

Subversive Beauty: The Work of John O'Connor

—John Yau

1.

John O'Connor seems to simultaneously occupy three divergent positions. He is a statistician crunching numbers, a satirist working in the mode of Jonathan Swift, and an occultist trying to divine the messages hidden in the stuff of everyday life. His work brings together dry, unrelenting logic, a sharp eye for human foibles, and a variety of means for unlocking the secret knowledge in the mundane. It seems that the only way O'Connor can make sense of existence (and non-existence) is through this unlikely combination. His work has a feeling of necessity to it. He is trying to understand a reality that is irrational and wayward.

With their interlocking combinations of bright colors, patterning, and odd, non-repeating shapes, words and numbers, his drawings do not remotely resemble anyone else's. While critics have pointed out that his hyper-hallucinatory drawings are based on a conceptual approach – rooted in self-devised systems for measuring and analyzing data – whose logic largely eludes even the most persistent viewer, many of these same critics have failed to recognize the unlikely fusion of philosophical and methodological positions integral to much of O'Connor's work. This is probably because, even in his most simple systems, the humor tempers rather than overcomes the drawing, never becomes ironic or cynical. Rather, something oddly magical and quizzical happens. We find ourselves scrutinizing an unlikely pairing that begins to make some kind of unsettling sense.

Consider *Implosion Explosion* (2013), colored pencil and collage on a shaped piece of paper. It looks like a combination of a mandala, a stylized jellyfish, with its tentacles fanning out, and a cartoon explosion. According to the artist, the inspiration for the drawing was the "weight loss industry (commercial drugs and popular diet books) and the actual physical gain or loss of measurable weight in an individual."

For a moment the purpose of the drawing makes sense, but then the logic of it dissolves, which – for this viewer – doesn't matter. The drawing is the astonishing residue of O'Connor's research. Don't we want to know if one of the diets cited in his drawing works? We know at least one must work at some level, don't we? But does it do what it promises? O'Connor has a knack for tapping into the reservoir of curiosity and disbelief that – at one point or another – possesses us all.

At the same time, O'Connor's drawing touches on what Charles Baudelaire, in his landmark essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," calls the "despotic power of beauty." It is a power that haunts many of us, because we fail, often miserably, to live up to the classical ideals regarding our appearance and weight. The mass media – in the form of television commercials, magazine ads and billboards – constantly reminds us that we are imperfect creatures who should always be striving to attain a state of perfection. It is a state that, with the purchase of the right product, is well within our grasp.

The reason O'Connor began examining the weight loss industry is ultimately subversive. According to him:

... the idea that the information from these commercial diet sources, which are meant to reveal or decode the key to bodily weight loss and emotional happiness, could be

inverted to create an expanding form that mimics an explosion, was a way to communicate the complexity of trying (and often failing) to achieve an ideal physical state.

Implosion Explosion is a record of failure and inescapable imperfection. Visually, the drawing, as it expands outward, reminds us that perhaps the various diets we are being sold are not all they are cracked up to be. In this regard, *Implosion Explosion* serves two functions, aesthetic and utilitarian. First, there is the eye-catching, asymmetrical pattern of the drawing, the bright colors and the close attention to details. Second, there is what the drawing registers in its mimicry of an explosion, charting the typical weight-loss trajectory, rapid decrease followed by rapid increase. We will never become what we want to be.

2.

According to O'Connor, for the drawings *Scumbag* and *Idiot* (both 2013):

[The artist] created a list of the most offensive words in our language (as voted by people via the internet). [He] then divided each of these words in half and started recombining these halves into new words. These combinations of words became vaguely offensive, surprising hybrids.

By treating the words as material things, which he separated into two distinct sections and intermixed to create new words, O'Connor works in a way that is akin to concrete poets or Jewish mystics looking for the hidden name of God. While some of the new combinations are, as he says, "vaguely offensive, surprising hybrids," others achieve an inimitable material distinctness, as in "snow mucus" and "skull kin." These combinations seem to describe something very specific, something that cannot be named in any other way, a state or condition we do not have any other words for. At the same time, the source for these new combinations was offensive words, words meant to hurt others. This is where the artist's occult (or alchemical side) comes into play; he wants to turn the rubbish heap of language into something precious.

3.

Although the impulse behind the drawings, *Implosion Explosion* and *Scumbag*, initially seems very different, their undercurrents derive from the same place. It strikes me that each of the divergent positions I alluded to at the beginning of this essay – the statistician, satirist and occultist – add up to someone looking for hidden patterns within everyday life. He is constantly searching (or what I would call reading) the mundane – including spam letters that have been sent to him – for some unseen meaning.

In *Sex and Violence* (2013), O'Connor used a diagram for sports bracketing, in which the winners in a tournament keep advancing to the finals, as a template for pairing sexual insults with the "language from nuclear war." The pairings are raw and distressing – "retaliation cock," "bomb muff," and "defensive butt." With its bright colors and loopy lines, the diagram both tempers and isolates two dark currents in our everyday life.

This is not to imply that *Sex and Violence* is particularly comforting or uplifting. O'Connor's drawings often touch a nerve; through this pairing he gets at the dark sides of human

behavior, the different manifestations of Eros and Thanatos. His combinations suggest that the instinct for self-preservation and the death instinct are devolving, rather than evolving. For all of its color, control and precision, there is an urgency to this drawing. It is through his use of the satiric that the artist admits his feelings of vulnerability, which become ours.

4.

Given O'Connor's interest in the mundane and how he might use it to measure something about our common experience, his drawings are remarkably different from each other. Clearly, by refusing to dump his preoccupations into the same format, the form he finds always fits the content, making the two indivisible. He keeps the interplay between the overall drawing and the detailed bits of information tightly tuned, like a concert violin.

In an O'Connor drawing, everything must work together, even as the information threatens to overwhelm the form. That tension enhances the drawings, which are always made of particulars. In his drawings the artist assembles a set of particulars. The set of particulars might be about a code that was posted on the Internet by the British Secret Service, or Alan Turing's test for artificial intelligence, or the artist's blood pressure when he gets to his studio.

The problem – which O'Connor solves with imaginative efficiency in his best drawings – is to provoke the viewer to continually shift between the entire work and the plethora of information it embraces, to revel in the beauty of the color combinations and shapes, even as he or she begins to look more closely, begins discovering what information the artist has harnessed in order to make the drawing. The goal for both the person making these drawings and ultimately for the viewer is revelation. In O'Connor's drawings, looking is always inseparable from discovery.