

reviews

Jasper Johns

Matthew Marks

Jasper Johns continues to dazzle with this rich show of nine sculptures and 20 works on paper. Although there was great variation among the pieces, all seem magically linked by encoded messages and allegorical reverberations.

The sculptures are rectangular plaques made of bronze, white bronze, aluminum, or silver marked with Johns's signature numbers, usually laid out in two sequences: 0 to 4 on the upper level, 5 to 9 on the lower. Johns's conceit is to treat 0 as an integer, in effect turning 9 into 10. In this way, he plays the idea of 3, traditional symbol of spiritual unity, off against 10, Aristotle's perfect number, an image of spiritual achievement.

These esoteric numerical elements are linked to other occult ideas, all of which suggest a code, a means to transmit secret messages. This notion of secrets hidden where anyone can see them continues in Johns's incorporation of sign-language hand gestures, a visual mystery for those who can hear.

Johns thickens the mystery with details, some autobiographical and some so personal as to be unfathomable: Merce Cunningham's footprint appears on the bronze plaque *0-9 (with Merce's Footprint)*, 2009. The footprint could allude to a birth certificate, which in bronze, becomes an elegiac commemoration of a lost friend, a death

certificate. In *0-9* (2008), house keys are inscribed on a silver plaque. Might the noble metal imply they are mystical keys to knowledge or an inner reality? The plaques, evoking those once bolted to locomotive steam engines, are charged with mystical energy, and tell something of the locomotive's history. By extension, Johns's plaques can be viewed as self-portraits.

In the aluminum *Numbers* (2007), about 108 by 83 by 2 inches, Johns extends his obsession with the 0-to-9 pattern to eleven rows of numbers. This commemoration is personal: Johns is courting his own immortality.

The drawings, which contrast with the plaques, fall into three categories. In one, Johns revives the picture puzzle of the vase that might be two faces in profile. In *Shrinky Dink 2* (2011), the vase occupies the center of the image while the two faces in profile stare at a human figure within the vase. Inside that encased figure is another humanoid image, perhaps Johns's secret self.

Installed in a separate room was a fascinating combination of works on paper and sculpture, including four works, all dealing with a fragment of a letter from van Gogh to the artist Émile Bernard (ca. December 1887). Johns printed the quoted section backward, thus turning van Gogh's friendly words into a Leonardoesque mystery. Van Gogh talks about the need to transcend the ego: "I believe that the first condition for success is to put aside petty jealousies; it's only unity that makes strength. It's well

worth sacrificing selfishness, the 'each man for himself,' in the common interest." These ideas, incorporated into the small collage *Fragment of a Letter* (2009), provide clues to Johns's relationship to tradition and the language of art. He quotes, in translation, another artist, taking his words, that is, his art, out of context and transforming them into something new, whose meaning we long to understand but which remains tantalizingly out of reach.

—Alfred Mac Adam



Jasper Johns, *Numbers*, 2007, aluminum, 107 5/8" x 83" x 2 1/4".