



WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN

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How can it be that William J. O'Brien's first survey exhibition brought to mind so many other artists but didn't lead me to conclude that his work was derivative? Walking through the rooms of this extensive presentation, my art historical rolodex of a brain was hit by name after name after name, from peers like Aaron Curry and Sterling Ruby, to, let's say, almost all of 20th-century modernist and post-modernist art history (Dada, David Smith, Harmony Hammond, etc., etc.), and representatives from what is still called outsider art, and ethnographic art, and craft, and on and on. The first line of curator Naomi Beckwith's essay is a quote from the artist: "There was a time [...] when the content of my work was coming from outside sources." Indeed.

I resisted Beckwith's essay until the last minute because I wanted to figure out my opening question for myself, but many of her points are useful. In particular, her assertion that O'Brien is now using the work's "internal" aspects as content (such as shape, material, and color) provides a way into the idiosyncratic aspects of the world that ultimately emerge in this show (in most cases, at least), a world of free-form assimilation unencumbered by any guilt of inevitable resemblance. In other words I think it's a "so what if this makes you think of something else" attitude that rescues almost everything here and enables us to move past getting too caught up in identifying possible predecessors.

It's likely, then, no accident that drawing figures prominently throughout, given that line can still be taken personally. Twenty-one small works on paper hung salon style in the corner of the first room introduce the dynamic relationship between the figurative and non-objective in O'Brien's work as cacophony transformed into conversation. They are all "Untitled" (everything is "Untitled," unless indicated otherwise), and almost all of them are from 2008, the same year as a larger diptych and two separate drawings of the same dimensions that have been installed as a diptych. These larger works on paper have been made with scratchy gestures in black ink, abstract and patterned in the former, bodily in the latter (think 1970s de Kooning). They literally re-frame the chatter across the room, formalizing not only the space between abstraction and representation, but also between fantasy and reality. This is then doubly reinforced by two large combine-like "paintings"

(they are on canvas), also from 2008, that subsume and consume stuff like fabric, cardboard, and plaster in and with Rauschenberg-worthy black enamel.

O'Brien is most known for his work in ceramic, and much of it is shown to great impact here. Shelves of it occupy the corner of the exhibition's largest room, holding a cornucopia of his wildly-inventive forms, most of which are his signature grotesque and/or goofy heads, but some that are sly updates of mid-century biomorphic abstraction. This assortment is joined by a few of his large scale ceramic and hybrid works placed in some cases directly on the floor, as well as examples of his powder coated steel cut-out sculptures, string-wrapped totem-like leaning assemblages, and—for good measure—a particularly whimsical set of 12 small felt-on-felt wall hangings. Without a doubt the exhibition proved that O'Brien's ceramics are part of a much larger enterprise, partners alongside everything else in what comes together as a particularly user-friendly *gesamtkunstwerk*.

O'Brien's only misstep in this exhibition is his installation from 2013. Comprised of totem pole-like stacks of ceramic vessels and even some mask-like forms, and presented in a darkened room (that hinders the viewing of other works like a witty and beautiful wall assemblage called "Core Values," from 2007), it takes everything too far. O'Brien has so much great stuff going on in his work, the last thing it needs is something like forced reverence. For me this was confirmed in one of the final rooms, with an especially idiosyncratic work, "Cinaedus Table, MDCCLXXV" (2007). Merely a large table covered with ceramic, mixed media, and found objects, it brought front and center the power of the tangibility and the accessibility of O'Brien's overall enterprise, transforming the everyday into the genuinely weird, and even the spectacular, all the while making it wholeheartedly his own.