



Figuring Jasper Johns

Fred Orton

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The matter of meaning, for painter and viewer alike, is crucial to this book, a deeply felt and richly considered attempt to come to terms with one of the most challenging artists of our day. An illuminating look at an enigmatic painter, *Figuring Jasper Johns* also provides a way of approaching American art of the 1950s and 1960s. Fred Orton's reading of John's oeuvre focuses on three key works - *Untitled* (1972), *Flag* (1954-55), and *Painted Bronze* (1960). Adroitly combining formal theoretical analyses and historical reflection, Orton explores each painting until the distinction between "picture" and "context" dissolves and his subject appears in a wholly new frame. Here we see how Johns's work makes use of the modernist opposition between surface and subject, how it manifests both relatively private and relatively public meanings, and how it develops a self-consciously figurative visual language. With reference to ideas in contemporary critical theory, Orton considers Johns's work as allegory and assesses the value and effect of doing so. A practical demonstration of how theory can work to generate new interpretations and unsettle old ones (some of them the product of Johns's own mythologizing), this book offers the clearest and most penetrating picture yet of Jasper Johns and in the process contributes considerably to the continuing rethinking of art history.

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