

John O'Connor

PIEROGI

John O'Connor revels in schematic mutation. Ceding varying degrees of aesthetic agency to programmatic procedures that give visual and linguistic form to statistics, sociocultural phenomena, and chance operations, he is best known for large, labor-intensive, colored-pencil-and-graphite drawings that creep and sprawl across their supports in accordance with eccentric, self-imposed directives. Pertinent examples include *A Recurrence Plot*, 2013, in which economic data and markers of social stratification are gaudily plotted onto a cross-sectional chart of planet Earth's geologic layers, and *Cleverbot I*, 2012, a brightly color-coded, handwrought block-letter transcription of conversations between the artist and a piece of machine-learning-based artificial-intelligence software that devolve into comical exchanges about manners and aggressive behavior.



John O'Connor,
Charlie (Butterfly)
(detail), 2016, colored
pencil and graphite on
paper, 86 1/4 × 69 3/4".

For this show, his sixth at Pierogi—a onetime mainstay of the Williamsburg gallery scene, now located on the Lower East Side—O'Connor drilled deeper into familiar mock-diagrammatic territory, while expanding on a relatively new set of more straightforwardly narrational concerns. Upon entering the gallery's scene-setting antechamber-cum-window display, the viewer was confronted by a classic O'Connor, *Noahbot*, 2014, a jazzy, bodily scaled extrapolation on poetically conceived precepts. Vibrant clusters of coarsely limned words—more excerpts from chatbot conversations—sit atop radiating circular forms composed of hard-edge black-and-white stripes, optically pulsing like a cartoon explosion. But on rounding the corner into the main, generously proportioned space, one encountered a broad repertoire of formats and methodologies. The walls were cheerfully segmented by wide blocks of floor-to-ceiling color alternating with expanses of white, each section containing and projecting variously sized exhibits to seductive, Popist effect.

Once perceptually assimilated, the dazzle separated into two distinct strains of work: diverse experiments in rule-bound abstraction—each an intriguing universe unto itself—and a series of darkly comedic tales delivered via strings of multicolored words rendered in homemade or culturally freighted fonts and punctuated by carefully drawn logos, hieroglyphs, pictograms, and emojis. The two standouts in the latter category were *Charlie (Butterfly)* and *Delta (Butterfly)*, both 2016, the latest installments in an ongoing series of overgrown graphic essays. Roughly seven feet tall and teeming with allover visual and narrative incident, these page-like pictures ask to be read as much as looked at.

Given the primacy of vision, the eye initially hopscoches over the words, from icon to emoji, from skeuomorphic surrogate to metonymic substitution, seeking resonance and coherence in the correspondence of color, form, and signification. Curiosity piqued, it behooves the attentive viewer to begin parsing the successive combinations of word and image, left to right, top to bottom, as semantic chains chronicling the obstacle-strewn passage of a hapless everyman wending his way through an exhaustively franchised and branded cultural landscape.

Despite the polarity of means—thematic and compositional prescription versus open-ended progressive invention—the show still held together, bound by a stylistic consistency that one might characterize as a casual awkwardness eschewing formalist convention in favor of wonky, instrumental composition and vernacular charm. Owing as much to sardonic cartooning (think Robert Williams) as to the earnest spiritual cartographies of so-called visionary painters (think Paul Laffoley), O'Connor's oeuvre lays respectful and convincing claim to such outlier visual genres as underground comix, fractal mapping, and cosmological modeling. But the exhibition was also consistent at the level of tone and content: Though tempered by humor, a sense of fear and loathing permeates many of these works. Profanity abounds, as do references to guns and drugs, and more than one of the artist's pathetic and lovelorn protagonists meet with a sticky end. There is a melancholic undertow to O'Connor's provocative transpositions and poetic peregrinations that betrays a passionate disavowal of cultural hegemony and social hypocrisy.

—Jeff Gibson

Jean Dubuffet

THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

The Morgan Library & Museum's impressive and comprehensive "Dubuffet Drawings, 1935–1962" comes at the end of a recent wave of Dubuffet mania that spawned three other New York shows: at the Museum of Modern Art, the American Folk Art Museum, and Acquavella Galleries. While the Morgan's exhibition putatively focuses on Dubuffet as draftsman, drawing here is broadly defined. The works on paper range in material from graphite pencil and watercolor to india ink imprints, wax crayon, gouache, butterfly-wing collages, incised scratchboards, and paint with gum arabic.

Curated by Isabelle Dervaux, the show highlights the artist's penchant for creating paper versions of the many series of larger-scale oil paintings for which he is best known. To this end, and by way of comparison, two of the wall labels (for *Mouleuse de café* [Woman Grinding Coffee], 1945, and *Portrait de Jules Supervielle*, 1947) contain reproductions of the larger paintings. One cannot help but ask, what exactly is the relationship between the two? The smaller works on paper are not so much preliminary preparatory sketches, or reinscribed afterthoughts as they are necessary equivalents, made in conjunction with the paintings: two sides of the same conceptual coin.

Dubuffet was also a prolific writer who strategically used his writings and correspondence to control and shape his own reception. Given the evidence presented in this exhibition, it seems that he used his works on paper to accomplish something similar.

Begun shortly after D day, the works in the "Messages" series, 1944, contain cryptic sentence fragments (MY HEALTH STILL EXCELLENT . . .) that efface their (sometimes German) newspaper supports and call for a response from the viewer/reader. Dubuffet's name is the first word in a particularly vulgar one, which seems to act as a negative advertisement for himself. Notable too are the number of works in this show in which Dubuffet both signs his name and inscribes the work to someone