



Art Review: William O'Brien at KMAC in Louisville

By: Eileen Yanoviak
March 20, 2017



“William J. O’Brien: Oscillates Wildly” is an exhibition that functions like a series of conversations about craft, medium, form, art history, identity, and emotion, to name just a few. Each individual work participates in these larger dialogues so the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Curated by Joey Yates at the recently renovated Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft (KMAC) in Louisville, the exhibition highlights O’Brien’s diverse and evolving practice over the past two decades and tightly demonstrates KMAC’s emerging vision that craft is not about craftsmanship, functional art, or certain materials, but about the artistic process itself.

On the most basic level, the Chicago-based artist experiments with form and material. The introductory section of the exhibition demonstrates this clearly, as we are met by large-scale figurative ceramics, gestural multimedia drawings, dense paintings, abstract steel sculptures, and tightly constructed colored pencil pattern drawings. This compendium could be frenetic, but O’Brien’s work and its installation achieve a rare balance of control and chance, representation and abstraction, unity and variety, intimacy and scale.



The juxtapositions of mediums in the exhibition initiates a broader conversation about the development of craft in the context of contemporary art. By now a rather familiar discourse in art circles, the boundaries between fine art and craft are blurred. O'Brien's work, in its varied materials and approaches, epitomizes the museum's current approach.

O'Brien's exploration of material and form is not merely self-reflexive; it is also a means to relieve the limitations of materials so he can engage with ideas about identity, emotion, and art history. Faces—arguably the most readily accessible of subjects in art—are a recurring theme throughout the exhibition and appear in multiple mediums. Some works recall traditional Appalachian face jugs with their vessel shape and exaggerated features, such as those in an untitled ceramic and steel totem from 2013. In a series of works on paper from 2008, expressive renderings elicit a visceral response with their jarring immediacy and sense of emotion.



It is perhaps O'Brien's comfort with emotion that makes a compelling contrast with the stoicism of his abstract steel sculptures. Many of O'Brien's drawings, felts, and ceramics are imbued with a raw emotion portrayed through the artist's application of color, choice of subject, and intense manipulation of his mediums. His

powder-coated steel sculptures, however, are sleek, hard-edged, and dispassionate. There are disruptions to this formality in works such as the untitled black steel sculpture of abstract shapes rising in a vertical column. A tall pink phallus stands erect at its center, visible through the negative space. Themes of sexuality and identity expression are embedded in many works throughout the exhibition, often through use of both subtle and overtly phallic imagery.



Also implicit in O'Brien's varied mediums is the ever-present engagement with the history of art. Recent large-scale ceramic figures draw on the Classical vocabulary of female caryatids and male kouros. Yet, rather than smooth marble and idealized physiques, these figures are messy. Recalling the aesthetic of Jean Dubuffet and Art Brut, the exquisitely tactile surface is dappled and crackled, and the color application is random.

Informed art viewers might become consumed with identifying the numerous art historical references in O'Brien's work. The steel sculptures evoke the rarified masculine world of Minimalism, the sketches use the automatic writing of Surrealism, the colored-pencil drawings are reminiscent of quilt patterns, and the small ceramics recall any number of ethnographic objects. That is not to imply that O'Brien's work is derivative. These references to the history of art betray his self-awareness and insist that viewers participate in the conversation about the genesis of art-making.