

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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## ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

### WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN TRANSFORMS ARTISANAL CRAFTS INTO ABSTRACT ART

Working in everything from pencil to felt to clay, the Chicago artist produces exuberant creations of idiosyncratic beauty

Text by James Yood | Photography by Kevin Miyazaki

Let's just go ahead and declare 2014 a big year for William J. O'Brien, an artist known not only for his spirited ceramic sculptures but also, increasingly, for his abstract drawings and collages. Things are certainly starting off auspiciously enough, with his first European solo show, at the Almine Rech Gallery in Paris, opening January 9, and a midcareer survey debuting January 25 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago, his home city since 2003.

Not too shabby for a rising talent, and an awful lot of attention for his signature medium, all too often overlooked in high-art circles. "Yes, there's traditionally a craft-based relationship to ceramics," he notes. "However, there's an element of vulgarity to clay that interests me." It's a material, he says, that naturally lends itself to expressive gestures, inviting spontaneous experimentation.

Working primarily with his hands, O'Brien manipulates mounds of clay into forms of such imaginative frenzy as to be both irreverent and mesmerizing.

Whether they suggest people or pots, the glazed-and-fired eruptions



Artist William J. O'Brien with recent ceramic sculptures and felt collages in his Chicago studio. He is represented in the U.S. by New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery and Chicago's Shane Campbell Gallery.

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command intense visual interest, simultaneously exuding up-tempo rhythms and a cunning insouciance.

But there's more to O'Brien's multifaceted oeuvre. He also draws like a dream, his works in colored pencil depicting largely geometric abstractions that make pattern pertinent. Tautly executed in a rainbow of hues, the compositions offer a fastidious complement to the raw, primal quality of his ceramic sculptures. The same is true of his felt collages, whose careful cutouts, stitched against a neutral ground, recall the late creations of Henri Matisse. The MCA exhibition will shine a spotlight on O'Brien's impressive range, with paintings, assemblages, and mixed-media installations all included.

In 2012, a fire in O'Brien's studio destroyed hundreds of his pieces, knocking him off his pins for a bit, but the artist—who serves as a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—has clearly bounced back in impressive fashion. The disaster is behind him now, and his renewed energies are ready for an outlet. "I want to show contradictions," he says. "After all, isn't that the point of art?"

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