

KMAC
MUSEUM

WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN

Oscillates Wildly

January 21 -
April 9, 2017



Educator Guide

WELCOME!

Dear Educators,

KMAC is excited to explore the artworks of William J. O'Brien with your students. This field trip guide is intended to help you prepare for your visit to KMAC and begin conversations of key themes and ideas in your classroom. Through discussion, reflection, and art creation, our goal is to have the artistic process come alive for your students. While touring the exhibition, we will look at select artworks to engage students in thinking and analyzing artistic mediums, personal expression, and non-traditional processes. You will see contemporary artists using traditional craft processes to materialize big ideas. To further cement the connection between responding, creating, and producing, we have also developed an art-making experience that corresponds with the exhibition.

Enjoy your visit!

KMAC Education Team.

KMACMUSEUM

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COVER IMAGE: William J. O'Brien "Untitled," 2015; Glazed ceramic. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery.

INTRODUCTION

William J. O'Brien

William J. O'Brien is an artist who has learned from the past and looks to the future. Unlike many students of art, O'Brien does not just look at master painters and sculptors, but also lesser known artists often working in traditional craft or in completely new ways. Sometimes called "Outsider Art," this category of art has not made it into many art history text books or large museums. These artists use less expensive materials such as thread, clay, colored pencils, and found objects. O'Brien likes to use these materials as well, even though they have been traditionally seen as "low art." He combines these practices with modern, abstract elements to produce art that seems to oscillate or move between styles.

William J. O'Brien will work through techniques he has seen in traditional craft like sewing, wrapping and building with clay until the gestures and processes become his own. He wants the audience to see the "doing" in his work. Like in our cover image, "Untitled 2014," the work of O'Brien's hands are very visible. The object is rough, unpolished and covered in drips and oozes of colors. O'Brien wonders if we can find meaning or expression in just the color and physicality of a piece of art. Can we look and find something beautiful and deep in something that may look like it was a mistake?



above:

William J. O'Brien
"Untitled," 2016
Ceramic and Steel
Courtesy of the artist and
Marianne Boesky Gallery

below:

William J. O'Brien
Triptych of "Untitled," 2016
Acrylic on Canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne
Boesky Gallery



COMPARISONS

Pre Visit Activity

You can see the influence of Modern Artists in William J. O'Brien's artwork. Can you find similarities between the Modern artwork and O'Brien's? Match an older artwork to one from the exhibition by drawing lines. Compare and contrast what you see.

MODERN



"Biloxi Art Pottery," George Ohr
mfa.org



"Head," David Smith
moma.org



"Untitled" Alma Thomas
moma.org

WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN



William J. O'Brien "Untitled," 2009.
Courtesy of Whitney J. Huffsmith.



William J. O'Brien "Untitled," 2015.
Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery.



William J. O'Brien "Untitled," 2014
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

CERAMICS

VESSELS



ABOUT THE ARTIST:

- Received his MFA in 2005 from the Art Institute of Chicago, where he now teaches
- Believes clay is the most “playful” material
- Will work with clay first thing in the morning so that he will not take himself too seriously
- Believes drawing is the most expressive process
- Many of his works were destroyed in a studio fire in 2012
- Thinks that new ideas can be expressed with old materials

left:

William J. O'Brien

Untitled, 2013

Glazed Ceramic

Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery

William J. O'Brien did not like art class as a child - not until he was a teenager and went to his first pottery class. O'Brien still works with ceramics regularly and has retaken entry level pottery classes to push himself to experiment. The hand-made aspect of his work comes out distinctly in his pottery. We can see the rough and heavy marks of his hands and the scratches and scores that he has made with his tools. This visible construction and his use of bright-colored glazes often make his pieces look naive or childlike. Though his forms are often abstract, we can find a hint of the figure. Like the face jugs found in the Folk Art tradition, O'Brien's vessels often look like people. The expressive quality of his markings gives a traditionally utilitarian medium voice and expression.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Can you see anything within this vessel? Describe it.

What type of art can you express yourself with most? Why?

Felt Work

TAKE A MOMENT:

- Close your eyes...
- Pause.
- Open your eyes and take a deep breath in and out.
- What do you see first?
- Keep looking.
- Get Close.
- Back up.
- How does the art make you feel?
- What words would you use to describe it?

right:

William J. O'Brien

Untitled, 2015

Felt on Felt

Courtesy of the artist and

Marianne Boesky Gallery



Textile or fabric is another one of the many art mediums that William J. O'Brien works with. This "Untitled" work is made of felt sewn on felt. But, take a step back and it almost looks like a drawing or painting because of the changing lines and shapes. The congested forms and criss-crossing lines give the piece a lot of energy and movement. Though it is not a narrative art piece, the expression of feelings is strong in his abstraction. O'Brien makes art that is personal. He takes what is internal and makes it external. Sometimes an art piece is about a memory of a person, a current relationship, or a situation he has to work through. When his art is exhibited it can tell the history of his emotions and experiences. Even though we as viewers may not be able to see the exact story, O'Brien can read the pieces like a map or photo album.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What symbols can you spot in the image? Anything familiar?

Can you make up a story to go along with this art work?

VOCABULARY

Textile: fabric that is woven or knit

Ceramic: an object made with clay and hardened by heat

Oscillate: to move or swing back and forth

Modern Art: style and artwork from about 1860 through the 1970s. Artists often disregarded tradition and practiced experimentation

Narrative Art: art that tells a story

Abstract Art: art that does not represent reality but uses line, color, shape and form to create effects

Vessel: a hollow container

LEARNING TARGETS

- I can describe elements of art and principles of design.
- I can identify meaning in visual artworks.
- I can share personal knowledge and meaningful experiences while looking at and making art.
- I can demonstrate skill in using ceramic tools.
- I can create a ceramic vessel by handbuilding.

READING CONNECTION

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

What's the Big Idea?: Activities and Adventures in Abstract Art by Joyce Raimondo

Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors by Jane O'Connor

Lines That Wiggle by Candace Whitman

Art by Patrick McDonnell

Beautiful Oops! by Barney Saltzberg

I See a Pattern Here by Bruce Goldstone

FOR OLDER STUDENTS

The Mad Potter: George E. Ohr, Eccentric Genius by Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan

How to Survive Modern Art by Susie Hodge

Radiant Days by Elizabeth Hand

The Truth Commission by Susan Juby

History of Art for Young People by Anthony F. Janson

Color and Pattern: 50 Playful Exercises for Exploring Pattern Design by Khristian Howell

INTERNET RESOURCES

kmacmuseum.org

moma.org

theartstory.org

usoutsiderart.com

marianneboeskygallery.com

ART STANDARDS

Content Standards addressed in this tour and art-making activity:

KY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOR MEDIA ARTS

Anchor 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

Anchor 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work

Anchor 3: Refine and complete artistic work

Anchor 5: Develop and refine artistic technique and work for presentation

Anchor 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Anchor 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work

Anchor 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

Anchor 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

Anchor 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context

KY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

SL.K-12.1 Participate in conversations with others and express ideas

SL.K-12.2 Integrate and evaluate information from diverse media

W.K-12.1 Write arguments based on visual evidence

HANDS-ON ART

Face Pots

Students will learn and practice ceramic skills and techniques to make their own version of the Face Jug. Students will take inspiration from William J. O'Brien's ceramics and traditional Face jugs. They will create a pinch pot, adding and subtracting clay to turn their pot into a figure. Students will practice many hand-building techniques to create a unique piece of art to take home.

WHAT DID YOU SEE?

Post Visit Activity

Write the title of three works you remember and then answer the following questions thoughtfully.

	Title #1:	Title #2:	Title #3:
Describe the artwork. Try to use words related to the elements of art (line, shape, form, space, color, value, texture).			
What materials and processes did the artist use? How did the materials effect the way you understood the artwork?			
What is the BIG IDEA? Describe a theme or a story you found in the artwork?			
Describe your reaction to the work? What did the art remind you of?			

Today, I jumped into an artwork.

I saw:



I heard:



I smelled:



I tasted:



I felt:



It made me:

