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The evocative and varied works of William J. O'Brien are now at KMAC

By ELI KEEL | January 29, 2017 7:00 am



Detail of work by William J. O'Brien

The Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft recently opened “Oscillates Wildly,” a solo exhibition by Chicago artist William J. O'Brien. The exhibit features more than 80 works by the artist and includes a broad spectrum of media — from paintings and drawings to ceramics, felt and more.

Insider caught up with O'Brien while he finished setting up his work and also spoke with KMAC curator Joey Yates about what makes O'Brien a perfect artist for the museum.

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Yates says O'Brien is an artist he and KMAC executive director Aldy Milliken have discussed since the beginning, while re-imagining the mission of KMAC and its understanding of craft.

"When I came to KMAC, we went through a litany of artists we thought represented (our mission) within their work," says Yates. With KMAC's new focus on the craft and practice of making art, they were looking at how artists worked and created.

Different media, different aesthetics and different materials were all elements Yates and Milliken wanted to create a conversation around. Often that meant shows with groups of artists were the best way to illustrate these ideas due to the breadth of work a group can showcase.

But with O'Brien's many disciplines, it's almost as if he is his own group exhibition. Though Yates notes that across the different media, O'Brien still has a distinct voice, "the other good thing about him is you can see the sensibility — there is a 'through line' to everything he's creating."

Among the many pieces — mostly untitled — O'Brien and Yates chose to showcase in "Oscillates Wildly," there are a large number of smaller, handmade ceramic pieces. Some evoke vessels and the more utilitarian ceramics of cups and pitchers. Others seem to suggest a figure or a face.

When I met O'Brien at KMAC, he was still in the process of arranging these pieces, and he immediately began discussing Judy Chicago, his other influences and some of the ideas behind his work. But he quickly interrupted himself to add, "And by the way, I don't really believe in the artist ever being around the work."

Despite his ability to get very in depth very quickly about each piece he's created, O'Brien believes in letting people interact with his art without influencing what they experience. It's a sensibility that is echoed by the fact that almost all of his creations are untitled.

"The work can speak for itself," he says.



William J. O'Brien — Photo by
Robert Chase Heishman



"Untitled" by William J. O'Brien

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The broad range of that work is stunning. Some are canvases that burst with color and shape, created with oil paints, pastel and colored pencils, while others are black ink on white paper. In addition to the smaller ceramics, there are larger figures made of ceramic, metal or a combination of materials. Another sculpture suggests a totem pole.

“In the best case scenario, art creates a space for you to open your mind and be surprised and shocked out of something,” says the artist.

Despite his instinct to let viewers come to his work without preconceived notions, O’Brien talks about his emotional journey with art.

“I don’t really talk about the spirituality of the work, but I grew up working class in a very religious family in Cleveland, and I am gay, and so there was this contention,” he says. This was compounded by his love of science and math, subjects he once thought would become his life and work.

He describes a kind of existential crisis he went through when he came out in his 20, and how he had to make peace between his analytical and creative sides — a process he says plays out in “a dance” in his work.

O’Brien uses verbs like dance and throw and pound when talking about his process. Those more active verbs illustrate another inner exploration.

“I was contending with these stereotypes and embracing violence and masculinity in a positive way,” he says. That positive violence came from the force of his process. “I do think the work is very physical and visceral, and my body is in all of it.”

The works may be untitled, but many of them are strongly evocative, with a sense of play, exploration and, yes, even violence.

Along with his struggle to integrate his nature, O’Brien also briefly mentions traumatic and difficult events in his life, but he does so almost sheepishly. He seems reluctant again — or even shy — about influencing viewers with biographical details.

He mentions a fire in his studio that destroyed all of his work, and how it forced him to start over. He also talks about familial loss.

“Not to say I’m one of these artist that always has really heavy shit going on, but last year, I lost my father,” he says.



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These experiences prompts O'Brien to ask, "How do you take in dark heaviness, and what do you do with it?" He offers an answer as well. "And a lot of the beauty comes from that ... A lot of those beautiful drawings don't really come from joy."

Whether it's O'Brien describing a dance between different aspects of himself, or Yates describing the swing of the work between mediums as a pendulum, "Oscillates Wildly" offers viewers a broad range of feelings and forms, which they are left to discover and explore on their own.



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