

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artforum
December 2007

William J. O'Brien

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY | NORTH HARVEY AVENUE

A lot of art materials are pretty icky, and it hardly requires a dedicated Freudian to note that, in their raw form, clay, paint, and glue are not without an excremental quality. The physical nature of artistic media, the mess of an artist's studio, and the feel of handling materials not fully transformed into something else are at the heart of William J. O'Brien's recent sculpture. O'Brien, like Robert Rauschenberg or, more recently, Nancy Rubins, Jessica Stockholder, and Jason Rhoades, has a light touch, making assemblages that seem at once tenuous and inevitable. O'Brien's aesthetic is one of grunge and glut, and the juxtapositions of yarn, paint, clay, wood, felt, found objects, carpet, and ink that coalesce in his sculptures tend to appear arbitrary at first and then—visually, at least—reconciled.

In O'Brien's recent show at Shane Campbell Gallery, seven sculptures were arranged in order of size in a row across the floor of the gallery. They stood like battered stelae, constructed from such low-tech materials and methods—and, in most cases, amateurish carpentry—that they offer a blue-collar fragility that becomes a touching tenderness. The smallest sculpture in this row of curiously heightened rubbish is *Summer Break* (all works 2007), a ball of stuff tied together with thick string, partly coated in a seemingly diffident slathering of light blue paint. Clearly a piece of reclaimed detritus, it shouldn't compel the visual interest that it does.

Tommy Cart is a construction of found pieces of wood stuck together (and put on wheels) so informally as to achieve a kind of nonchalance. A blob of blue-green painted clay tops this sculpture, and its wheels, vertical articulation, and round top lend it a strange totemic air. Clay is a component in almost all of O'Brien's sculptures: He manipulates it with his fingers and applies it as a collage element; he kneads it to emphasize its earthy tactility; and he fires it to fuse glossy colors into its surface. His ceramics are as rough-hewn and reticent as the rest of his output, but there is something in their handcrafted nature that gives them a special place in this work.

Seven ink and colored pencil works on paper here struck a slightly different note. Consisting primarily of bold abstract patterns interrupted by the occasional floral motif, the consistency and simplicity of the media he employs make these works more immediately unified than the sculptures, determined by an internal logic that is all their own. Nevertheless, both bodies of work reflect

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223

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O'Brien's tendency to meander, to use accretive and sequential processes as a way to discover equipoise in the midst of chaos.

—*James Yood*

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