

Fragments According to Johns: an Interview with Jasper Johns*

In the following interview, Jasper Johns discusses his lithographic series *Fragment – According to What*, made at Gemini G.E.L. in 1971. The interview took place in Los Angeles in 1971.

John Coplans: *I understand the six handprinted lithographs are fragments from the painting According to What (1964). If I remember correctly, the painting consists of several linked panels. How many are there?*

Jasper Johns: Six, I believe – either five or six.

So each print relates to one of the panels of the painting?

No, not really, because *Hinged Canvas* and *Leg and Chair* relate to the same panel. *Bent “Blue”* is from the lower part of the lettering. *Bent Stencil* is from the lower part of the center of the painting. *Coathanger and Spoon* is from the lower right side of the painting. *Bent “U”* is just an element of *Bent “Blue.”*

How did you transfer these images from the paintings to the prints?

I used photographs. The leg, the bent stencil, the letters, and the coathanger all derive from photographs I had specially made. A lot of the perspective of things in the drawing of the prints is derived from photographs, so in certain situations I thought it easier to use the actual photograph than to avoid it.

You did say the complexity of the letters “blue” would have been a horrible task to render in drawing?

Well, actually I couldn't have done it because in the original painting they are fake. I can tell you what happened: I had aluminum letters cast for the painting – red, yellow, blue – and it was my intention to bend all the letters of the word blue. I took them out on the terrace and began hammering at them, and I couldn't make them bend because they were too thick and resistant. So I had to send them back to the man that made them, who also couldn't bend them. He had to saw into them, then bend them and fill in the joints with solder, so the letters are not literal, they suggest something they are not. All of the letters – red, yellow, and blue – are painted

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backwards as a mirror image; then between the painted image is a hinge carrying the three-dimensional bent letters.

You've used the words red, yellow, blue a lot in your paintings.

I've used all the primary and secondary colors as words.

What are the elements of Bent Stencil in the actual painting?

They are just circles in squares. The squares are treated as value, a kind of progression from white to black; the colors are a spectrum progression – yellow to orange, then it skips. To explain that: yellow, green, blue, violet, red, orange are right out of the spectrum, but adding and subtracting – yellow plus blue equals green; minus yellow equals blue; plus red equals violet; minus blue equals red; plus yellow equals orange; plus black equals brown; minus orange equals black; plus white equals gray; minus black equals white; The only place where there is any disturbance in the order is with the brown, which always seems to me to be a separate color. Then the value scale went from white through gray to black, and then from dark to light again by adding a violet.

The prints refer to...?

The piece of metal attached to the painting is the template I used to paint all the circles; when I got to the bottom I bent it and attached it to the lower part of the painting.

The drawing in Coathanger and Spoon is quite different from the painting.

It is as though the coathanger was positioned flat against the surface, traced onto the canvas and then bent away. So the gray represents the tracing of the coathanger before it was bent, and the black is the coathanger bent backwards.

The spoon is on a piece of wire attached to the canvas?

No, it's on a piece of wire attached to the coathanger, but loose, swinging in the air.

What about Leg and Chair?

The first time I used this kind of element was in Japan, in a painting called *Watchman* (1964), in which I did a section of figure seated in a chair. It was used with the realistic or imitative surface shown forward. After I finished the painting, I invited various people to come and look at it. My Japanese friends all went up against the

painting to look behind to see how it was made. So when I made this painting, which I already had in mind, I turned it the other way to show the back of the cast, as it were, or the inside of the cast rather than the outside.

Where does the title According to What come from?

I made it up. Recently I found something on this wording. I think the note appearing in my sketchbook goes like "somewhere there is the question of seeing *clearly*, seeing *what*, according to *what*." And that's where the title came from.

The hinged canvas is at the bottom of According to What, face to the painting and signed on the back. I presume the print is of the image concealed on the inner face of the hinged canvas. Does the Hinged Canvas lithograph correspond pretty much to the original image?

Yes, fairly exactly. In the painting the canvas is hinged and drops to the floor. The print simultaneously shows the hinged canvas closed and open. On the face of the canvas is the shadow of Duchamp.

But in the original painting everything is flat – there is no illusion of perspective.

Yes, but in the print I just made the image symmetrical, so the top is the same as the bottom.

And the reference to Duchamp?

Duchamp did a work which was a torn square (I think it's called something like *Myself Torn to Pieces*). I took a tracing of the profile, hung it by a string and cast its shadow so it became distorted and no longer square. I used that image in the painting. There is in Duchamp a reference to a hinged picture, which of course is what this canvas is. Beyond that I don't know what to say because I work more or less intuitively.

And the black splattered blob to the side of the Duchamp profile with the trickle coming down?

I sprayed that with a spray gun.

But does that have a particular reference?

The painting was made up of different ways of doing things, different ways of applying paint, so the language becomes somewhat unclear. If you do everything from one position, with consistency, then everything can be referred to that. You understand the devia-

tion from the point to which everything refers. But if you don't have a point to which these things refer, then you get a different situation, which is unclear. That was my idea.

In the original painting you applied paint by brush. Are there so many different ways of applying paint?

It's applied through a stencil, it's applied with the idea of an image of Marcel, it's applied with air – with spray. I think this is also the first painting that I let drips go sideways – I turned the painting to let this happen. It has squares and circles of paint, is shaded and unpainted and all that kind of thing. I tried to involve the paint in the area of thought that moves from representation to material or dimensional objects, and tried to make them all equal, more or less.

Were the shadows ever a concern to you?

The shadows change according to what happens around the painting. Everything changes according to that. Everything changes according to something, and I tried to make a situation that allows things to change.

Back to the prints. Did you try any other aspects of the painting and not use them?

No, I didn't. What I did was to take those things which are elements and are more or less lost in the painting, and made these details the subjects of the painting.

You dropped the use of the wide range of color as used in the painting.

The prints are all in various cold and warm grays.

What is the portion of a comic on the top right-hand corner of Bent "Blue"?

In the print each image is different – that area is a monotype.

Of the sixty-six numbered prints in the edition, each is different?

Yes, each is a different fragment of newsprint – comics, want ads, sports, all kinds of things.

One would never deduce that from a single print.

You would never deduce it from looking at one print because you tend to think that the prints are all the same.

Are any of the other prints different in this way?

No, only Bent "Blue."

And all the prints employ the same range of color?

Yes, except in the newsprint in *Bent "Blue,"* which is a direct transfer from the newspaper.

What is the multicolored arrowed line on Bent "U"?

Just to indicate the line at which the letters are bent.

It also repeats the colors red, yellow, and blue as used in the lettering on the painting. I notice the double arrowed line across Coathanger and Spoon also repeats the colors.

In both situations it represents a line which is turned back. The words "hinge" are also in spectrum colors. I use the spectrum colors at every point where a part has the ability to turn in a different way.

Why did you cross out your signature on Hinged Canvas with blue lines?

Well, I didn't cross it out. The cross was there before I signed it, but I planned to sign it that way. I have deliberately taken Duchamp's own work and slightly changed it, and thought to make a kind of play on whose work it is, whether mine or his.

Why did you cross out the printed matter in Bent "Blue" in the same way?

In a sense to say it is of no importance, because in *Bent "Blue,"* that area is constantly changing, so it's not too important what's there. But obviously it's of great importance what's there, because that is what is there. But it could be anything else – that or the next image.

Apart from color, did you use as great a variety of techniques in the lithographs as in the paintings?

No, what I did in the prints was to get rid of color and replace it with a gray field – gray, gray-violet and that kind of thing. Where I've used color, like red, yellow, and blue, the colorful elements generally would be those normally without color – as an indication they are directions, for instance, to bend something.

Some of the prints are also signed in different colors. Hinged Canvas is signed in purple, Leg and Chair in blue, Coathanger and Spoon in green. Do you have any general remarks on the prints – something that came to mind as you were making the lithographs?

Without exception, the prints are highly representational. In every case, objects are represented, so they are very conventional illustra-

tions. But in making what is a detail in the painting – and is often lost – the subject of each print, I made it more obvious, I think. What I did then was to print them in such a way that the suggestion of other things happening occurred. One of the ways I chose to do this is not to center the printing on the paper. Only the subject is centered, so the printing runs off the paper without margins. In every case they bleed, and this suggests they are fragments of something else.