

William J. O'Brien
Artist Statement

To be frank, I started making art because I felt awkward about being in the world. That tension of loneliness and separation spawned my first works of creation as well as a path towards learning and figuring out who I was in my early years. No one really ever knows why they make art. If an artist declares firmly the intention, concept or ideal behind their creation it almost simultaneously deflates the magic. We don't ask the river how it created a beautiful dance of water in between rocks, or why a group of flowers bloomed beautifully in the spring. We just directly experience it. So when asked to describe and talk about my work, it seems absurd.

Most artists just naturally talk about their relationships, experiences, tragedies and tensions. Most of the time, unresolved issues lead them to make the work on view. In my own recent experience, most artists are fascinated by the dance in between our hearts, minds, and bodies. How or where that lands either in a line on a page, a brush stroke, incision into a piece of clay really isn't the point. We are trying to figure out the ineffable. If we knew the answers, we would not be so curious or invested this path. No one chooses to be an artist most of the time.

Many times you just wake up one day and find your hands weaving a tapestry, or constructing a totem out of clay. Often I think that it can be very detrimental to sit down and think too much about why we make art. It will only lead towards more doubt, self-sabotage, disillusionment and neurosis. The best pieces I have made are when I am not thinking, goofing around and many times make something as a joke. Direct experience. Being surprised. Startled. That is art. I like to think of my art as a disciplinary practice. An offering of myself and how I am co-existing in the world. To deal with it, me, whatever and however that exists.

If I would describe how I ended being an artist, I would say it happened because quite frankly I was not very good at anything else. I was mediocre at most things. I thought I was good at mathematics but ended up taking a ceramics class in high school because I needed credit since I was home schooled. What I did discover is that I liked being alone, being by myself. The studio became a safe zone to check in with myself but also really play. I always climbed trees and played outdoors as a child. School and the very idea of being sent to school baffled me and I remember harboring resentment against my mother for forcing me into kindergarten. To this day I still wonder how or why I have ended up mentoring and teaching others since I struggled with being in school. At the end of the day I like people. I like talking about art, getting to know the fire, the drive, and the impulse that pushes artists to produce.

I like repetition. Mantra. The sound of objects, people, and the world. The fuzziness of things. I'd like to think that these qualities shine through in my pieces.

Religion. Spirituality. Catholicism. Being Gay and all the baggage that goes along with that. I think it is relevant in terms of my interest in magic. The body. And ritual. Like most gay men I hated the Catholic Church for years but frankly now I like going to mass with my parents and observing the rituals and enjoy sitting quietly for that hour, not unlike the studio. I do meditate and have an affinity to Buddhism. More so in the same way that meditation, the studio allows me to check in with myself. Make friends with myself. My demons. Too many times see that I am a better person than I think I am.

Cycles. I have noticed that my art comes in cycles. I do go through cyclical periods. Many times it has to do with tragedy or inspiration. A Breakup, Death, Tragedy and Unexpectedness. Being Alive. Sickness and Struggle. When I am sick in bed and unable to move, there is a wall opposite my bed. I have a wall of drawings of others artists and a few made by me. In that space of fear of death and immobility, I have been able to see the gift of looking at art. That for whatever reason, color, patterns, lines and shapes help soothe the suffering. One of the happiest things I

can say about my work is that it is in hospitals. I like the idea that the work could uplift the human spirit and offer a vehicle for nostalgia. I could offer reprieve from the unexplainable.

Influences. I am most attracted and have always been influenced by artists that have real life problems and have overcome insurmountable obstacles. Personal Demons. Often times, and for the most part art and academia deny being human. It is looked down upon to be real and to have feelings. The mind and thinking are always valued more. The world has been good at destroying itself with not being in sync with our hearts and minds. Therefore, despite it's loaded and sometimes clique affiliation, I prefer to remain on the side of emotions, psychology feelings, body and heart.

Lineage. Family. My Family. That lineage. My grandmother and my grandfather. For most of her adult life she had a handicapped daughter, my Aunt. Until shortly before her death, and into her sixties, my grandmother carried her own daughter up 2 flights of stairs to bath her and take care of her every night. I think about my grandfather who worked at the post office. Towards the end of his life he worked a great deal as a woodworker and to this day I sit on his stool when I make my colored pencil drawings. I like to think it is the most sacred object I own.

Sexuality. My lovers. My father who is probably the root of all the work. This is a hard dance of pain and also reality. Wanting to be genuinely connected, loved, accepted and struggling to find that unconditional love.

Layers. Feeling color. Feeling line. Feeling Shape. How something visual can be a dance, tell a story, be nothing, be everything, be funny. I love how art can be a refuge, a true refuge.