

Subject matter is one of the ways in which the modern tradition distinguishes itself from the great tradition. Metaphoric, conceptual, self-conscious art denies the need for a Zeus and Leda, a passion of Christ, or a sad clown painted on a field of velvet. The vitality of the art of Jasper Johns is in the subject and his treatment of it. A flag, a can of beer, a sequence of numbers can carry as much intellectual, emotional, and sensual excitement as a group of tearful, big-eyed Keane urchins on a street in the rain. The fact that a sequence of numbers is worth getting worked up about is what I will look at in this essay.

Jasper Johns' 'numbers' prints that I will discuss date between 1960 and 1969. 0-9 is a series of ten lithographs from 1963. There were three sets of this series, A-C; we are concerned with series A, in black ink on off-white paper. The composition of each lithograph is the same. The upper third of the page contains the numbers 0-9, set into ten rectangles that remind one of children's blocks. The rectangles are arranged in two rows of five across. There is a white border around the two rows. Below this is a large number in a rectangle, easily three times the size of one of the smaller ones but otherwise identical in typeface and proportion. Every print has a different lower number, 0-9; and each is very different. Zero is dissonant, with motion in many directions that does not resolve. Three is faded like a pair of old denim jeans gets from long use; the curl at the lower tip of the number looks like the line in the back pocket worn by a can of chewing tobacco. Four is sparse with only the outline of the number and five or so gestural crayon marks. Six looks like a grave rubbing made by a child, and eight looks like a number chiseled crisply into that gravestone. Nine has a dense scratchy texture that only lets enough information through so that the viewer can see the number nine. The rows of numbers at the top of each image vary as much as the images underneath. The range of tone used to create these effects is extremely wide. Rosenblum writes:

. . . the sweeping range of light values that run, characteristically for Johns, an all-encompassing gamut from the somberest blacks to the most luminous whites . . . the intermediate light values are no less remarkable; for the oily density of the lithographic crayon . . . permits the artist all manner of marvelously twinkling phenomena . . .

A single lithograph with the same title from the same year depicts the same ten numerals overlaid directly on one another. Lines are smudged and their thickness is uneven, but a steady hand is still evident. A later version of the same process, superimposition of the numbers 0-9, is handled differently in 1969's Numbers. The medium is still evident in a few scratchy and gestural areas but the overall effect is very different. Instead of allowing the lines of the ten numbers to intersect one another, Johns has joined them and exposed the underlying whiplash curves, creating a delicate structure apparently pulled from the front of Carson Pirie Scott.

These images only scratch the surface of Johns' 'numbers' prints. Numerals are a perfect subject for Johns, for several reasons. The numbers clearly reference the lithographic medium. Numbering reproduced works, which works have numerals as their subject, makes a play on words (on numerals?) with the value associated with certain series in a print run. Why would any number be more valuable than any other, when they are now printed with permanent numbers? He uses numbers as an obvious guideline by which to work. Rosenblum writes:

If the given data of the numbers are inflexible in pattern and sequence, the aesthetic means that define them are of a bountiful freedom.□

By liberating himself from any type of formal guideline save a numerical sequence, Johns concentrates his energy on formal issues of design.

The numbers series also comment on the mass media in our society. The print media are a sterile medium of reproduction, the goal being that every copy is identical to the last. They are reproductions, but painterly reproductions, reflecting the visual texture of the original drawings with the added variation from print to print. Johns insists on adding his hand, eye, gut, to the equation.

Johns' numeral prints are as striking today as they were thirty-five years ago. In the exhaustive grasping and complicated reflexiveness of post-modernism and whatever is beginning to respond to post-modernism, the stark directness of his swatches of black on white are hypnotic and the range in between is blinding. Numerals are simple symbols without the capacity for complex puns or societal double-referencing. The viewer doesn't need a masters in art history to appreciate the meaning (the word 'value' would be a pun) of a number. Johns' careful treatment of the typefaces suggests admiration for its designer; his rendering of the numerals into an art nouveau facade in 1969's Numbers shows his respect for and love of solid design principles and a desire to pay them homage. Like Liechtenstein, Johns is aware of and interested in his medium, in the physicality and nuance betrayed by process. Unlike Liechtenstein, he doesn't stylize these artifacts of his medium; nuance is left to speak for itself. Liechtenstein is clean and Johns is 'painterly.'

These prints have become even more significant than they were when they were first exhibited, because design and typeface issues have become everyday ones for the general population. We are armed with libraries of fonts and the wherewithal to use them, likely without any understanding of what really differentiates one from the next. Even if we were the fair-haired children of the VisCom department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the physicality of 0-9 (the single lithograph) would cause reassessment of the ease with which we call this type of information from magnetic storage on a hotrodded Macintosh. Because we don't know the printing process anymore, and artists

who are involved in it appear more and more like members of the Society for Creative Anachronisms every year. We do everything on a computer, printing and photography and video and sound, and when we see work that reminds us of the labor it took to get us to where printing and photography and video and sound are effortless, and how much skill and thought it takes to create a consistent typeface, we eventually realize that something significant has changed in the face of friendly access to easy design tools and that maybe people won't learn to do things like design type by hand, and that maybe we face a future of pristine laser printer edges and effortless reproductions, digital sound with no needle pops or tape hiss, no consciousness of the medium but for its absence, and it is a little scary. Johns doesn't encourage us to wear chain mail and traipse around in the woods calling one another 'thou,' but the numeral prints encourage us to understand and appreciate what we lose. In 1995 we love Johns' work because we miss seeing the hand of the artist, shaky and steady, assertive and hesitant, sensual, intellectual, and human.

Rosenblum, Robert. "Jasper Johns: The Magic of Numbers." Jasper Johns: Printed Symbols. 1990, Walker Art Center.