abstract Expressionists while symbolically putting their manhood in a vise. At any rate, such has been the conventional wisdom since Johns emerged in the late 1950s painting cryptic forms in deliberate strokes that seemed to counter the Ab-Ex model at every level—in the slow speed of his marks, the density rather than space-claiming nature of his compositions, and the apparent emotional neutrality of his basic iconography of numbers, targets, flags, and maps. All the while, the young Turk's elders and legions of their followers continued to reenact existential anxiety and spontaneous self-definition painting after quivering painting.

To this well-worn canard add recent critiques of first generation New York School painting that focus on sexual politics and the suspect heroization of the mythic ruffians of the downtown avant-garde. Here Jackson Pollock plays the heavy and pays the price for a boyhood photo in Cowboy duds, an apprenticeship with all-American Tintoretto manqué, Thomas Hart Benton, and too much hard-drinking, he-manly posturing in Manhattan bars, even though the best of Pollock's work is characterized by an exquisitely responsive sensuality and delicacy. Here Johns's satirical puzzle-pictures—*Painting with Two Balls*, *Alley Oop* and others—are interpreted by various schools of thought as pointed double-entendres designed to undermine the supposedly unequivocal masculinity of Jack-the-Dripper and his cohort, though in the

or story-telling were, many ears remained deaf to them and some artists at whom the imperative was directed seem simply not to have heard because they were too busy reading. Guston in particular was a great reader and in addition to a voracious appetite for fiction—Kafka, Babel, Roth being high on his list—he read poetry of all kinds, but especially that of younger Americans such as Bill Berkson, Clark Coolidge, William Corbett, Ann Waldman and Frank O'Hara. For his part Johns has favored Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, who is an explicit source for works such as *Diver* and *Periscope* (Hart Crane) but also O'Hara to whom he dedicated a work titled after one of O'Hara's poems, *In Memory of My Feelings*. At the time it was painted in 1961—just three years after Johns's public breakthrough—it was among his most undisguised protests against the view that his art was the chill, unfeeling antithesis of Abstract Expressionism. Finally both Guston and Johns were devotees of Samuel Beckett, with whom Johns ultimately realized the "livre d'artiste," *Foivades/Fizzies*.

Setting the impact of poets aside, the parallel poetics of Johns's and Guston's works hinge primarily upon the uncanniness of the principle sign—or thought-objects they deploy, forms that seem to anchor their compositions yet render them and their meanings inherently unstable. A brief inventory of motifs suggests that some of the correspondences between the two artists are fairly straight-forward. The most "literary" of these images, naturally, is the book. And so, for example, Johns once attached an open book to a canvas and painted over the text thereby transforming it into a bas-relief, and

a linguistically mute emblem representing the thing it formerly was in actuality. Guston's oeuvre is replete with floppy books resembling massive tablets on the one hand, and, just as biblically, "The Book" as archetype, on the other. Attributes or scenes of the artist's studio that hint at or effectively are self-portraiture also appear frequently in Johns as well as Guston. The latter depicted himself both as a jowly, stubbly monster and as a Ku Klux Klammann, while in *Souvenir* the former had his impassive Photomat likeness screened on to a saucer he then incorporated into a painted montage and later reprised lithographically. The image of the canvas in front of which the saucer sits is a gray monochrome, and as such strangely similar to the grayish red monochrome that Guston's Klammann stares at in one version of that subject and the green monochrome that hangs above his head in another. The impossibility of reading the expression on Johns's face or of seeing the face under the hood in the Guston works is correspondingly aligned with the basic inscrutability of painting itself. It is as if each time either of these artists removes one mask, another is exposed. What is revealed in each case is the obdurate but protean nature of the unknowable and the hidden.

In Guston's second treatment of this theme - and as much as they were for Johns and de Kooning, repetition and variation were essential to his aesthetic—the Klammann is looking at a naked light-bulb, also a staple in Johns' lexicon of mundane things, along with shoes, watches and coat hangers. For his part, Guston favored shoes, wall clocks, and irons, but the function of these pictorial nouns is to reference the humblest aspects of daily existence



while estranging them at the same time, and by that means lending them larger but always unreliable metaphoric dimensions. These dimensions are further amplified and complicated by previous art historical renditions such as the shoes of Van Gogh—tokens of mortal being—or the disparate, timeless still lifes of de Chirico with their immobilized clocks, though Johns rarely indulges in overtly metaphysical symbolism and Guston only does so with a still more overt grotesquery. Along the same lines coincidentally, in 1979 Johns and Guston pictured brushes plunged into paint covered receptacles—a Savarin coffee tin in the case of Johns and a sauce pan the case of Guston, who may have eyed his variant as a way of entering into direct dialogue with Johns who had long meditated on the Savarin tin prior to this date. Both images resonate with the compound connotations of beginnings and endings, the intuitive generation of imagery and the suspension or exhaustion of that process, the attraction-repulsion of the colored dirt—that is what Guston called oil paint—and noxious liquids from which beauty is extracted and the mess to which the tools that create such beauty return at the end of the day.

Such variously evocative physicality is plainly manifest in the visual weight of the pigments Guston and Johns used and the tactility of their generally rich paint handling. On both sides of this equation, mastery is a matter of the balance between ambiguity and bluntness. Nowhere is this more crucial than in the numerous works Johns has made using radically simplified details of the human face in combination with other pictographic devices for and quasi-naturalistic representations of watches, wooden slats, veils and

handkerchiefs, the Milky Way, plus one pure riddle of a shape that was the puzzling protagonist of many works in the 1990s.

Guston often fragmented the human form, and, in portraits of his wife Musa and others, more or less codified the horizon-hugging, floating eyeball that resurfaces in Johns's work like a snail crawling the inside of a glass tank. But the poignant dispersal and identity threatening dissociation of facial features is Johns's alone. So doing he manages to turn the entire rectangle of the framing sheet or canvas with its internal armatures and decentering separation of parts-to-whole into a ceaselessly morphing countenance in which the alternatively bold, tender, comic, sensuous, awkward and virtuosic touch of the artist becomes the means of summoning deep emotions without the object of that emotion ever emerging from or coalescing out of the contradictory state of shapely definition and structural indefiniteness in which Johns locates and we discover them. For true and truth telling ambivalence to achieve this pitch of intensity, its counter terms must be jarring as well as subtle, lyric as well as prosaic, thought as well as felt. Despite real and supposed differences, Johns and Guston had many things in common, but it was such extremes of understanding and such a range of expression that keeps the sympathetic harmonies and dissonances between them vibrating.

BROOKE ALEXANDER





















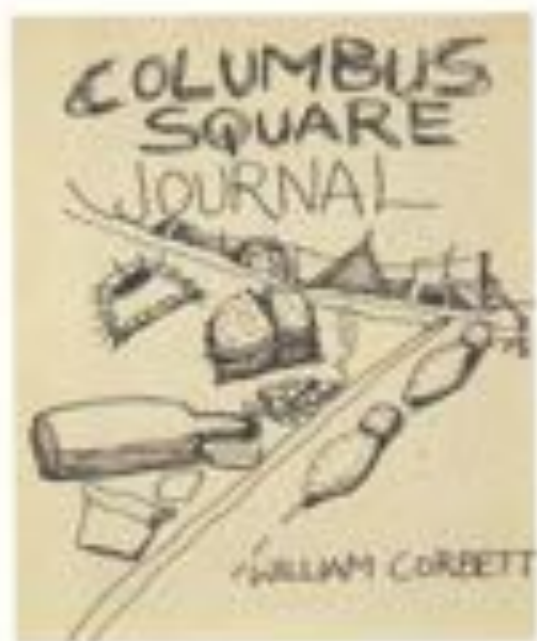


















LEO CASTELLI

















**BROOKE ALEXANDER**

1. Philip Guston, *Untitled*, 1979  
Oil on linen  
36 x 32 in. / 91.4 x 81.3 cm.  
Courtesy McKee Gallery, NY

2. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1983  
Encaustic on canvas  
30 1/2 x 45 1/4 in. / 77.5 x 115 cm.  
Collection of the artist

3. Philip Guston  
*Untitled Drawing for 'Enigma Variations'*  
ink on paper  
8 x 17 in. / 45.7 x 43.2 cm.  
Collection Bill Berkson

4. Jasper Johns, *Study for Ventriloquist*, 1983  
Watercolor on paper  
8 1/2 x 6 in. / 21 x 15.2 cm.  
Collection of the artist

5. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1988  
Watercolor and pencil on paper  
24 1/2 x 35 1/2 in. / 62.5 x 90.2 cm.  
Collection of the artist

6. Philip Guston, *East Side*, 1980  
Lithograph  
32 1/2 x 42 1/2 in. / 83.2 x 108 cm.  
Edition of 50

7. Philip Guston, *Untitled*, 1977  
ink on paper  
19 x 24 in. / 48.3 x 61 cm.  
Courtesy Locks Gallery Philadelphia

8. Jasper Johns  
*Ventriloquist (JLAE 8233)*, 1986  
Color lithograph  
47 1/2 x 29 in. / 106 x 73.7 cm.  
Edition of 69

9. Jasper Johns, *Souvenir 2*, 1969  
Graphite pencil, watercolor and ink on paper  
17 1/2 x 13 1/4 in. / 43.8 x 34.3 cm.  
Collection of the artist

10. Philip Guston, *Untitled*, 1969  
Crayon on paper  
16 x 19 in. / 40.6 x 48.3 cm.  
Private Collection

11. Jasper Johns, *Savarin (JAE)*, 1977-81  
Color lithograph  
50 x 38 in. / 127 x 96.5 cm.  
Edition of 60

12. Philip Guston, *Fire Exit*  
ink on paper  
16 x 11 in. / 40.6 x 27.9 cm.  
Courtesy Joan Sonnabend/  
Obelisk Gallery, Boston

13. Philip Guston, *Painter*, 1980  
Lithograph  
32 x 42 1/2 in. / 81.3 x 108 cm.  
Edition of 50

14. Philip Guston, *Untitled*, 1978  
Oil on canvas  
42 x 48 in. / 106.7 x 121.9 cm.  
Private Collection

15. Jasper Johns, *Land's End*, 1979  
Lithograph  
57 1/2 x 36 1/2 in. / 131.5 x 92.1 cm.  
Edition of 70

16. Philip Guston, *Hand and Cigar*, 1979  
ink on paper  
17 1/2 x 14 in. / 43.8 x 35.6 cm.  
Private Collection

17. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1962  
Graphite pencil, graphite wash, and masking  
tape on paper, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. /  
35.3 x 27.7 cm.  
Collection of the artist

18. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1990  
Watercolor and pencil on paper  
28 x 19 1/2 in. / 71.1 x 49.3 cm.  
Collection of the artist

19. Philip Guston  
*Untitled (Man Smoking in Bed)*, 1974  
India ink on paper  
19 x 23 1/2 in. /  
48.3 x 60.3 cm.  
Private Collection

20. Philip Guston, *Head (Stranger)*, 1968  
ink on paper  
18 x 22 1/2 in. / 45.7 x 57.2 cm.  
Collection Janie C. Lee

21. Jasper Johns, *Summer*, 1985  
Charcoal on paper  
30 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. / 77.2 x 51.9 cm.  
Collection of the artist

22. Jasper Johns, *The Sevens*, 1989  
ink on plastic  
26 x 58 in. / 66 x 147.3 cm.  
Collection of the artist

23. Philip Guston, *Red Picture*, 1969  
Oil on panel  
24 x 26 1/2 in. / 61 x 67.6 cm.  
Collection of Anne & Robert Lehman,  
Washington D.C.

24. Jasper Johns  
*Skin with O'Hara Poem*, 1983-85  
Lithograph on engineer paper  
22 x 34 in. / 56 x 86.4 cm.  
Edition of 30  
Private Collection

25. Philip Guston, *Negative*, 1973  
ink on paper  
24 x 19 in. / 61 x 48.3 cm.  
Collection Bill Berkson

26. Jasper Johns, *English Light Bulb*, 1979  
ink on polyester film  
10 1/2 x 14 1/2 in. / 27.1 x 36.7 cm.  
Collection of the artist

27. Jasper Johns, *Lightbulb*, 1957  
Graphite wash and pencil on paper  
15 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. / 38.9 x 11.7 cm.  
Collection of the artist

28. Philip Guston, *Columbus Square Journal*  
ink on paper  
17 x 14 in. / 43.2 x 35.6 cm.  
Courtesy Joan Sonnabend/  
Obelisk Gallery, Boston

**LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION**

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Janie C. Lee  
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Soyun Locks  
DeCourcy McIntosh  
McKee Gallery  
Edward F. Miller  
Private Collection, NY  
Collection of Smithsonian American Art  
Museum, Washington, DC  
Whitney Museum of American Art, NY  
Juan Sonnabend / Obelisk Gallery  
Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum  
& Gallery, Skidmore College, NY

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