

# Jasper Johns *Copy/Trace*

Curated by Jeffrey Weiss

May 7–June 26, 2026  
537 West 20th Street, New York, 2nd Floor



Jasper Johns, *Study for Skin I*, 1962. Charcoal and oil on paper. The Art Institute of Chicago, Regenstein Endowment Fund, 2025.434.1 © 2026 Jasper Johns / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of works by American artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930) at the gallery's West 20th Street location in New York. Conceived by independent curator Jeffrey Weiss, the exhibition focuses on related approaches to process in the artist's practice, together signified by the terms *copy* and *trace*.

On view are drawings and prints spanning the 1960s through the 2010s that demonstrate the various ways Johns has deployed methods of copying and tracing as means of representation—by *copying* one of his own paintings, by leaving an imprint, or *trace*, of the body, or by *tracing* an existing image through a translucent support. Comprising important works borrowed from museums and private collections as well as a selection of loans from Johns's personal collection, *Jasper Johns: Copy/Trace* illuminates a significant throughline in the artist's practice and provides new insights into the relation of meaning to making in his work.

As curator Jeffrey Weiss writes:

Broadly speaking, Johns's pictorial work—painting, drawing, and printmaking—reflects an intensive application of material means. Much is said about iconography in his oeuvre: the flag, the map, the target, and the number, as well as numerous other figures drawn from sources both well-known and obscure. Johns largely denies the symbolic significance of chosen motifs, even as he accepts the inevitability of their allusive charge. Perhaps most important is that a Johns work is, to paraphrase the artist, both object and image. Across decades, single figures and signs are relentlessly transformed. "I am," he said, "concerned with a thing's not being what it was."<sup>1</sup>

Johns has long deployed multiple ways of producing work, self-imposed methods of restriction through which, counterintuitively, invention is set free. Such procedures include repetition, rotation, superimposition, and reversal, along with changes in medium, color, format, and scale. In this context, three direct forms of representation are fundamental.

Two can be designated by the term *trace*—trace as both noun and verb. The first is the trace of the body: a series of works solely containing direct imprints in oil and charcoal on paper of Johns's head, face, hands, pelvis, or torso. The imprint is revealed by the application of charcoal in broad strokes. The second is that of *tracing*: literally, using ink to trace an existing image—typically a photograph in a magazine or book—onto a sheet of translucent Mylar. The traced image is often obfuscated by intricate patterns of pooled ink and water-based paint, a technique of controlled chance well-served by the fluidity of the medium and the non-absorptive nature of the plastic support. The third form of representation relating to Johns's restriction of means is that of the *copy*: the depiction through drawing of given examples of the artist's own painted work.

Together, the three means of representation are, as operations, unassuming and direct, but their implications—presence and absence, actuality and metaphor, memory and forgetting—can be haunting and complex. At stake is a recursive poetics of representation grounded in the process of the work.

The exhibition at David Zwirner includes works on paper from the 1960s and early 1970s that exemplify Johns's nascent and ongoing interest in using the body as both subject and tool, including a suite of four major drawings on loan from the Art Institute of Chicago, *Study for Skin I-IV* (1962). The artist produced these by coating his face and hands with oil which he pressed into the paper before then covering these imprints with broad strokes of charcoal, resulting in spectral images that grow more abstract with each iteration.

Other works on view showcase Johns's practice of producing variants or copies of his own work, such as *Target with Four Faces* from 1968 (Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, loan from Collection Jean-Christophe Castelli), for which the artist returned to one of his most iconic paintings over a decade after its creation (the 1955 work of the same title in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York), drawing in various mediums over a proof for a 1968 screenprint made after the same composition. *Disappearance II* and *Device* (both 1962; private collections) were Johns's first works in ink on plastic, a material approach that appealed to him because of what he termed its "independence." The works were made, respectively, after a 1961 painting in the collection of Toyama Prefectural Museum of Art and Design, Japan and a painting-assemblage from 1961–62 in the Dallas Museum of Art.

A significant group of works in the exhibition highlights Johns's tracing of reproductions of works by other artists from posters, books, and elsewhere. In *Tracing* (1978), Johns references two artists at once, having traced an impression of Jacques Villon's 1934 etching *The Bride*, which itself was made after Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting of the same title (Philadelphia Museum of Art). Examples of Johns copying works by other artists—Cézanne, Holbein, Picasso—over the following decades are also on view. Johns also traced other kinds of photographs. *Untitled*, a monotype from 2015 (Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland) and a rare instance of color in the show, is one of several works Johns made beginning in 2002 that reproduces photojournalist Larry Burrows's 1965 image of Marine Lance Corporal James C. Farley in Vietnam, seen distraught after a failed mission under his command—an image published in a 1965 issue of *Life* magazine but discovered by Johns in a book published in 2002.

*Jasper Johns: Copy/Trace* is the second exhibition curated for the gallery by Jeffrey Weiss, following *Ad Reinhardt: Print—Painting—Maquette* that was presented at the same location in 2024. Weiss, an independent curator and critic, is regarded for his monographic exhibitions and extensive scholarship on twentieth-century European and American art. Between 2010 and 2018, he was a senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, where, with Francesca Esmay, he co-organized the Panza Collection Initiative, an eight-year study project devoted to the institution's vast holdings in Minimal and Post-Minimal art. Weiss organized the celebrated 2007 exhibition *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965* during his tenure at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, where he was curator and head of modern and contemporary art from 2000 to 2008.

This exhibition coincides with two other projects devoted to this important artist: *Jasper Johns: Night Driver*, a retrospective of the artist's work on view at Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from May 29 to October 12, 2026; and *Jasper Johns: Flags*, at Craig Starr Gallery, New York, on view through June 27, 2026.

Jasper Johns (b. 1930) is among the most prominent and inventive American artists of the twentieth century. He was born in Augusta, Georgia and briefly studied art in South Carolina before moving in 1953 to New York, where he spent the majority of his adult life. He had his first solo exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958 and immediately gained renown for his groundbreaking, innovative use of common objects, repeated motifs, and found imagery. Over seven decades, Johns has developed a singular career that has both influenced and surpassed major movements including pop art, minimalism, and conceptualism. His work continues to upend traditional art-historical hierarchies and challenge the definition of what an artwork can be. In 2021, the two-venue retrospective *Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror* was on view simultaneously at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Johns lives and works in Sharon, Connecticut.

#### Notes

1. Jasper Johns in Gene Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Part 2." *Artnews* 62, no. 10 (February 1964), p. 43.

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