

Words for Words: Riffs on John O'Connor

—Robert Storr

His is a garrulous art. Like Walt Whitman – also of Brooklyn – he has heard the talkers talking. On the crowded street, in all but empty rooms, they chatter, argue, declare, expound, say what they have to say to nobody in particular or to everyone at once but also to anyone who hears them and responding to fragments of speech feels as if they have been verbally accosted and so respond involuntarily, turning around to face the stranger who has addressed them, only to discover that he is invisible though his words hang in the air.

More often than not they would seem to be talking to themselves. Yet like Jesse Howard, Howard Finster, and countless other graphomaniac souls and vernacular conceptualists – obsessive compulsive guys (and gals) whose swirling minds pivot on an “idée fixe” only to discover that that “idée” isn’t “fixe” after all but inherently unstable, metamorphic – he hears voices in his head that command attention and demand a reply, voices that unbidden, engage in dialogue with whomever is within earshot – or, when words becomes images, cadences becomes patterns, timber becomes color – within “eyeshot.” Voices in his head that talk to each other as well as to him, if “him” can ever be thought of as only one among them all rather than as all of them together, all chattering, although only some, perhaps, only one is audible at any given time, even when a diffuse murmur or steady drone provides an acoustic background – or, in pictorial terms, a visual buzz – for the intelligible utterances or legible bursts of text. Language – spoken and written plus the gaps in between them – is an inherently plastic medium – Marcel Duchamp has shown this as has Bruce Nauman, as has Lawrence Weiner and so many more – offering itself to manipulation the results of which treat syntax and sound and sense like Silly Putty.

And what are the voices saying in John O'Connor’s art? Hard to tell, a good deal of the time. Not that it is difficult to make out the individual words or phrases. Compared to the cryptic cursive of Leon Ferrari his block lettering reads clearly.

GANG

DUNK

FUB

CORN

PUS

SNOW

CUN

SKULL

SCUM

BLUMP

CUM

ASS

TEA
FUCK
BABY
DUNK
MEAT

Goes one column. All entries are complete words until one gets to CUN, at which point one begins to think about what truncation does, and wonders whether each of the others has a missing syllable or follow-up word / For example GANG PLANK, GANG WAY, GANG UP, GANG BANG or PUS, PUSSY (cat or cunt) and then consider what kind of gamesmanship is involved in the artist's choice of words or word fragments in the column next to the one above.

FLAPS
BOX
ARM
ABLE
BAG
MUCUS
DUMP
KIN
BAG
FUCK
TANTIS
BALL
SY
HOLE
UGLY
FISH
BANG

Running up and down the two lists looking for possible out of alignment matches, one indeed comes up with GANG BANG, and PUSSY. Also SCUM BAG, TEA BAG, FUCKABLE, CORNHOLE followed by a series of equally obscene neologisms CUMBOX and FUR FLAPS, and with that the "idée fixe" in question reveals itself though the game goes on.

In context, *Portrait of a Psychopath* serves as a kind of flow chart of the type of consciousness that engenders such play. That is to say, a naturally fecund imagination that enjoys access to preternatural if not frankly "unnatural" – hallucinogenic, drug-induced? – latitudes of awareness. Everything about the deliberate facture of these complex diagrams and even of the

simple rosters tells us that their author is in full possession of his wits and in full control of his hand. So let us simply affirm that no matter how obsessive/compulsive the work may appear we are not dealing with "Outsider Art" or Art Brut although recently – take the current Venice Biennale where O'Connor would have looked very strong indeed and fit in very neatly if the curator had only cast his net more widely – a new generation has once more discovered what modernists have known since the turn of the twentieth century. Namely that crazy people make beautiful things and have much to teach us. Starting with the fact that the serpentine, intrinsically unstable, ever blurry line dividing "crazy" and "sane" is too important a distinction to be left exclusively to the judgment of "sane" people. After all how much do they really know about "madness?" O'Connor plainly knows something but does not fake it which is all to his credit. Rather, his is a deliberate art from start to finish, which the viewer grasps immediately because it does have a "finish." But as purposeful as the decisions he makes are, and as resolute as their realization is, there's something excessive and slightly "off" about those decisions, causing them to be liberating to the viewer exactly at the points – and those points are scattered throughout individual drawings and across the work as a whole – where explanations break down and deducing a "raison d'être" – or, in plainer terms "getting it" – becomes far less interesting than being absorbed by the work, and ultimately lost in it.

And then of course there are the entirely abstract things that O'Connor has made of late. In light of what has been just said it may be useful to think of them as "speechless" works, things where the abstract frameworks containing words elsewhere have been rewarded for their effort by being given free rein to express themselves on their own purely – or should it be impurely – visual terms. In these dazzling, exfoliating, careening images, shapes proclaim their liberty and discharge their stored up energy in ways that parallel the syncopated torrent of language that was the artist's previous preoccupation. Think of them then as batteries emitting current into the atmosphere, or as circuit boards humming with vibrations that if amplified and isolated may reveal themselves to be manic conversations on myriad topics – is this what the desk-jockeys of espionage who eavesdrop on us for the NSA listen to all day long while waiting for key code words to emerge? In short regard them as pieces of a vast matrix to which all of O'Connor's work up until now contributes additional facets. And then go with the flow, lose oneself in the static, wire into the buzz. Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb. Join in the crowd of talkers talking – and talking back. Muttering, whispering, grumbling, cursing, swearing, shouting, screaming, praying, chanting, intoning, scating, Do-wopping, rapping, making a joyful noise unto the heavens, howling at the moon. Listen to your eyes and you shall hear the sounds he saw.