

# CHICAGO GALLERY NEWS

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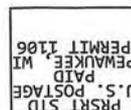
## ANTIQUES ARE NEW THIS SPRING *A FRESH FAIR DEBUTS AT NAVY PIER*



### IN THIS ISSUE:

- The 2014 winter art season
- William J. O'Brien at the MCA
- The Renaissance Society's new director
- An interview with Chicago collectors
- Edward Gorey comes home
- Galleries, museums, resources and more

Pictured above: Sapphire Fancy Diamond Bangle Bracelet from Buccellati



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# William J. O'Brien at the MCA

BY FRANCK MERCURIO

William J. O'Brien's first big solo museum exhibition at the Renaissance Society in 2011 helped cement his reputation as a skilled ceramicist. Standing out from the 100 ceramic works were O'Brien's "busts"—highly expressive, human-like heads that carry a wide range of cultural references from 19th century face jugs to rubber Halloween masks. These pieces read as engaging psychological portraits, but they also showcase O'Brien's accomplishments in the medium of clay.

So, it may be surprising to learn that the 38-year-old, Chicago-based artist is well versed in a variety of media—besides ceramics—including assemblage, painting, drawing, and metal sculpture. Examples of each genre are presented in O'Brien's first comprehensive museum exhibition, *William J. O'Brien*, opening January 25 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

"The work in the studio was nothing like the stuff I saw in the [Renaissance Society] show. He had all these other incredible bodies of work," says MCA curator Naomi Beckwith who organized the O'Brien exhibition. "What I wanted to do was to bring the breadth of his works out to the public."

O'Brien first exhibited at the MCA in 2005 as part of the museum's *12 x 12* series (now called *BMO Harris Chicago Works*). He was also included in the MCA's group exhibition *Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today* in 2012.

"Bill is clearly someone, institutionally, who we've been watching for some time," says Beckwith.

O'Brien's current exhibition is the latest installment in the MCA's "ascendant artist" series—which has featured such notables as Rashid Johnson, Amalia Pica, and Paul Sietsema. As the word "ascendant" implies, these exhibitions present artists who are not quite at mid-career, but are on the brink of fame. Says Beckwith, "We're catching people on their way up."

O'Brien is the first Chicago-based artist to be showcased in the MCA's ascendant artist series. "It's really great to feature someone located here [in Chicago], someone who's already showing in New York," says Beckwith. "It's nice to come home and look at the talent that's right under our noses."

In addition to being represented by the Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago, O'Brien is also represented by the Marianne Boesky Gallery in

New York and the Almine Rech Gallery in Paris.

The physicality O'Brien brings to his art is a constant that runs through each genre he tackles.

"He has such a bodily investment in the work that he produces," says Beckwith, "You can see him really working across the page in the drawings. You can see him wrapping, molding, reshaping, breaking and sticking things together in the assemblage work."

Representative of the physicality of O'Brien's process is the layering of textures in his work. His ceramic busts are heavily textured, often featuring knobs of clay protruding from glazed surfaces, giving a kind of bumpy, nubby appearance. Some of O'Brien's "paintings" are assemblages constructed of layers of detritus—packing materials, old clothes, sticks—all covered in a unifying pigment. His metal sculptures are created by welding a series of planar elements together, giving the impression of texture through layering. Even O'Brien's drawings are multilayered.

A counter-balance to the "masculine physicality" of O'Brien's pieces is his interest in color, pattern, and naïve forms—qualities that are often associated with feminist artists, outsider artists, and/or artists of color.

"There is almost a kind of feminist gesture there," says Beckwith, "where you see his work moving from the decorative, associated with



William J. O'Brien, *Untitled*, 2007. Collection of Dana Hirt. © William J. O'Brien. Photo: Tom Van Eynde, courtesy of the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

women's work, to something that feels like abstraction. You see his work veering from quilting and textile to assemblage."

This push-and-pull between masculine and feminine, art and craft, high and low is evident throughout all of O'Brien's works. "He's thinking about those things that have been dropped out of art history," says Beckwith, "while using those things that have been valued by art history."

In September 2011 a fire almost completely destroyed O'Brien's studio and the studios of three other artists in an Avondale warehouse. Many of his works were lost. Luckily, enough works survived in the galleries and in the hands of collectors that the current MCA show could still be mounted. New pieces have filled the

gaps, including a large-scale, site specific installation that Beckwith describes as "totemic objects" exploring the idea of "monuments to feelings."

When speaking of O'Brien's likely reception at the MCA, Beckwith stated, "He's been teaching at the School of the Art Institute for a while. It's going to be amazing to have his students here [at the MCA] alongside his colleagues. Clearly, he has a collection base and group of supporters here in the city. It's nice to have what feels like a big family hug around William at this time."

Accompanying the MCA exhibition will be a monograph, *William J. O'Brien*, co-written by Beckwith and Trevor Smith of the Peabody Essex Museum, which will include a creative writing piece by local critic Jason Foumberg. The monograph will include a checklist of the 140 objects to be displayed in the MCA exhibition.

For more information about *William J. O'Brien* (both the exhibition and the monograph), visit [www.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/](http://www.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/)



Pictured left: William J. O'Brien, *Untitled*, 2008. Collection of Larry and Marilyn Fields.  
© William J. O'Brien. Photo: Tom Van Eynde, courtesy of the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Right: William J. O'Brien, *Untitled*, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.  
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PREVIEWS JAN. 24, 2014

## The Maker: William J. O'Brien

by Jamilee Polson Lacy



Installation view,  
"William J. O'Brien,"  
Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Chicago. Photo:Nathan  
Keay, © MCA Chicago

Chicago artist William J. O'Brien is in demand. His first major survey exhibition, "William J. O'Brien," opens this weekend at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago (Jan. 25-May 18). It follows critically acclaimed shows at Chicago's Renaissance Society and the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, in Overland Park, Kan., and a 2013 outing at New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery. O'Brien's first European solo exhibition, an installation of ceramics and works on paper, opened at Paris's Almine Rech Gallery just two weeks ago.

Speaking to *A.i.A.* last week, the artist, 38, said that with every piece, he seeks to "manifest the physical activity of the body and the studio" in abstract images and structures that at once honor and refute various creative traditions. Though O'Brien is most celebrated for gritty yet whimsical ceramics, this midcareer survey demonstrates the truly broad tenets of his practice. Most notably, the artist's oeuvre emphasizes a keenness for color, pattern and form, an exploration of two- and three-dimensional mediums alike, and an eagerness to bring together diverse art historical narratives.

O'Brien's work over the last 10 years has maintained an affinity with the "maker" trend, in which craft aesthetics, handmade approaches and the sheer physicality of art-making surpass theoretical and academic frameworks. Indeed, each artwork on display at the MCA (all are untitled) conjures aspects of folk and outsider art. Tumorous vessels formed with hand-manipulated clay are reminiscent of the "face jugs" and "crazy pots" native to the antebellum American

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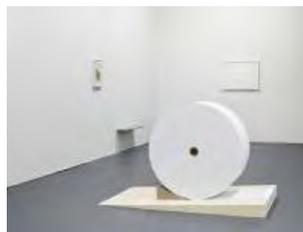
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South. Complex geometrically abstract patterns distinguish his brightly colored drawings and collages, joining the visual vocabularies of American domestic art with psychedelic design.

O'Brien's output has increasingly meshed such "maker" tendencies with concerns central to much of 20th-century art history. "In theory," he told *A.i.A.*, "I am a longtime admirer of minimalism and the tenets of restraint. Essentially, this is because I am naturally so inclined to being messy and expressive in my work." Accordingly, monochromatic pieces like a roughly hewn and welded steel sculpture from 2012 look like the unruly offspring of David Smith's sculptural primitivism and Anne Truitt's minimalist pillars. And large, fencelike armatures globbed with paint, glitter, string and studio remnants "defy logic and constraint," as the artist put it, in that they cram many art historical narratives into a few maximalist sculptures.

The bodies of work featured throughout the MCA's expansive first floor gallery vary widely in terms of surface and materials. To date O'Brien has utilized drawing and painting resources of all kinds, paper and felt collage, kiln ceramics, various metals, wood, textiles and mixed-medium forays into children's art supplies, found objects and accumulated refuse, all of which feature prominently at the MCA. Yet the artworks maintain a sense of cohesion thanks to the appealing flaws left by the artist and the improvisational nature of his process. "So often today's art world can be a vacuum of competence and perfection," the artist told *A.i.A.* "I'm interested in the point where ugliness and failure can become attractiveness."

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From left: Christopher Williams, *Bergische Bauernscheune, Junkersholz, Leichlingen, September 29th, 2009*, inkjet print, 17 x 21½". Michael Snow, *Authorization*, 1969, Polaroid Type 55 prints, adhesive tape, mirror in metal frame, 21½ x 17½".



## PHILADELPHIA

**"MICHAEL SNOW: PHOTO-CENTRIC"**

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART • February 1–April 27 • Curated by Adelina Vlas • In *Authorization*, 1969, Michael Snow transformed the seemingly static, two-dimensional photographic medium into something both sculptural and performative: Shooting his own reflection with a tripod-mounted camera, he then pasted the resulting self-portrait onto the mirror's surface, repeated the process four more times, and exhibited the collaged result. That same year, in *One Second in Montreal*, Snow took a different tack, producing a motion picture using only a series of still images of snowy landscapes. Both works showcase the Canadian artist's eccentric approach to photography, a medium fundamental to his entire oeuvre and the focus of this survey at the Philadelphia Museum (the first exhibition to specifically address this element of his practice since "Projects: Michael Snow—Photographs" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1976). Curator Adelina Vlas will bring together some thirty pieces made between 1962 and 2003 in which Snow diffracts photography across painting, sculpture, film, and music.

—Branden W. Joseph

**"RUFFNECK CONSTRUCTIVISTS"**

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART • February 12–August 17 • Curated by Kara Walker • In 2006, Kara Walker made her curatorial debut at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with her post-Katrina exhibition "After the Deluge." Her sophomore effort's mash-up title, "Ruffneck Constructivists," conjoins the ethos of Russia's revolutionary avant-garde with MC Lyte's early-1990s track. Walker will go beyond her authorial interest in the psychosexual phantasms of American cultural history in selecting more than thirty recent works by artists from the US, Eastern Europe, and South Africa: Dineo Bopape, Kendell Geers, Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Jennie C. Jones, Deana Lawson, Rodney McMillian, William Pope.L, Tim Portlock, Lior Shvil, and Szymon Tomasiak. Muscularly responding to ideas of space, policing, and anti-sociality, the show will emphasize works in sculpture, installation, video, and photography, and will include a full roster of performances, talks, and screenings. The catalogue is designed by artist A. K. Burns, with original texts by Walker and architectural theorist Craig Wilkins.

—Thomas J. Lax

## CHICAGO

**WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN**

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART • January 25–May 18 • Curated by Naomi Beckwith • William J. O'Brien's feverish material explorations regularly succumb to restrained, taxonomical displays when entering the public arena. At Chicago's Renaissance Society in 2011, O'Brien installed a tiered arrangement of modestly scaled ceramic objects. Last winter, he hung grids of felt compositions and framed oil pastel and inkwash works on paper at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. For this survey exhibition at the MCA, to be complemented by the first major catalogue devoted to the artist's work, roughly one hundred of O'Brien's abundant artifacts will be "organized like a poem," with stanza-like groupings convening disparate objects including textiles, paintings, colored-pencil abstractions, ceramics, and glitter-coated assemblages. One of the show's earlier pieces is a 2008 line drawing that depicts a nude clown with a conspicuous erection, riding a camel-like circus animal—an allegorical figure that, in its Calder-esque clarity and simplicity of means, should stand out as an anomaly in O'Brien's vast field of work shaped by intuitive, romantic energies.

—Michelle Grabner

**"CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS: THE PRODUCTION LINE OF HAPPINESS"**

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO • January 24–May 18 • Curated by Matthew S. Witkovsky, Mark Godfrey, and Roxana Marcoci • Conceptual artist Christopher Williams's first museum retrospective, featuring his trademark photographs, films, and videos from the last thirty-five years, is sure to be a nontraditional survey: Williams has conceived all three incarnations of this traveling exhibition as works in their own right, each fitted with site-specific interventions that will reflect on the architecture of that venue. An extensive publication—more artists' book than catalogue—accompanies the project, containing essays by Godfrey, Marcoci, and Witkovsky along with a wide selection of source material: lists, budgets, contracts, and manifestos authored by Daniel Buren, Morgan Fisher, and Scritti Politti, among many others. Characteristic of all Williams's output, this book analyzes the parameters and conditions of its own production. *Travels to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Aug. 2–Nov. 2; Whitechapel Gallery, London, Apr.–June 2015.*

—Willem de Rooij

## Q&A

# Artist William J. O'Brien on His Brilliant, Multifaceted Career

By Eric Bryant

Jan. 15, 2014



An installation from William O'Brien's 2013 show at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York.



The artist [William J. O'Brien](#) is, without question, having a moment. His first solo exhibition in France opened last week at [Almine Rech Gallery](#) in Paris, featuring a series of ceramics made over the last five years and a new group of works on paper. Then, later this month, his first major museum survey is opening at the [MCA Chicago](#), in the city where he has lived for more than a decade.

While he may be best known for his idiosyncratic and exuberant glazed ceramic vessels and masks, the prolific artist has for just as long been creating brightly colored powder-coated steel sculptures, fabric collages that recall the vibrance of **Matisse's** late *découpage* pieces, and all manner of works on paper, from paintings to collage to color pencil drawings.

We spoke with him about his hometown, his influences, and what it means for an artist to find and express his own identity.

**Your career has been rooted in Chicago, where you have been both student and a teacher, and where you have shown widely in galleries and museums. Does the city hold special meaning for you and your career?**

It is hard for me to adequately express the gratitude and heartfelt connection I have to the art community in Chicago. When I moved here from New York City I was unsure of how contemporary art exists here. I found there's a long history of artists who have spent very meaningful time in Chicago for school and also use the city as a great place to get work done. I greatly value the opportunity to work with my students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Although there aren't as many institutions as in other cities, everyone here has a close connection to the work they do, and having that intimacy is something that I value about living here.

**You are known for working in a wide variety of materials—not merely dabbling or sending out to fabricators as some artists do, but really working with the specific media, from clay and glazes to pencil on paper to fabric and steel. What draws you to the different materials?**

I look at my art practice as one of experimentation and improvisation. Working in different materials allows for different formal qualities of the work to come about. I am fascinated with using materials in their traditional, historical forms, but also with refuting their logic in experimental forms. Different types of materials have different natural qualities affecting how they can be manipulated. Clay inherently is more playful but also delicate, steel more rigid and unforgiving. Drawing is one of my favorite materials because it has the widest range of expression, and I like the potential for works of art to maintain both static and unfinished states in completion. That tension opens up the dialogue for interpretation for me as the maker, but also for the viewer of the work as well.

**In your upcoming MCA exhibition, as in past shows, you will be displaying the products of these varied means of production together. What do you think about when creating these groupings or tableau?**

In my early work I primarily did installation so for me the interplay between objects was of critical importance in the work—mostly as a critique of object-making, but also as a way to allow for the spaces in between to be the content of the work. The gallery or museum in and of itself offers a structure and dialogue about how works react to one another in the space. This dialogue is something that I enjoy but also at times become incredibly challenged by. I like the idea of art existing in a casual but also serious nature. When things are shown in groupings it breaks up the seriousness and contention of art objects. Art, both in the making and viewing, is a continuum, so the mistakes or imperfections in the work and between the objects are part of the content of the work, as are the contradictions between them.

**Some of your work seems to hover at the edge of referencing kitsch, while elsewhere there appears an influence of a kind of highly formal modernism. Do these concepts have special meaning for you?**

I think this relates to audience and the history of certain material-based practices. I am influenced by and embrace outsider artists, funk ceramicists, but I am also greatly inspired by minimalism and the tenets of both. This idea of identity in material and process is something I am greatly fascinated by as a means to embrace, contradict, and evaluate the role that certain materials have within different contexts.

**On a practical level, how do you go about your work? Do you find yourself in the course of a day**

## **moving from drawing to cutting out felt to building pots?**

I work continuously in all materials simultaneously. But lately I have been focusing on series of works at a time to see a particular set of rules or constraints followed through. Experimentation and range is something that has always been an important aspect of my practice. I usually work in ceramics in the morning and do more concise controlled work like drawings later in the day. Ceramics are naturally more experimental, so I enjoy starting my day in ceramics to allow myself to not take myself so seriously. In the end, I think that making art is a push and pull between following your own natural tendencies towards expression but also setting up rules and constraints for yourself to be able to evaluate when things are done.

## **Does working in one material help you break through a creative block in another?**

I think you need to sit with the discomfort of things not working out in the studio for long periods of time to eventually resolve and evaluate in yourself your own set of expectations and rules for the success of the work. Because in the end art is subjective and I find the work I have produced that's a failure in my eyes is usually the most interesting to the viewer. Their interpretations or sets of critical insights are often very different from my own. Oftentimes immediate insights and perspectives in making are hard to see, so in the end I try to just focus on the making of the work and then later be more curious about whether it's successful or not.

## **Going back to the idea of you being a very hands-on artist, can you talk about the importance of what I think I once saw you refer to as "genuinity" in your work and about the significance of authenticity more broadly in contemporary art?**

The best art comes from each person genuinely being themselves, which is why there is the potential for many different ways of existing as an artist. Moreover, this search to be genuine refers to the pressures many artists feel to conform to certain current sets of constraints in their work to feel the work is relevant to what else is being created. In the end there is always a tension between any maker's desire to be genuine and to want their audience to embrace what they do and assign value or success to the work. But I do think the artists I most admire just sincerely kept to their own sense of themselves in the work despite periods of the contemporary canon embracing it or not. It is interesting to consider how long a work sits in time—to consider both its immediate gratifications, but also the value or lasting content in the work. Many times the work that lasts the longest relates to this issue of being yourself in the work.

## **Were you specifically drawn to some of your materials, particularly ceramics and fabric, because of their association with craft in art history?**

My earliest art experiences were through ceramics. I never enjoyed art classes—I can recall crying in grade school for not being able to use the scissors correctly and for my pumpkin cut out assignment to never achieve the same quality as the example. When I left high school to be home schooled I had to take an art class for credit and ended up taking a pottery class at the community art center. My art teacher was a gregarious alcoholic who, despite maybe not teaching me anything about ceramics, allowed me a certain freedom and space to explore which I think I associate more with craft-based materials.

Because it may be a more bastardized material historically, I think it allows me to refute and be subversive compared to when I work with materials that are more expensive. So the craft-based influences in my work originally were really extensions out of practical economical constraints. Fabric from the thrift store was cheaper than canvas at the art supply store, et cetera. In the end, I like how loaded craft history is with its material usage. I find the art world likes my ceramics when they are not well crafted, but ceramicists like my work when they are better crafted. I like the idea of being misunderstood or playing around with the roles of what the maker should

look like or appear.

**These same materials have since the '70s been taken up by some artists because of their connection to traditional "women's work." As a gay man, do you feel some connection or corollary to this feminist stance?**

I would say that there is a certain history associated with certain types of material choices within the art historical canon as it relates to identity. I still am fascinated by the idea of what queer minimalism, or identity-based minimalism could look like. Currently I think many artists are playing around with this idea of material and identity. I do not think of myself as doing women's work. Maybe I just pretend that I work as a baker.

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William J. O'Brien  
*Untitled, 2013*

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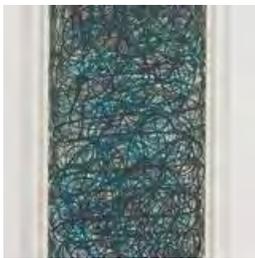
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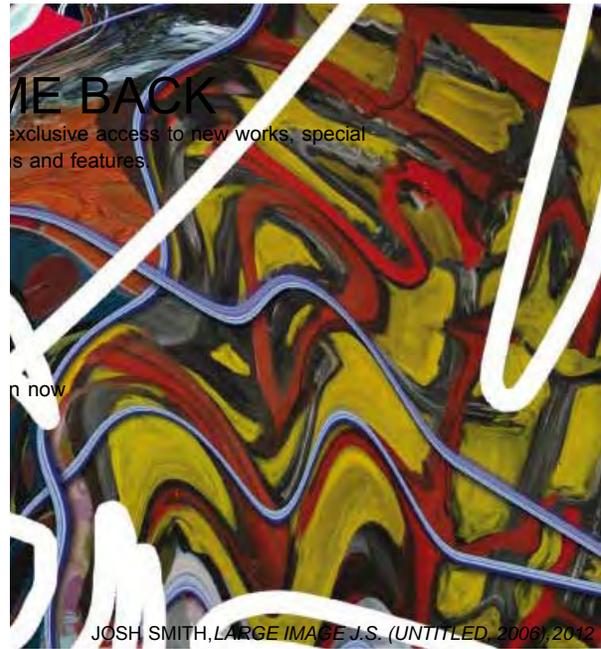
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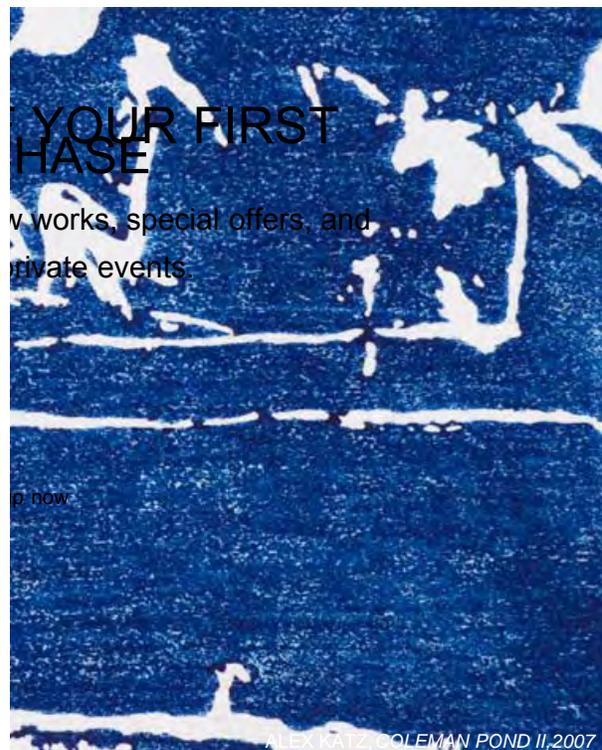
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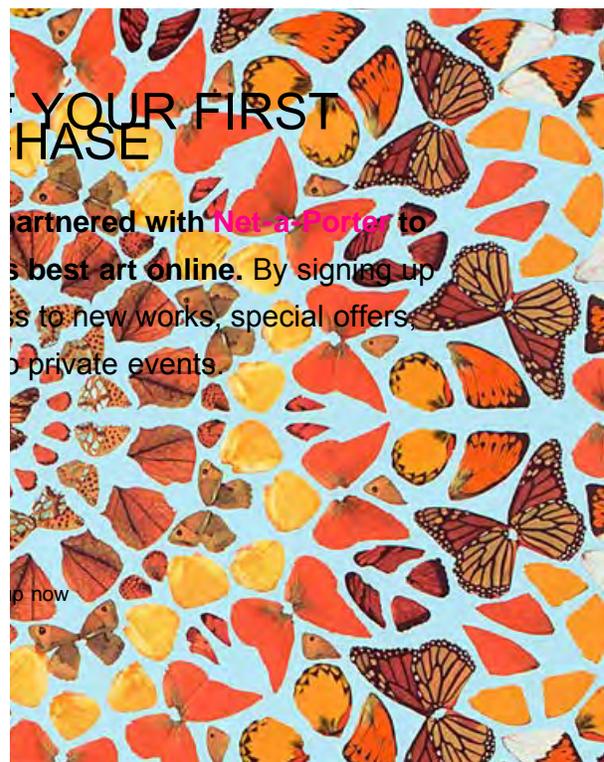
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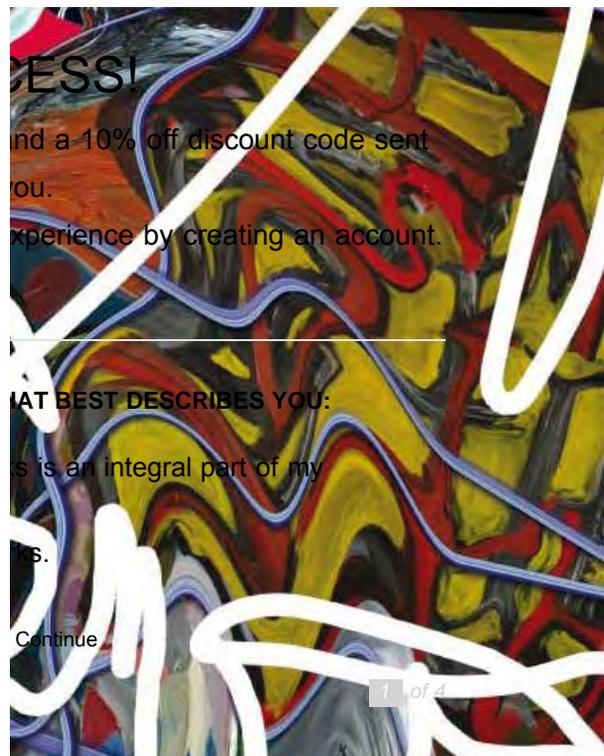




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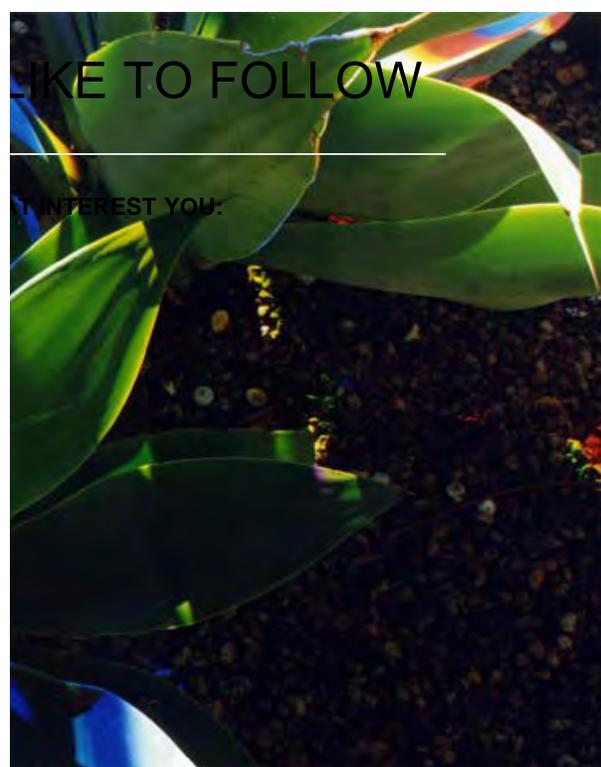
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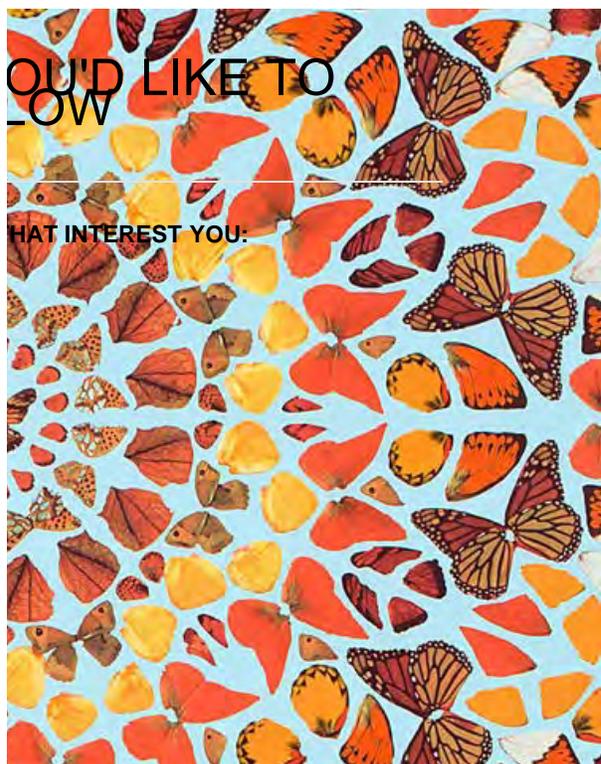
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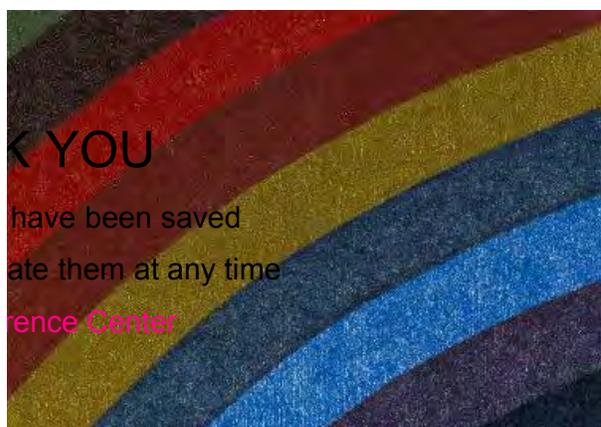
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