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WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN

CERAMIC HEADS



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# WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN

MAKING FACES

BY

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The human head has obsessed sculptors for millennia. It is the head where we assume consciousness lives, and it is requisite in attempts by sculptors to recreate living, breathing persons in durable materials. For this reason, the bust has a privileged place in the history of sculpture, from the Romans to the Renaissance to the likes of Rodin, Rosso, Epstein, and Giacometti. This tradition reminds us that the body has sometimes been considered to be secondary, and sculptors have let the head, neck, and shoulders stand in for the rest. The head is good enough alone, prompting us to believe we are seeing another subject and a personality in the face on its surface. In this tradition, the head stands for the person.

William O'Brien doesn't sculpt heads or portraits. He makes objects with faces. It is an anxious leap of catachresis to call his overwrought ceramics "heads." They would be more comfortable if they were heads, if they all had necks, or if they reflected our facial geometries back to us. They don't. They wryly confront us

with a face on a surface and – more provocatively – with the face as a surface.

The face is a privileged image for us – one that we are neurologically predisposed to recognize, to search for, and to engage. For this reason the face is a potent sign that performatively overtakes anything on which it is placed. In fact, one of the quickest routes to the uncanny or the unsettling is to locate the face on anything other than a head. It is this discomfort that O'Brien often cultivates in his works. His rudimentary faces have been incorporated into predominantly amorphous objects that (while vaguely head-like) are not the scale and shape of human heads but agglomerations of matter. Mainly, these faces are marked and identified by the two eyes that O'Brien signals through absence – through the negative space of the punctured holes in the hollowed clay mound. Each face struggles with the bulging masses from which it emerges. They compete with the incised marks, attached balls and tubes, and layers of glaze under which they are buried. Nevertheless, these approximate visages persist, distantly, amidst the material static of ceramic's layers. Ultimately, they are better understood as facial drawings in and on ceramic sculpture – drawings which, like the physiognomies they depict, themselves become surfaces for the accumulation of marks, scratches, splatters, deposits, and obsessive repetitions.

O'Brien's facial drawings in clay are insistently simple, asymmetrical, crude, and



MCA CHICAGO, 2014

disintegrating. Only the most basic elements of the face's recognizable traits have been left for us. It would be easy for us to disregard this lack of resemblance as merely a stylistic primitivism or ironic stance, but it's more than that. Their features appear to have been hard won and quickly deformed. They are not intended to please. Rather, they mock our attempts to find ourselves reflected in them. Some of these works barely show us their faces at all. Consequently, some viewers find themselves nonplussed next to O'Brien's ceramics. They seem too rudimentary, since any discernable representation of the face is undercut by the brazenness of his splatterings, emissions, and accumulations. In addition, O'Brien's draw-

ings in clay approximate crude and purposeful graffiti images more than anything else. Furtive and anonymous, amateur graffiti's caricatural images and prurient content are used to mark surfaces and to occupy sites with provocative evidence of desire, presence, and control. Other artists such as Cy Twombly, Brassai, and Jean Cocteau have similarly been fascinated by the rawness and charge of such image-based graffiti, and O'Brien speaks to this history of such clandestine, lusty drawings by inscribing his receptacles with similarly playful, penetrating



MARIANNE BOESKY, 2011



images of faces that then function as surfaces to be covered and obscured.

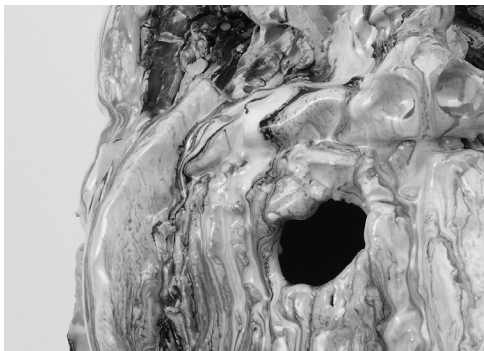
This profane play with the facial image builds upon but also distinguishes O'Brien's work from the long lineage of modernist sculptors' interventions into the portrait tradition. The aim of transforming the head from portrait into tactile, obdurate object gained momentum with Honoré Daumier's encrusted caricatures, Auguste Rodin's finger-marked portraits, Antoine Bourdelle's stony heads, and Medardo Rosso's melting visages. In the formative years of modernism, Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* prompted viewers to look at the head not as portrait but as a solid piece of sculpture, hewn and polished. Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore made abstract sculptural head-objects that bore little resemblance to humans, and the head was fractured into planes by Julio González and Pablo Picasso. All of these forebears acknowledged how we invest in the head, and they attacked it as an attack on representation itself. They recognized that it is in the representation of human beings that we most forcefully invest the presumption that art should reflect back the world as we see it. These artists wrestled with the head as the allegory for this presumption – that is, as the image of imaging. In their hands, the head instead became a thing devoid of subjectivity but further invested with sculptural objecthood. O'Brien takes this one step further, leaving the

head and its enclosed solidity behind to make the face itself a material surface, probed and encrusted.

Sometimes O'Brien's objects seem to look more like vessels than sculptures. All are visibly hollow. Upended, they do not hold anything, but they look as if they could try. This is important, since it again signals O'Brien's move away from the assumptions of the tradition of the bust and the portrait. While some busts (bronze ones, for instance) are hollow, it is relatively rare for this to be acknowledged or foregrounded by the sculptor. Such an admission of hollowness contradicts the myth of the portrait bust as containing and conveying the personality of the sitter. At the outset of modern sculpture, Rodin made the most of a studio accident that fractured a portrait on which he had been laboring. He submitted the facial fragment, broken and half enclosed, to the 1864 Salon with the title *Mask of a Man with a Broken Nose*. This move gave primacy to the sculpture as an object rather than as a portrait. In this way Rodin made the evocation of personhood and personality secondary to his own manipulation of matter, signaled in the visibly hollow half-head. The work was rejected for this reason, and it was only when Rodin offered the Salon a complete bust in 1875 that it was accepted. Nevertheless, Rodin's modernist foregrounding of objecthood and his own manipulation of sculptural material were presaged by this headless face. O'Brien's works take

a version of this dynamic to hyperbolic levels. More than just hollow and more than just masks, O'Brien's faces are inscribed and punctured ceramic slabs worked into awkward and amorphous objects. In this way, he derails us from thinking about what is supposedly behind the eyes and he forces us to look at the face as hollow shell, covered in his effusions – a different sort of “mug” shot altogether.

O'Brien has also energized his practice through oblique references to non-Western image-objects such as Pre-Columbian representational drinking vessels and accumulated African *bocio* sculptures. His works are, however, intentionally less refined than any of these possible sources, and he is concerned with treating the ceramic object as site of overworking and, ultimately, the failure to achieve representation. This is one of the things most remarkable about these works – how their very forms seem to carry with them the process of trying to make an image (*the* image: the face) and being overcome with the material, sculptural object as obdurate thing. The history of sculpture is characterized by artists' negotiations of materiality and its coordination or interference with representation. This is especially acute in the material of ceramic, which has the potential to offer both refined verisimilitude and – in its multi-stage process involving firing and glazing – unexpected material resistances. O'Brien's faces-as-surfaces speak to this larger context by settling on crudity and over-layering in their



DETAIL OF AMELIA , 2010

rendering of the most charged of images and then treating it merely as a place to drip glaze, cut grooves, and smear clay.

In some of the most daring works, clay balls cover the face and cluster on its features. Overall, these objects are not composed sculptural images so much as they are piled accretions of material acts. Always visible is that struggle between the facial image and its material substrate, and O'Brien emphasizes this dynamic as the main thrust of the works. We might think there is a personality to some of these faces, but there is always the interference of the clay and the glaze that makes a physiognomy difficult to discern amidst the strata of smears, punctures, and growths. It's easy to get

caught up in the residue of the obliterations and build ups that litter and layer the surface. More than the crudeness of the facial representations, it is these accumulations of manual gesture on the works that incite affective intensities. To look at one of these objects is to follow O'Brien's excited handling with its determined layering of marks, gobs, and proddings.

In all these ways, O'Brien sacrificed the face as psychological image in order to make it a debased and mottled target for his obsessive, onanistic, and repetitive relations with clay and glaze. For him, the face isn't a window to a person or an imagined subjectivity. It is the receptive ground. The facial image is given to us as the surface that catches these marks, drips, scrapes, and deposits. Treating a face like this can be understood as an aggressive or even an erotic act – or simultaneously both. We should remember that the human face can easily become the site of pleasurable degradation or objectification, and this is a common trope in erotica and pornography, from the Surrealists' obsession with lips to the conventional money shot. All of this involves treating the face as both privileged image and mere object, and this is what O'Brien's slyly atavistic objects with faces play out. How else could we understand the elision in some of his works between human ears and the handles we recognize from sides of drinking vessels meant to be grabbed?

It is crucial that these works have been made

in ceramic. There are many ways one could make similar forms out of different materials, but O'Brien's heads need their hollowness and need that accumulated history of clay as medium. More importantly, the traditions of glazing ceramics that he references are crucial to how we look at these uneasy artworks. The glaze as splatter and as expressionistic drip are, by now, conventional and common tools for the ceramicist. Indeed, it is in ceramics where the expressionistic drip still retains its popularity. O'Brien emphasizes his glazes as once liquid, sardonically using and following this tradition. When we look at one of the objects, we are conscious that the now hardened shell, not too long ago, flowed over these faces. Importantly, he often leaves the bottom of these objects unglazed to remind us of how the surfaces are layered and dried. Like the over-inscriptions and feverish encrustations, the candy-coated dippings and drippings compel the viewer to see the facial drawing in the clay object as just a receptive, once-wet surface.

A point often passed over when many critics talk about O'Brien's work is his insistence that these works are infused with sexuality. Granted, these works do not represent sexuality nor do they even image bodies, but their making is nevertheless riddled with queer themes of unauthorized desire, obsessive repetition, non-procreative sex acts, and the playful (and, in the end, smartly funny) provocations incited by his reveling in these faces'



BLUM AND POE, 2007

wanton encrustations. These objects proudly bear the residue of O'Brien's agitated handling and the resulting accumulations and coatings he has given to these objects. His willfully direct and gratifyingly crude style insures that we can never overlook such excessive traces of his acts of repetitive material manipulation. In 2012, he told Renaissance Society curator Hamza Walker that, "as a queer-identified person, my gravitation to art was more a validation of my voice than my talent," but, importantly, this context for O'Brien now manifests itself not as imagery but as method and as making. As he recalled, he "took out that literal [sexual] content and put it physically through the material" by channeling it into process instead. These objects, in other words, offer no iconography of sexuality,

but their unashamed material transgressions catalogue his impulsive pursuit of alternative desires and idiosyncratic aims. They tell the story of a queer attitude toward the face as the object of pleasurable degradation and accumulated use – one which departs from mainstream, normative scripts about the assumed bodily sites of sexual pleasure and libidinous attachments. Indeed, it is in their recording of O'Brien's obsessional processes and effusive negotiations with wet clay and glaze that these sculptures have their strongest charge. These objects with faces have been not just lavished but ravished.

In the end, O'Brien's sculptures demand an archaeology that attends to their material wrangling, to negotiations with the psychologically charged image of the face, to their onanistic and almost childlike aggressions against that image, to the ceramicist's play with materials that move between liquid and solid, and to pleasurable repetitions for repetition's sake. They are not busts so much as the trophies of his attempts to merely use the face.



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