

An Interview with Jasper Johns about Silkscreening

by Katy Martin

The following interview was conducted in New York City in December 1980. It concerns Jasper Johns' screenprints, *Usuyuki* (1980), *Cicada* (1979) and *Cicada II* (1981), co-published by the artist and Simca Print Artists. The interviewer had been watching Johns work at Simca for several months while making her film, *Hanafuda/Jasper Johns* (1981, 35 minutes). What follows is a transcript of the sound track of that film.

KATY MARTIN: Can you describe the silkscreen process?

JASPER JOHNS: Well, somebody else could probably describe it better than I can. Basically it's a stencil. It's a positive and a negative, an opening through which paint is put that takes the shape of the opening on the paper.

KM: The reason I'd ask you to describe it is that I know you work in different media. How do you go about figuring out a medium?

JJ: Well, the medium expresses itself to you by what it is. Silkscreen, basically, is very simpleminded. It's simply an opening through which ink can go and be deposited on paper. And the fact that the silk is there allows you to have very complex openings that you couldn't simply cut out with a sheet of paper and have all the pieces hold together. But the silk supports these floating islands of material that block the ink, that don't allow the ink to go through.

KM: What's peculiar in the way you use silkscreen is that you don't use it to create areas that are flat.

JJ: But it is flat. That is its nature.

KM: But what's peculiar in the way that you're using it is that you build up a very complex and painterly kind of surface.

JJ: I understand that. But I think that might properly be considered an abuse of the medium (laughs). I'm not sure. Because what it does in its purest form is deposits an even coat of ink through an opening. There's never any breakdown in the amount of ink that's deposited in any place. It's always the same amount in every spot where it touches the paper – perfectly even.

What I do, what I tend to do, is to first work freely with the brush on the screens, getting whatever shapes the brush makes. Then I tend with additional screens to reinforce those shapes, and that confuses a little bit the flatness of it and suggests a different kind of activity. But it's basically an illusion created by adding.

KM: The many layers?

JJ: Yes. Not just many layers but layers that mimic one another, so that many of the marks mimic the marks that are already there. So that instead of seeing two things, you think you're only seeing one that's richer in some way.

KM: You don't get the same kind of accidents with silkscreen that you might get with other media.

JJ: What accidents do you refer to?

KM: Well, for example, variations in tone.

JJ: No, you don't get any variation of tone, unless you do it very deliberately by the way you color the ink. The ink going through the screen is always one quality and never varies – if you have a good printer.

You get accidents to the degree that you can't imagine what something will look like, if you want to call that an accident. You think you will do something that will be a certain way, and then when you see it, it's a little different. Usually I think my response is just a yes or a no to it, that that's all right or that's not all right. I don't know – it's subjective judgment. There isn't much to be concerned with, and there's not much room for accident.

What accidents would you have? That things don't meet that are supposed to meet, or that things overlap that are not supposed to overlap. Well, that's very easily dealt with, that kind of thing. Because you only have ink and no ink. So you have the shape that the ink takes, and that's all you have. If you can imagine it properly, then there's no reason that you don't do it properly.

KM: How does imagining it properly take place?

JJ: I think it just amounts to jumping in and working and then continuing until you don't do it anymore. And then you say that that's you print.

KM: I see. You mean, in general with the print, or in general with the medium?

JJ: Well, you begin. And you work as long as your interest holds up. And if it interests you to change something, you can change it.

KM: How do you change it?

JJ: Well, in this, you can change the drawing, you can change the order of the screens, you can change the inks, you can change the gloss, the physical quality of it. Things like that.

KM: And when are you done?

JJ: Well, sometimes when it looks hopeless to do anything more, sometimes you're done.

KM: Yes?

JJ: When your mind stops working in relation to the print. Basically that. I mean, when your mind stops working in relation to what you're doing, either you've finished it or you throw it away. Those seem to me the only choices.

KM: Can you describe what a hand-cut screen is?

JJ: A hand-cut screen is basically a sheet of film in which the parts that you want to print are removed from the sheet of film, and then the film is attached to the silk. Then the parts which have been cut out with a razor allow the ink to go through.

KM: And the screens made with tusche?

JJ: Tusche – you put a waxy substance directly onto the silk. Then a material is pulled over that which becomes like the film, and where you put the tusche you wash out. Then you have an opening, so that what prints is the mark which you drew.

KM: Do you think you could describe how the tall *Usuyuki* print is built up?

JJ: There's a hand-cut stencil which, if I remember correctly, follows a paste-up I did of strips of newspaper that form a kind of crosshatch pattern. Then we had made photographically a screen, which only had the type that was on the newspaper, that was printed in a kind of a black or gray. So with those two screens you get the effect of pieces of newspaper glued to or lying on the surface of the other paper.

KM: And then?

JJ: Well, I'm not sure I have the order right. Then those colored areas were put down. I'm sure there's a very simple way to explain that. Usually with a squeegee you move ink across the screen, and a certain amount of the ink goes through the screen and is deposited on the paper. Usually you use one color ink. And in laying down those flat areas, the ink was blended of more than one color, so that, say, instead of having a puddle of yellow ink pulled across, you had a puddle of ink that went from yellow to orange and was mixed.

KM: They were done in sections.

JJ: Well, that's partly because to do such a large thing would be very difficult to mix.

KM: At the vertical edges of those sections, the colors are almost the same but not quite.

JJ: Well, going to all that trouble to print it in five sections, I thought we shouldn't disguise the fact and should have it *not* match exactly. I thought it would be richer than hiding the fact that we were doing it in that way. There is the one idea that is suggested, that there's a smooth flow, a smooth color change from top to bottom. But literally it's not as smooth as it could be.

KM: And the color flow is a rainbow.

JJ: Yes, basically a spectrum.

KM: This is a silly question, but why?

JJ: I haven't the slightest idea why (laughs).

KM: I knew that was the answer, but I thought I might ask ...

JJ: These prints relate to other works, and I've thought about it so much that often something which has a function in one work is used in another work without the function that it had.

What I did – I made a study for the other *Usuyuki* print as a drawing, and I used kind of rainbow-colored inks to help me locate different things easily, and having done that I decided to use that kind of color in this print, just for itself.

For instance, the cross-hatching in the three-panel painting (*Usuyuki*, 1977-1978) is moving in one direction. The grid, perhaps, is moving in a different direction. I think the grid and the little shapes are always moving in the same direction. I'm not sure. But you several possibilities of moving, and in the drawings that I've done, I've moved all these things in different ways, and sometimes have colored them in ways that help me just keep it in my head what I'm doing, because it gets complicated.

KM: Could you talk about that more, how you move things in different ways in different drawings?

JJ: Well, if you have two systems – say, the crosshatching and the grid – one of those systems, say, can move to the right and downward. This can go from the left down to the right and spiraling around. That's one system, say, the crosshatching. Say, the other could move downward to the left. So if you make three representations of this, you will have different things meeting in the different pictures because they've been displaced.

Say that you have one of the shapes, say the little circle, that's moving downward to the left, and the crosshatching down and to the right, the section of crosshatching that meets that shape in one picture of this movement will meet a different section of crosshatching in the next picture of this movement. That's how you show the movement. That's what is being shown actually.

I've tried to do all the different possibilities in the drawings and things that I've done, just to see what it looked like. ...

What I wanted to do was to see what happened on the paper if I did all the different possibilities. Some of them are interesting because nothing happens, really. Some of the situations don't reveal what's happening actually.

KM: And that is the interest of an idea? That's what you sustain through the different prints?

JJ: Well, it's interesting to me. One hopes to have an image that is interesting in itself.

KM: See, I'm really asking maybe too broad a question, which is, where does the image come from? How do you get an image where there wasn't an image?

JJ: Well, this comes from a thought, basically. The thought has certain implications, and then if you try to deal with the implications, you have to do a certain amount of work. ...

I'm always interested in the physical form of whatever I'm doing and often repeat an image in another physical form just to see what happens, what the difference is. And to see what it is that connects them and what it is that separates them. Because the experience of one is rarely the experience of the other, for me at any rate.

KM: You had a painting in the shop that you were working from in the *Usuyuki* prints, but there was no painting for the *Cicada* prints. Have you ever made a *Cicada* painting?

JJ: I've made several. Three, as a matter of fact. The one print is based on one painting, the other print is based on another painting.

KM: Why did you switch around the colors so much during the making of the first *Cicada* print?

JJ: Well, the two paintings I did – the first painting, the ground is white, the central colored marks are red, yellow, and blue, and the outer edges are the secondary color – I think. Then I made a small painting and I reversed that, so that the white became a kind of dark gray and the secondaries were used where the primaries had been used, and the primaries were used where the secondaries had been used. And in working with the prints, I wanted to try the two other possibilities that occurred to me. One was to have the central area be the secondary colors (and) the outer edges be the primary colors on a field of white, and the reverse of that with the

gray. Though I think I came back to the original situation in the print, didn't I? I'm not sure. I think the primaries run through the middle.

KM: You had it on different color papers. Were you really undecided at that point?

JJ: Well, one has the opportunity to try that kind of thing while working, and it may be something you would use and it may not be. And actually you're looking before you're doing the edition, so that at any moment you could decide to have the edition be like that.

KM: But it's also the opportunity to see.

JJ: Yes, of course.

KM: For the two *Cicada* prints, I noticed that after the first edition was printed, you altered the screens for the second edition. Why?

JJ: Well, because a dark shape on a light paper has a different quality than a light shape on a light paper. And because different colors of ink overlapping do different things, make different effects.

KM: So you'd have to alter the screens.

JJ: Not necessarily, but I think I did have to with that print. I don't remember how much altering I did.

KM: You basically changed the edges.

JJ: It probably has to do with the contrast between the dark ink and the white paper.

KM: The possibilities can become infinite.

JJ: I always think that what I do is much simpler than that. I do what I think to do, and that's about all there is that I can do. ...

Just the process of printmaking allows you to do – not allows you to do things, but makes your mind work in a different way than, say, painting with a brush does. It changes your idea of economy and what is, what becomes, a unit. In some forms of printmaking, for instance, it's very easy to reverse an image and suddenly have exactly what you've been working with facing the other direction and allowing you to work with that. Whereas if you were doing a painting, you would only do that out of perversity. You would have to have a serious interest to go to the trouble to do that. But in printmaking things like that become easy, and you may want to just play with that and see what it amounts to. Whereas if you had to do it in a more laborious way, you wouldn't want to give it that energy. Your curiosity wouldn't be that strong. There's a lot of that in printmaking. And some of that feeds back into painting, because then you see,

you find things which are necessary to printmaking that become interesting in themselves and can be used in painting where they're not necessary but become like ideas. And in that way, printmaking has affected my painting a lot. ...

Instead of smearing and slurring, you're to make it in steps. And then, of course, the other interest goes into printmaking. It becomes very playful, because then you would like to try in printmaking something that isn't in its nature. That's that quality with the screenprinting that I think I tend to do, which I don't think is particularly appropriate.

KM: How do you come up with a title?

JJ: Well, the *Usuyuki* – I came upon the word in something I was reading and the word triggered my thinking. I can't always do it in a kind of cause-and-effect relationship, but I know that's what happened.

KM: Do you know what *usuyuki* means?

JJ: I think it means something like *thin snow*.

KM: Why was that interesting?

JJ: (laughs) I don't know why anything is interesting, Katy. I think it has to do with a Japanese play or novel, and the character, the heroine of it, that is her name. And I think it was suggested that it's a kind of sentimental story that has to do with the – what do you call it – the fleeting quality of beauty in the world. I believe. At any rate, I read this and the name stuck in my head. And then when, I think Madame Mukai was here once, and Hiroshi (Kawanishi) was here, and I had just read this – I'd been in St. Martin and read it – and I came back and I had dinner with them one night and I said, "Hiroshi, if I said to you, *usuyuki*, what would it mean?" And he said, "I think – very poetic – a little snow" (laughs). So I kept on and made my pictures using that title.

The *Cicada* title has to do with the image of something bursting through its skin, which is what they do. You have all those shells where the back splits and they've emerged. And basically that kind of splitting form is what I tried to suggest.

KM: In this interview, I've tried to talk about the specific images you've been working on, how they work, what their formal elements are, how you think about it technically ...

JJ: Well, that's a very important part of it, but I think that might be better done by someone figuring that out rather than just casual conversation. Because it's a step-by-step thing, I think it would be better if someone figured it out and arranged it in their head and said it.

KM: But even though you don't have to be the craftsmen that the printers are, you have to have some idea of how things work just to bring an image into being.

JJ: I think you have to have a very clear idea.

KM: And then I wanted to talk something about meaning but ...

JJ: About what?

KM: Meaning. In the work. But I wasn't sure how far to go with that. But I can't help thinking about meaning to some degree.

JJ: Well, you mean meaning of images? (pause) I don't like to get involved in that because I – any more than I've done – I tend to like to leave that free. ...

The problem with ideas is, the idea is often simply a way to focus your interest in making a work. The work isn't necessarily, I think – a function of the work is not to express the idea.

The idea focuses your attention in a certain way that helps you to do the work.

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