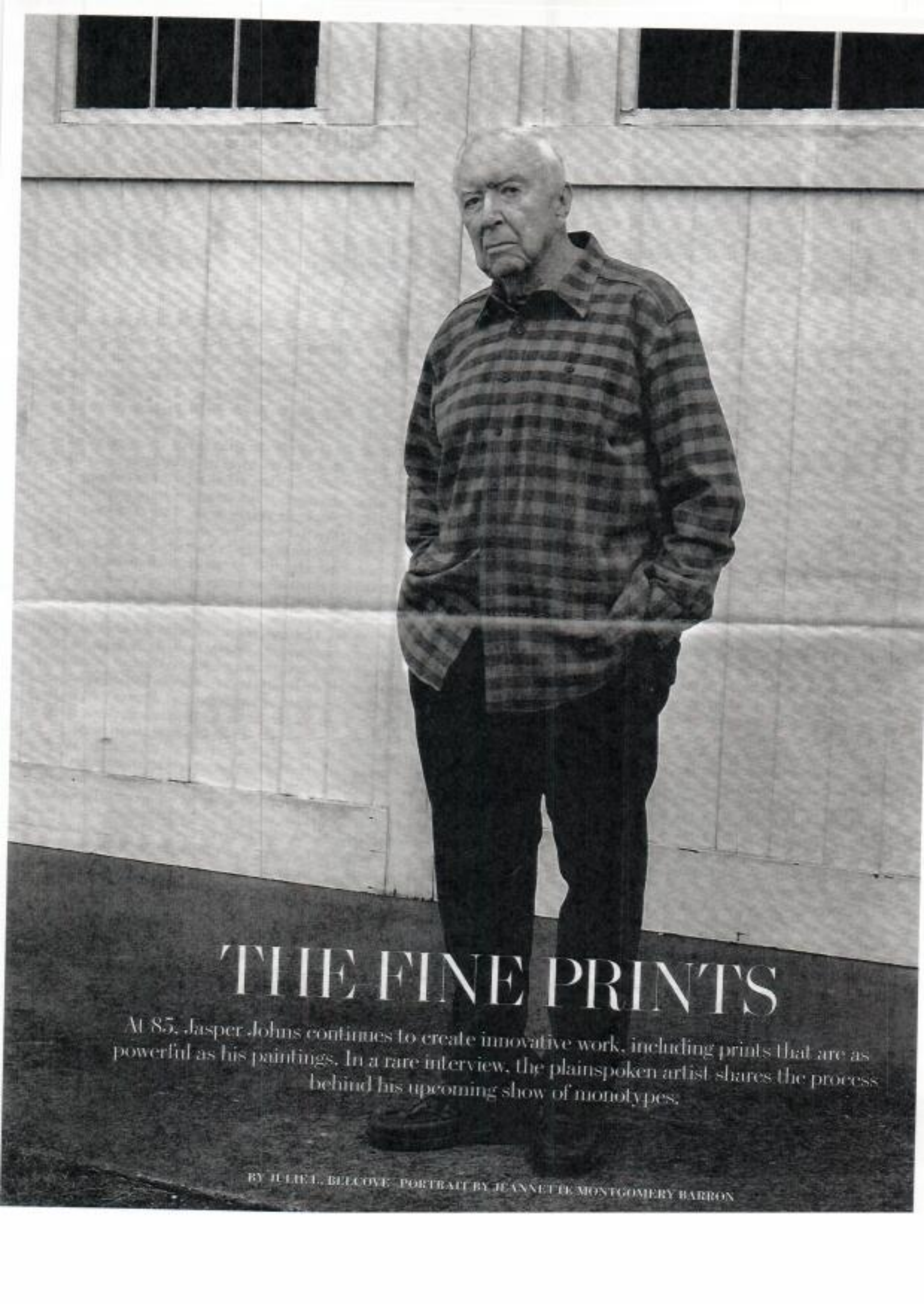
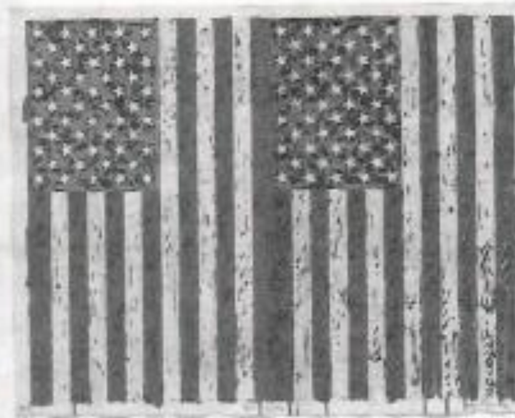


THE FINE PRINTS

At 85, Jasper Johns continues to create innovative work, including prints that are as powerful as his paintings. In a rare interview, the plainspoken artist shares the process behind his upcoming show of monotypes.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE PORTRAIT BY JEANNETTE MONTGOMERY BARRON



BY 1954, Jasper Johns had left his boyhood in rural South Carolina behind for New York City, where, by his own account, he spent several years yearning to be an artist rather than actually being one. That year, however, proved ivotal in his career. As art history has documented, n 1954 his fumbling efforts finally found their form: Ie began his seminal painting *Flag*, a cocksure renlering of the Stars and Stripes that brashly signaled n escape route from the dominant abstract expresionism. But a quieter experiment the same year ielped set him on a parallel—and no less inventive r influential—path as a printmaker. "While workng as a clerk in a bookstore, I folded a small piece of aper, made parallel cuts into it," then applied ink, ohns recalls, "and pressed it against another sheet f paper, leaving an impression of the ink."

That small artwork is the earliest surviving Johns nonotype, a style of printmaking that typically esults in just one impression, rather than editions numbering in the tens, hundreds or even thousands as with lithography and etching. Over the course of his printmaking practice, Johns returned to monotypes sporadically but compellingly, eventually completing nore than 200 works. Now 41 works from five decades of Johns's output in the medium, including images made in the past year, are the subject of a new solo exhibition, *Jasper Johns Monotypes*. On view at New York's Matthew Marks Gallery beginning May 6, they offer a rare window into Johns's fecund imagination.

Johns, who turns 86 in May, abandoned Manhattan for Sharon, Connecticut, two decades ago. There, in a private compound enclosed by a stone wall and hidden from the road, he lives with his dog in a grand house and works in studios elegantly created by his friend, the designer Bill Katz. In a shingled barn, with warm wood paneling and well-placed windows framing pastoral New England views, there is one immaculate studio for painting and another dedicated to printmaking. For the past 20 years, Johns has even employed a full-time master printer, John Lund, to oversee its operations.

In 1960, Johns began collaborating with Universal Limited Art Editions, shortly after being introduced to Tatyana Grosman, its plucky, Russian émigré founder. It was two years after his breakthrough show at Leo Castelli's gallery in New York City, which had featured *Flag* as well as other paintings of instantly identifiable symbols, such as targets and letters of the alphabet. The Museum of Modern Art bought three of the paintings. Art connoisseurs at the time turned up their noses at prints, which were generally just reproductions, but Grosman was intent on making them artworks in their own right, and she was seeking young artists with revolutionary ideas to be her accomplices. She had recently seen Johns's canvas of a coat hanger at MoMA and admired the chutzpah it took to paint such a mundane subject. In short order, Johns made lithographs for ULAE of a coat hanger, a flag, a target and some of his other favorite motifs, the numerals 0 through 9. The numbers project, in which he altered a single lithographic stone for each print, took three years to execute. "He'd never drawn on a lithographic stone before," says Bill Goldston, who now runs ULAE and makes regular pilgrimages to Sharon from his Long Island complex to confer on prints. "If Mozart was a child genius in music, Jasper was a child genius in printmaking." And the art market caught up. Johns set an auction record for postwar or contemporary prints with a piece going for $1,314,500 at Christie's in 2010. (By comparison, the top auction price for a Johns painting was $36 million in 2014 for his 1983 *Flag*.)

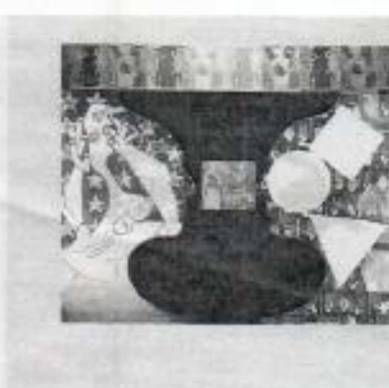
It has become cliché to append "the greatest living American artist" to Johns's name, so long has he reigned and so deeply have his contributions infused contemporary art. Pop, minimalism and conceptualism all owe him more than a tip of the hat. His prints are as virtuoso as his canvases. "He is the greatest living printmaker. No doubt about that," says Jennifer L. Roberts, a professor of art history at Harvard University who is co-writing a *catalogue raisonné* of Johns's monotypes. "He turns the many different essences of printmaking into the technique of his work and also the subject of his work. Printmakers have to think backwards—they have to be able to imagine things in reverse. With Johns's work, it's thematized into the work itself," with frequent doubling, or mirroring, and folding of images. "He's able to take the process and turn it into a sophisticated meditation on all the ideas that are part of that process." Moreover, his paintings and prints, as well as his drawings and sculptures, are in constant dialogue.

Goldston began working with Johns in 1970, when they experimented together with an offset printer designed for posters and art books but deemed far too pedestrian for artists. It nevertheless got Johns's creative juices flowing. "The way he thinks is so interesting to me," Goldston says, noting Johns's mastery not just of aesthetics but of the technical dema printmaking. "He has such insight into the princ transferring ink from one surface to another."

Monotypes are a peculiarly immediate an mate form of printmaking. Unlike, say, an et which once created allows a printer to apply a later time and repeatedly produce multiple a monotype the artist in one sitting paints di onto a smooth surface, or matrix, such as a sh Plexiglas. Then, before the ink has a chance t the matrix is run through a press, transferrir image to a piece of paper. "They're uncategori They are prints, but you could just as easily they are drawings or paintings," says Roberts. space for rapid, intense experimentation. The r is essentially destroyed in the process of creati like life. There's no fantasy you can keep creatir image. There's something haunting."

Like many inventions, some of Johns's mon were born of a series of happy accidents across Take his 17 monotypes entitled *Savarin*. Johns's of the Savarin brand coffee can, its name embla in large type across the label, dates to 1960, wl made *Painted Bronze*, a life-size sculpture of th monplace tin in which he often stored paintbr In the late 1970s, he returned to the image, de the can against a backdrop of his crosshatches- of short diagonal lines that are another freq mined Johns concept—for a lithograph. He ma resulting image both the poster and the catalo for his 1977 retrospective at the Whitney M of American Art. The next year, when John preparing to leave New York for his winter ho St. Martin, Goldston cut about half a dozen small for him to pack in his suitcase to stave off bo Johns returned with more riffs on that can of br He has a habit of employing nontraditional ma and for one plate, he used an island cookie to m marks. "When I unwrapped the plate, there we cookie crumbs all over it," Goldston says. It b the lithograph *Savarin 1 (Cookie)*; Johns experin with other effects for *Savarin 2* through *5*.

Then one day in 1981, he revisited the conce a new idea, making a lithograph of the Savarin with a red impression of his own arm and har running along the bottom of the page. "Jasp happy with it," Goldston says. As he remem they began running the press, but the paper ro ran out. The new roll wasn't the same shade of the original, so they set aside the batch they'd



OEUVRE AND ABOVE
"He is the greatest living pri
No doubt about that," says H
University professor Jennifer
Roberts. Johns's prints inclu
left: *Ale Cans*, 1964; *Decoy*, 19'
I, 1973; *Four Panels from Untit*
Savarin, 1982; and *Shrinky Di*

produced and started fresh. The following year, when Johns was signing the edition, Goldston says, they realized they had 27 sheets of the original paper. "What were we going to do with them?"

It was almost too enticing for Johns. In fealty to perhaps his most famous quote, in actuality a note to himself—"Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it"—he couldn't resist toying with the sheets somehow. Over the course of four days, Johns proceeded to paint on a piece of Plexiglas, lay it face down on the lithograph and run them through a press, then repeat the process, thereby turning each lithograph into a monotype. "Working directly over the original matrix is one way of experimenting or playing with differences—different kinds of refinement, accent, tone, playful variations," Johns says by email. One outcome is reminiscent of a heroic product shot, with the can in bold red, the brushes outlined in black and the background a primary-color field of hatch marks. Another variation proclaims *Hallelujah!* in stenciled letters arching over the brushes, along with the date *21 Jan. 1982* running across the bottom. Yet another rendition substitutes Johns's closely clustered handprints in red, purple and green for the hatches, while a fourth version casts a dramatic black veil over the image, highlighting the brushes in white as if by moonlight. While stopping short of calling monotypes fun to make, Johns says, "They may invite a playfulness, or a light touch with the materials."

Roberts is struck by the complex, almost labyrinthine trajectory of Johns's prints. "You can see the way a monotype is about not just the artist creating images, but images begetting images," she says. "Johns would paint one, then print the print. There would still be a little material left. He would add to that, print again. You really see this evolution."

Johns finds it difficult to articulate exactly how he makes his choices. "Monoprints sometimes come as afterthoughts following some project," he says. "I suppose that each medium or technique offers an appeal of its own.... One jumps in and, if lucky, finds ways to proceed."

"EACH MEDIUM OR TECHNIQUE OFFERS AN APPEAL OF ITS OWN.... ONE JUMPS IN AND, IF LUCKY, FINDS WAYS TO PROCEED."
—JASPER JOHNS

JOHNS IS A MAN of few words, and he tends toward the literal. I once asked him why he uses encaustic, the pigmented hot wax that is a signature material in his paintings. "It's here. I have it in my studio, usually in quantity," he replied. Whether this was a stab at humor was hard to assess. He is also an exceedingly private man, whose manners are especially decorous in this age of oversharing. His old-school ways were ingrained in his strict Southern upbringing. After his parents divorced when he was a toddler, he was promptly left with his paternal grandfather, a prosperous landowner, and his wife. Following his grandfather's death, Johns moved around between his mother, who by this time had a new family, and his aunt, who taught her nephew in a rural school of only a few students. He quit the University of South Carolina after three semesters to come north to New York City, where he lasted all of one semester at Parsons School of Design. As he flailed in his attempts at making art—he eventually destroyed nearly all of his early work—he befriended three other creative forces: artist Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham.

They were four of the most inventive minds of the 20th century. Johns is the last surviving member of the quartet, and he continues to innovate in the 21st. Among the most powerful images in the monotypes exhibition are some of Johns's most recent: a series that takes as a jumping-off point a black-and-white image by acclaimed photojournalist Larry Burrows originally published in a 1965 issue of *Life* magazine. The photograph captures Marine Lance Corporal James C. Farley, a 21-year-old helicopter crew chief, breaking down after a disastrous mission near Da Nang, Vietnam. The rawness of the moment is palpable as Farley, crumpled on a trunk in a supply shed, hides most of his face in his hands. Johns abstracts the image and doubles it, fading the mirrored version like a specter.

Susan Dackerman, a scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, who is co-writing the *catalogue raisonné*, was bowled over by the luminosity of the new monotypes and the way "the figure of the soldier is sometimes foregrounded and sometimes disintegrates. The ink bleeds and pools."

The new prints build on Johns's recer
series, though not in an entirely linear fashi
works, begun in 2012, experimented with a
tograph of the British figurative painter Luc
commissioned by Francis Bacon. Freud is se
on a small bed, hunched over in apparent
torment, and Johns went on a tour de forc
charcoal, watercolor and ink. He explored nc
subject's anguish but the formal qualities o
tograph, down to a rip in the surviving print
when he reproduced the picture alongside
image, a skull appeared.

When I visited Johns before *Regrets* mac
lic debut at MoMA in 2014, he told me he'c
earlier attempt at a similar subject. He wa
teristically loath to reveal anything. "I don'
want to tell you about this," he began. "I hav
photograph from a completely different sou
I have tried to use as the basis of drawing
which has come off to my satisfaction. A sim
is conveyed, and it also has to do with the
buried, I think in the arm, but nothing to d
art world." He broke into one of his rare b
laughs. "I had to put the other away as a fail

It now seems clear that the Burrows ima
initial muse. "A relationship between the t
graphs seems obvious but is not something
analyzed," Johns says. "I believe the work t
ist makes in relation to a subject is expressi
that cannot necessarily be broken down in
parts." After making *Regrets*, he asked his as
find the Burrows drawings, which he had ma
2002, and set to work again. This time he
solution in monotypes. Using Mylar as th
instead of metal or Plexiglas, he applied ink
color but, unusually, allowed them to dry. Th
the paper and pressed it to the Mylar, rea
the color. Asked if he chose this process for
reasons—the ink was drying before he coul
or for aesthetic effect, Johns replies, "I do
there is a separation." In any case, he note
even usually, the various ways of working
become, to varying degrees, unconscious."

The late best-selling author and produce
Crichton, a good friend of Johns's, once desc
as "the intellectual who will not explain
intellectual terms." To be sure, Johns pres
self as an artist who doesn't overthink it. Tr
he says of making a monotype, "At its simpl
easy as leaving a fingerprint." •

PRINT BY NUMBERS
This 2013 work by Johns, *0-9*, a monotype on hand-torn Japanese paper, will be in the upcoming show at Matthew Marks Gallery.

*, he says, "I'm really into very 'naive craft,' like nd World War playing cards."

is disparate posse does not include the types sit around talking about purses off-duty. "They lives outside of fashion and something special fer," says makeup artist Aaron de Mey, who cre- the J.W. Anderson runway looks. "Jonathan gs things out in people that they don't nec- rily know they have inside them." Perhaps erson's most significant creative partnership been with Benjamin Bruno, an alumnus of ich *Vogue* who first collaborated with him on 2011 debut women's collection. "Everything had invented—there was no DNA for that brand, no ion vocabulary. But there was a beautiful blank for both of us," says Bruno. "It was a romantic ground for him, and he would project his uto- onto awkward little garments."

runo's role is amorphous, and he is often referred s "stylist" or "consultant," which belies the full e of his contribution. "I'm just always there," Bruno. For the ad campaigns, Anderson gives no and Hawkesworth free rein. Hawkesworth's er began with reportage photography, an ele- t of which he retains in his fashion work. For fall 2015 campaign, they traveled to Estonia. resulting image shows a group of women danc- in a circle as though performing a pagan ritual. e of this was planned. "It was a process of going ewhere unfamiliar, seeing who turns up and just ting," says Hawkesworth.

le and Bruno also produce the images for a hard- r book each season documenting the Loewe ection. The print ad campaign, however, is always with Meisel, whose images dominated the mood k Anderson put together to get the Loewe gig. thout Steven Meisel, I wouldn't have Loewe," he . "When I first joined Loewe, the only photogra- r I wanted for it was Steven. I was like, What will I he won't do it? Loewe needed a fashion educator, the only person in terms of imagery who can do is Meisel. He is incredible at giving a silhouette text, making an image become iconic."

lere, too, Meisel has been free to depart from his cal campaign work, instead repurposing his own rival images. Some of the Loewe ads have even n devoid of clothes, including an '80s image of the tographer kissing a male model.

'he ability to subvert the expected often seems at heart of what Anderson's group does best, as with verent art directors Augustyniak and Amzalag. for Anderson's esoteric runway soundtracks works with musical magpie DJ Michel Gaubert his partner, Ryan Aguilar. Casting is by Ashley kaw, who has cultivated completely different lels for the two brands.

She has an eye for human beings that no one else ," Anderson says. "She'll take a risk on a new face no other casting director will ever do."

All of these figures play essential roles for lerson, who is adamant that he is not the sole entor. "I'm no precursor to anything," he says at point. "Sometimes fashion has a memory like sh." Later, he explains why he and his team con- e to push boundaries. "If you are going to design ething," he says, "I don't feel that you can be the archetype for it. Ultimately you are going to get old, and your clothing is going to get old with you."

Anderson grew up one of three children in the small town of Magherafelt in Northern Ireland. (His older brother works with him as legal/HR/operations manager at J.W. Anderson; his younger sister works in pharmaceuticals.) His grandfather was a farmer. "Jonathan was animal crazy," says his mother, Heather, a former English teacher. "Every day he would come back with a bird of some sort. He had an aviary—lovebirds, canaries.... What was the other animal he had? The one that gave birth?"

"Chinchilla," says his father, Willie, a former rugby player and coach. "The next day we had two chinchillas."

Animals often figure in his collections: Insects were encased in the accessories at his graduate show at the London College of Fashion, and since then there have been prints with howling wolves, cats, hunting dogs chasing ducks—an entire menagerie. "Fashion can become overly serious. An animal always gives it an element of humor," says Anderson.

His hobbies included growing and selling chrysanthemums and collecting eggs. One year he decorated the house for Christmas by hanging orchids from the ceiling in test tubes. Another time, his mother says, "we came home from holiday, and he had painted the outside wall blue and stuck marbles on it."

As a teenager Anderson felt as though he didn't fit in. "But I was never bullied at school," he says. "It was just low-grade unhappiness." He found an outlet by joining the National Youth Theatre, in London.

At 18, Anderson moved to Washington, D.C., to pursue acting at the Studio Theatre's conservatory. He found the two years he spent there to be a profound experience. "D.C. redefined my entire life," he says. "I found my sexuality there. I found out about everything I loved. There was no taboo. Decadent? One pound equaled $2, so your money went far, let's put it that way. I drank and had fun."

He moved back and took a job at an upmarket department store in Dublin before leaving for London to enroll in fashion school. But he says he received his real education from Manuela Pavesi, the late, eccentric collaborator of designer Miuccia Prada. They met when Anderson worked on window displays at Prada.

Until her death last year, Anderson previewed each of his collections for Pavesi. "She taught me you should never compromise in anything you do," he says. "She was incredibly important to me, because I felt like I was trying to prove to her that I can do it." (She may have also influenced his flair for store design: The Madrid Loewe boutique features Arts & Crafts furniture while the Miami one is dominated by an *hórreo*, an 18th-century Spanish granary that was dismantled and brought to the United States.)

If Anderson was looking for industry recognition, he has found it: Last year he was named both best menswear and womenswear designer by the Briti Fashion Council (he won in 2014 for menswear, 2013 for new establishment and in 2012 for emergi talent). He also was honored by New York's Fashi Group International this fall. Of his trophies, he sa "They're on the ground somewhere at my office."

DOUBLE VISION A sampling of Anderson's work. From left: Three avant-garde looks by J.W. Anderson from the past three years, and three designs for Loewe that experiment with elements of the brand's traditions, including suede and leather work.

The day after the FGI gala, Anderson went to vi Printed Matter, a Chelsea shop that specializes obscure art books and zines. "Mathias [Augustynia once told me I had to go," he says, "and since then I' been an addict. I leave with a whole box for the plan As he browsed on the second level, his assista Sandra Torres waited for him on the first. She was Loewe for 15 years before working with Anderson. can't function without her," he says. "It's like I've p two mothers now. She's proper Parisian, through a through. Hard as nails." In a few hours he'll be off Paris to begin the next Loewe collection.

He held a stack of zines and the book *Jesus Dc 1978-1983* by the photographer Greg Reynolds- purely visual assortment. Anderson is dyslexic, wh was discovered early in his childhood. "Writing a reading—it's like a hidden language to me," he say

Regardless, every weekend he hunts down n volumes, which are sold on his brand's websi including a variety of vintage periodicals like Pe Hujar photo books, '70s *Playgirls*, '50s male physic pictorials, *The Face* from its Britpop heyday and copies of cult queer zine *Straight to Hell*.

"I have an obsessive compulsiveness for it," says. "I must have 10,000 books in the house. good for people to see where influence comes from

Working with other creative minds has ma him realize his own strengths. "I'm probably a b ter business person than I am a designer. Becaus completely run with instinct, I know when the pr is fading out. I know that we need to do somethi before it even happens. I know when there is energy fatigue."

But life is good. "I am in one of the happiest pe ods of my life," he says. "I have full control over job. I know when to turn off." He sees only one limi tion: "The problem that I have with myself is that incredibly ambitious," Anderson says. "To the po where it's probably Machiavellian." ■