

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

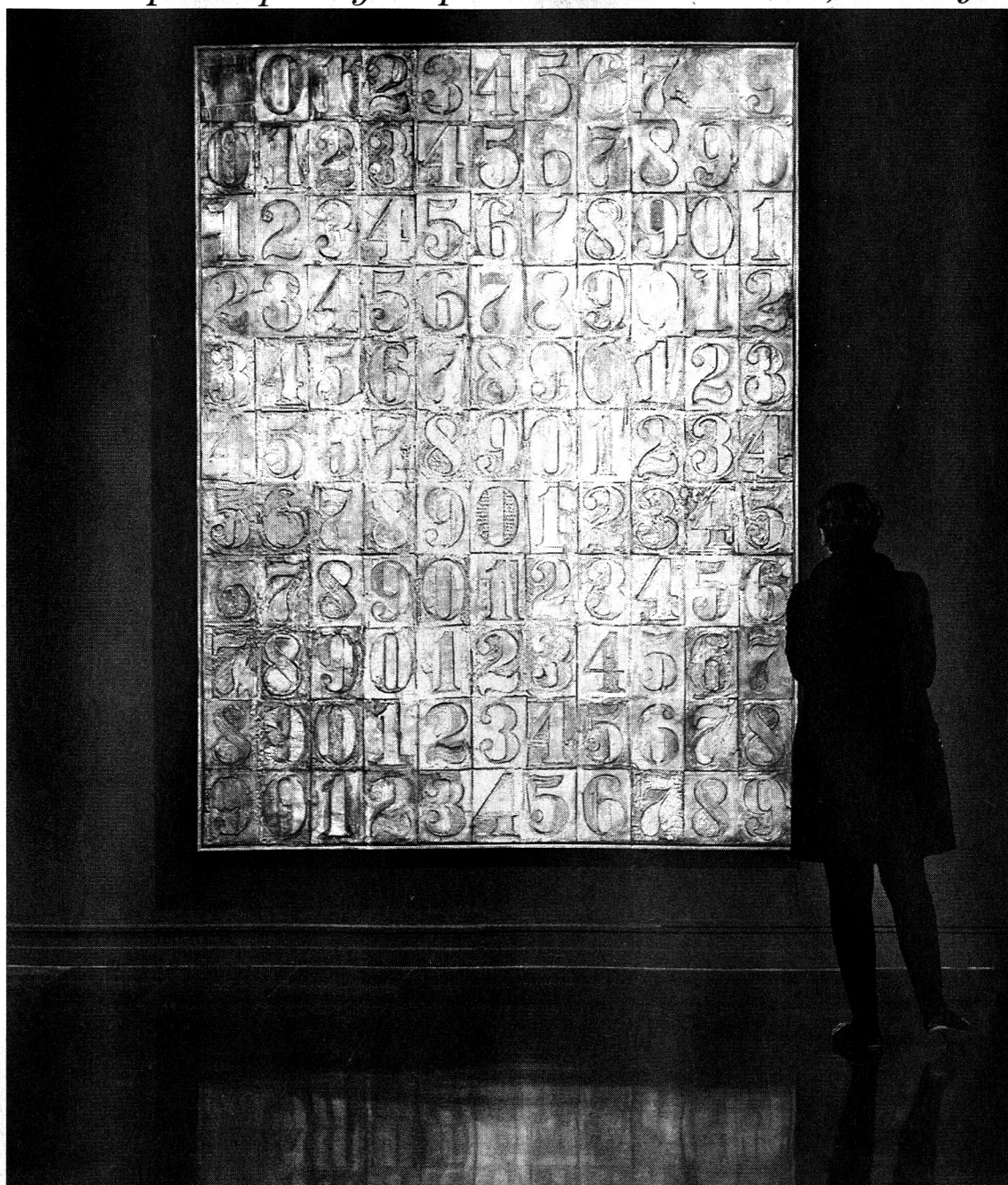
Financial Times

April 30 - May 1, 2011

p. 13

Meaning in the making

His paintings changed the course of art history in the 1950s. Now, at 80, Jasper Johns is preoccupied by sculpture. In a rare interview, he tells Julie Belcove why



Numerology Jasper Johns' 'Numbers', on show in Valencia earlier this month;

Jasper Johns is standing in his handsome, wood-panelled studio, housed in a shingled barn with wide-open views of rolling New England hills, looking at two pencil drawings propped against a wall. Made last year, each includes an image of a ladder – one broken – along with two figures in outline, a boy and a man. The man is but partly rendered; the line stops abruptly and, in contrast to the rest of the picture, which is shaded in grey, there is a haunting white void where his body ought to be.

The implication of absence is all the more poignant considering a remark Johns made a few minutes earlier. I'd asked how he thought he'd evolved in his more than 60 years as an artist, to which he replied, "It's very difficult to know, because it's a bit like ageing. In many ways you don't feel you've changed at all, and yet you're perfectly aware you have, and if you examine yourself in the mirror, you can point to the details." He laughed and added, "There's a little bit of Gertrude Stein: 'What's the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man?'"

A few weeks shy of 81, Johns says he's pretty much the same person he's always been, beginning with his bleak childhood in South Carolina, where he was shunted from relative to relative, and his arrival in New York City at the age of 19, determined to become an artist. "There was a lot of desire," he says, "and a lot of ineptitude."

That last bit has surely changed. One of contemporary art's great masters, he remains a vital practitioner. The past decade has proved an unusually fruitful late period. First came his "Catenary" series of paintings, grey canvases with strings slung between points, and on May 6 he will debut

Johns would have one believe his choice of imagery can be the result of something as banal as cleaning a studio

a batch of new sculptures at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York's Chelsea.

His hair is white now, his hands perhaps a little swollen. But his voice has not lost its rich, deep timbre and, even after a hard winter, his first here in Sharon, Connecticut – he has always fled to the Caribbean island of St Martin when the cold sets in – he does not seem frail. He is warm and courtly, true to his Southern roots, but he is also intensely private and notoriously elusive. At times it can be hard to tell whether he's being unnervingly straightforward or just ironic. Asked why, for example, he favours working in wax – his most famous paintings are encaustic, which is pigment in heated wax – he replies, "It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity."

Johns, who in the 1950s showed a way out of Abstract Expressionism and changed the course of art history with his startlingly brash canvases of flags and targets, hasn't been painting much in the last couple of years. Instead, he's been preoccupied with sculpture.

He has laboured on and off in metal in his career, but just why he turned his attention back to it so resolutely is a story that unravels like, well, a Johns artwork – that is, slowly, in layers, and with the

distinct sense that there is more to the mystery. The way Johns tells it – though not necessarily in the order – the architect Philip Johnson, a friend, commissioned him to make a piece for what is now the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center. "I did it probably because I needed the money," Johns says, sipping tea in a comfortable sitting room above his studio, lined with, among other treasures, a powerful grouping of de Kooning drawings.

Presiding over the theatre's lobby, "Numbers" (1964), an enormous grid of numerals – one of Johns' signature motifs – became iconic in its own right. Then, in 1999, 35 years after he made it, Lincoln Center decided to sell it for a reported \$15m. Johns, Johnson and a host of the cultural elite objected vociferously, in large part because the piece was made specifically for the site. It is also the artist's only public work. The performing arts centre backed down, shamefaced, but, Johns says, "When they found out it was worth a lot of money, they decided it needed protecting. The last time I saw it, it had Plexiglas in front of it and ropes in front of the Plexiglas." Johns was aghast at the display. "I thought if the work could be turned into metal, all this protection wouldn't be necessary."

He started experimenting and concluded he could safely cast the original, but the owners refused to give him the go-ahead. So, Johns says, "I just decided I would make a new piece since I knew how."

The result is "Numbers" (2007), a grid of numerals nought to nine repeating, like the original, in sequence. Carved in wax and then cast in aluminium, the wall sculpture, also like its antecedent, includes snatches of newspaper, a classic Johns touch, as well as a set of keys – perhaps a gentle chiding of the platoons of Johns watchers who would attempt to unlock his art's meaning. Near the upper right corner is a foot. It is an impression of Merce Cunningham's. Johns says he wanted to create a "clear reference" to the Lincoln Center piece, which also bears a subtle stamp of the avant-garde choreographer's appendage. (It was an inside joke: long ago, Johns wanted to get Cunningham's foot in the door there.)

Cunningham, who died in 2009, was a friend of Johns' for more than 50 years. He and his partner, the late composer John Cage, joined with Johns and artist Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s to form a four-some of mind-boggling creativity. Frequent collaborators, they bonded, Johns says, "through the sharing of ideas. The complexity of that grew over time." Once intensely close, Johns and Rauschenberg, who died in 2008, parted ways years ago.

Johns' economy of words is matched by an artistic thriftiness. It's as if he had an aversion to waste of any kind. His recycling of symbols has spawned countless doctorates and dissertations. Viewing his repetition as a possible "limitation", he would have one believe his choice of imagery can be the result of something as banal as cleaning a messy studio.

When he was straightening up in St Martin last year, he came across scraps of paper – shapes, sketches – which he then referenced for the new drawings. In what Johns describes as "fallout" from "Numbers", he literally pulled the original wax apart in sections to cast smaller sculptures. While most are darkly subdued bronze or aluminium, a shiny silver variation is hard to miss on a studio table. "It's so glamor-

ous," Johns says, sounding almost embarrassed and quickly noting that he made only one. "You don't want to do too many. They're quite showy."

Johns had to job-out the metal casting to a foundry, but he handled the polishing and patina himself back in the studio. Although he bucked the ever-growing trend to just phone it in, he is hesitant to preach the glories of the handmade. "I don't know if it's important or unimportant. It's just the way I behave," he says. He laughs and admits one reason is that often he doesn't know what he wants until he gets there. "There's always an aspect of uncertainty and something unknown that you're dealing with."

Delving into the unknown still seems to be the primary source of inspiration for

Asked why he favours working in wax, he replies: 'It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity'

Johns. Take another group of works in the Marks exhibition, made, no joke, from Shrinky Dinks, the children's craft material that contracts to one-third of its original size when baked in an oven. His, just a few inches tall, are unusually flat and symmetrical; in amateurs' hands they tend to curl, distorting the image. "There were a few failures," he insists.

For another series of prints, he mined the sign-language alphabet. After ordering a set of sign-language rubber stamps online, he redrew the hand symbols and e-mailed his version to the company, which made him a new set to his specifications. Known to sign his canvases by stencilling his name, Johns chose to spell it in sign language this time around. The prints, like much of Johns' oeuvre, could be read as a meditation on communication.

But don't bother asking Johns. He much prefers viewers come up with their own conclusions.

"So much of the meaning to me is in the making," he explains. "While that's going on, there's shifts of thought and associations and paths of development you want to follow and you want to avoid. Somehow the viewer can have a somewhat similar experience of determining. It sounds corny, but you have a sense of being alive when you encounter the thing."

When I ask if has given thought to his legacy, he replies, "What does legacy mean?" I throw out a standard definition. He pauses in his deliberate manner, staring out a window, and finally answers, "No."

"I think about what I'm doing. I sometimes think about what I have done. I don't have any real sense of what the world needs or what it will be," he continues. "No, I'm just here."

Jasper Johns: New Sculpture and Works on Paper, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, May 7-July 1. www.matthewmarks.com



the artist receives the Medal of Freedom from President Obama in February 2011; Johns in 1968, in front of his print edition 'Numerals'

Photoshot, AP, Corbis