

NEWCITY Art

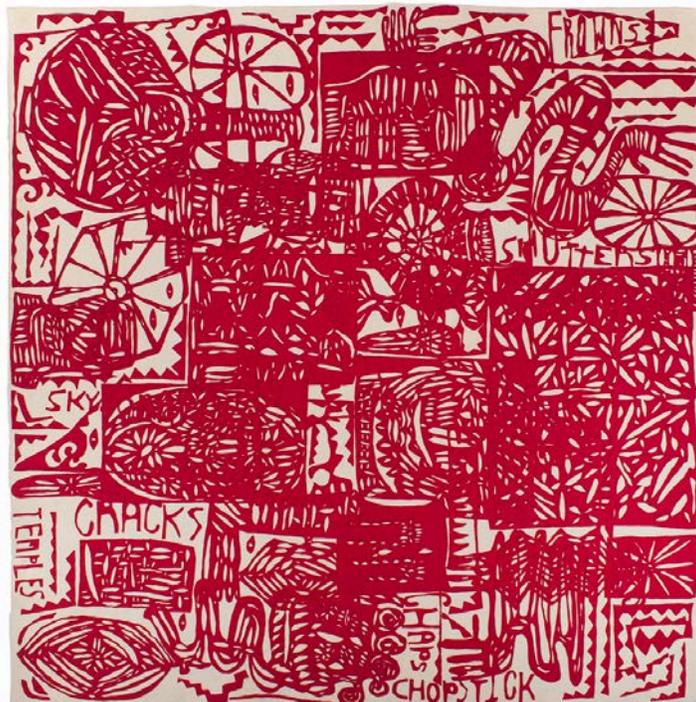
Portrait of the Artist: William J. O'Brien



Portrait of William J. O'Brien in his studio, circa, 2013. /Photo: Robert Chase Heishman.

Weaving his way gracefully around shelves brimming with colorful sculptures and past an in-progress colored pencil drawing tacked onto the wall, William J. O'Brien guides me into the ceramics section of his large, ground-floor studio. The room smells of clay and incense, and three large tables are packed with drying clay bodies draped in fogged plastic.

While O'Brien is most celebrated for his ceramic work, his practice expands across a much wider range of media. With drawings, textiles, paintings and metal sculpture, he creates surfaces that bear the heavy, laborious marks of his hand. "It can seem like a lot of different media all over the place, but the work is about the story of me, my relationships and also my physical body," he explains while carefully removing the plastic from one of his drying pieces. "A lot of the work is a form of self-portraiture, but it usually extends from relationships." The plastic falls away, revealing a torso-like form whose tactile surface is littered with floral motifs and rough, abrasive lines clearly made by scraping his fingertips through the clay. "These are meant to be collages, and they're not meant to be perfect," he says while turning his gaze toward a row of pieces lining the countertop behind us—neatly facing forward, the lower portion of the figures stand patiently awaiting the completion of their better halves.



William J. O'Brien. "Untitled," 2015. Felt on Felt, 72 x 72 inches. /Photo: Bradley Biancardi.

Walking briskly into the front room, O'Brien begins pulling open flat file drawers. "The work is about people, and when I make the work it's oftentimes remembering someone or resolving people I've had trouble with," he explains as he pulls out a bright drawing and carefully lays it on a nearby desk. "The reason I ended up making colored-pencil drawings is because I was in a relationship with someone and was trying to decide if I should end it or not." We both lean over the piece, closely surveying its dense, candy-colored floral motifs. The time and labor spent on the work is visible in the repetitive and interlocking forms bonded together through intense, aggressive strokes of color. "Some people say you remember the time of your life based on who you loved during that time," he says. "For me, it's the same with the work. When I look at the work, I look at the people I was with."

Below the drawing rests a large-scale felt tapestry. The jagged edges of its black-and-white cutouts resonate with the sharp angles of splattered glaze on a tall ceramic sculpture standing in the corner. "For me, the work that is more beautiful happens when I'm needing stability. When I feel wound up and out of control the work helps get me to focus and to feel safe. Finding beauty means safety." Gritty and imperfect, the pieces offer us an array of handmade constellations—our emotions are awakened, mapped out and brought to life by O'Brien's explorative hand. (Maria Girgenti)