

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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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

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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 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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