

# ART PAPERS

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HARMONY KORINE + MORE





**WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN**  
CHICAGO

in the world, a consequence among so many  
an image in an endless stream of images. And  
nds to a question, for which I have no answers:  
es one approximate capitalism's exploitative rela-  
without falling, on the one hand, on the side of  
evidentiary presentation, risking a dilution or  
e of reflexive content, and, on the other, on the  
"open-ended" presentations that surrender  
s to the affective?

—Gean Moreno

Walking into William J. O'Brien's solo exhibition is like discovering an unattended banquet: two majestically-scaled plywood tables are chock full of glazed ceramic objects, over one hundred in total, making it hard to parse it all from a distance [The Renaissance Society; May 15—June 26, 2011]. Get closer and the exhibition comes alive. This could be O'Brien's answer to the maharajah's feast, with all its grisly delicacies, in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. No chilled monkey brains on the menu here, but plenty of mutant forms in clay. If you were raised on a frugal diet of Minimalism or Conceptual Art you might need a palate adjustment, but in its own way, it amounts to a delectable spread.

To attribute life to inanimate things is a human habit, which the exhibition seems to anticipate and activate. For one thing, there's the immediate sensation of being watched. From the moment you enter, five metal masks rise up from the crowd, gaping at you with cutout eyes and misshapen grins. The welcoming committee or malevolent ghouls? Either way, this sets the tone: the show oscillates between lighthearted and sinister, good-humored and grotesque. The exhibition design, though understated, also plays a major role. One of the two intersecting tables aims straight at the doorway, which compels you to pick a direction to circumnavigate the dense display. Pulled closely into the works' orbit, you encounter the pieces one after another, moving around the tabletop and its three raised platforms.

O'Brien's broader practice encompasses drawing, sculpture, and other media, but this exhibition—the artist's first museum solo—is primarily a tailored showcase of his ceramics. Produced over the past six years, the gathered works demonstrate an impressive range; within a certain shambolic style, each clay object has a distinct character. Jagged shapes are fused together from shard-like pieces. Others resemble tangled heaps of organic matter. A few traditional vases nod to functional pottery. Most remarkably, dozens of gnarled heads emerge, with etched-in teeth, dark holes for eyes, and textured faces. If the latter faintly recall Picasso and

other modernists inspired by African art, O'Brien is channeling the vital spirit more than the habitual forms of these sources. Animistic undertones flare up again: I found myself waiting—like a Hollywood archeologist in yet another supernatural setting—for these handmade artifacts to speak up or murmur, to crack free of their kiln-hardened surfaces.

On another level, the sheer quantity of the works on view animates the exhibition. It's tempting to interpret O'Brien's prolific output in pathological terms. Indeed, the curator's essay launches right in with Freud. But one might take a different cue from the recent exhibition *Making is Thinking* at Rotterdam's Witte de With, which was partially inspired by Richard Sennett's book *The Craftsman*, 2008. In that context, O'Brien's work was situated among that of other artists, such as Eva Berendes and Wilfrid Almendra, who find their bearings in artisanal labor and the values of craft—though often skewed and scrubbed free of nostalgia. Imagine the artist wrapped up in the daily discipline of making things, engaged in the work in and for itself, where he finds a space for experimentation within a set of constraints. Repetition can be its own reward.

Significantly, O'Brien chooses to make his ceramics at a community art center, rubbing elbows with amateurs. If fine art ceramics still can't fully evade dismissive associations with gift-shop-friendly craft, O'Brien's devotion to the medium has a contrarian aspect—an undertow that pulls away from pedigreed cultural taste. Then again, passing by a brown clay bust with its tongue sticking out, it's easy to feel that O'Brien might not even need us at all, that he could go on adding to the table indefinitely, conjuring disheveled spirits from the stuff of the earth.

—Karsten Lund

William J. O'Brien, installation view, The Renaissance Society, 2011 (courtesy of the artist and The Renaissance Society; photo: Tom Van Eyndt)

MAY 30

## Review: William J. O'Brien/Renaissance Society

Hyde Park, Sculpture

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### RECOMMENDED

The impulse to sort and classify William J. O'Brien's 100 vessels, urns, plates, masks, heads, fragments and geometric constructions in his current exhibition should be suppressed, at least momentarily, for the power of this display is in its collective glut, as a chorus of many shouting, horrible and sick faces and visceral sculptures, raw or glazed, in densely textured and richly colored patinas. After this exhibition, the 100 sculptures will be removed to their respective homes and propped onto shelves or pedestals like the good trophies that they are, but for now, these goblins of taste are presented buffet-style like the feast of some pagan ceremony.

The mostly ceramic sculptures tickle the line between natural-history-museum artifacts and Tiki mug souvenirs, not as a critique of ethnographic cultural consumerism and exoticism but as a way for O'Brien to articulate a spectrum of symbols on the cusp of original feeling and mainstream sentiment, like a parade organized by James Ensor. The crowd of objects expresses a dynamic psychology: there are things buried and prematurely unearthed; there are freshly bundled and hoarded piles of waste; there are plenty of finger-sized orifices. Most importantly, the urns, vessels, heads and totems burn with internal tension, reliquaries of ashen and neutered desire. Like Freud's tchotchke shelf, some things seem grotesque because they are so familiar. (Jason Founberg)

*Through June 26 at the Renaissance Society, 5811 South Ellis, Cobb Hall 418, University of Chicago, (773)702-8670.*



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