



Jasper Johns, *Flag on Orange Field*, 1977  
ink on plastic, 15 11/16" x 11 13/16". Craig F. Starr.

**reviews:** new york

## Jasper Johns

**Craig F. Starr**

Jasper Johns first painted and drew on Mylar-like plastic sheeting in 1962, and he has periodically returned to the material ever since. This small exhibition moved through an entire career's worth of imagery and interests to reveal the artist's intriguing, not to mention circuitous, journey. It showed how an artist known for his instinctive introversion and fascination with process made his own art a core element of his subject matter.

Among the pieces here were new reworkings of paintings like *Device* (1961–62) and the 1977 version of *Flag on Orange Field*—a particularly perverse example, given that it was produced in black ink—and studies of originally sculptural motifs like the Savarin coffee can, in *Untitled* (1977), and the Ballantine cans, in *Ale Cans III* (1974). Much of the vitality that these ink-on-plastic versions expose in their subjects derives from the materials themselves; typically, Johns maintains an enthusiasm for a technique that other artists might see as a battle against recalcitrant materials. The plastic sheeting that he uses is nearly impermeable, and so when the ink is applied in anything other than a finely drawn line, it slops around the picture surface until it eventually dries. Johns, it seems, sees this as an advantage, as it compromises his mark-making intentions and keeps his personality out of the work.

But, as is almost always the case with Johns, things are not quite that simple. As a picture like *Land's End* (1982) makes plain, Johns is in consummate control of this technique, and if he allows the ink to puddle or blot, he does so in no less deliberate a way than when he makes sharp lines, smears, or carefully judged washes. Indeed, these surfaces suggest that inside Jasper Johns is a highly painterly abstract artist trying to get out.

—Robert Ayers