

**World Class Boxing Essay** 'William J. O'Brien: Death Rattle by Dominic Molon, February 9-April 6, 2008

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**William J. O'Brien's Primitivism of Resistance**

**Essay by Dominic Molon**

Looking at William J. O'Brien's recent sculpture recalls the acrimonious exchange of words in the pages of *Artforum* from late 1984 to early 1985 between art critic Thomas McEvilley and curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, over his review of their 1984 exhibition «Primitivism» in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Collected in the 1990 anthology *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* under the title «Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,» this heated debate brought heightened visibility to a then nascent paradigm shift in modern and contemporary art discourse about the perception and treatment of non-Western culture within the context of Western institutional frameworks of exhibition-making and scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In essence, McEvilley took Rubin and Varnedoe to task for an unwillingness to treat objects from Africa and elsewhere as more than mere inspirational material for sophisticated Modernist works of art (Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* from 1907, for example) without recognizing the objects' inherent value within their own specific cultural contexts. O'Brien's works feature ceramic forms resembling African masks placed under Plexiglas atop black pedestals that mimic museum-standard presentational formats and which are further adorned with subtle geometric sculptural intimations on their base. They quietly reawaken this intellectual conflict at a moment when Modernist aesthetics have been reinvigorated by current artists in formal, historical, and ideological terms. In their mock-museological appearance, O'Brien's works don't take sides in the argument so much as reemphasize the set of quotations around «primitivism» intended (one presumes... though it is somewhat unclear in Rubin and Varnedoe's rhetoric) to indicate cultivating the idea of the «primitive» rather than ascribing the term to the non-Western objects in question, their makers, or the cultures from which they came.

Indeed, the primitivism that O'Brien appears to be drawing upon in his sculptures and in the suite of drawings that accompanies them in his project for *World Class Boxing* is the more primitive elements of the Modernists themselves — at least in the context of an age of increasing hypermediation. As suggested by the recent exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, many of today's most interesting and relevant artists are going low-fi when it comes to the production of their works.<sup>2</sup> More than simply handmade, the unfinished look of the objects created by Isa Genzken, Gabriel Kuri, and Jim Lambie, as well as O'Brien, owes much to the spirit of such early-twentieth-century Modernist predecessors as Kurt Schwitters and Vladimir Tatlin (as well as the work of artists such as Martin Kippenberger and Robert Rauschenberg, who extended their legacy) in the use of the raw detritus of everyday life as a form of aesthetic resistance to a society similarly defined by rapid technologizing and the use of technology as a form of social control. O'Brien's sculptures also recuperate the use of ceramics, which, until rather recently, have typically been associated with handicraft and therefore relegated to a more tertiary status within the hierarchy of the arts.

His figurative drawings bring this affinity for a more untempered and deliberately unpolished into a pictorial space. Departing from the relatively clean linearity and saturated colors of his more abstract works on paper, these drawings feature a looser and more unstructured sense of line and are monochromatic more often than not. Exuding a naive simplicity, they recall Paul Klee's willful use of a childlike aesthetic to achieve a more primitive or innocent representational manner. Yet where Klee's figures possess a strange elegance of sorts, the layered graphic dissonance of O'Brien's drawings privileges a more distorted rendering of faces and bodies amid a chaotic swirl of turns and strokes. In doing so, they accomplish in image form what the sculptures as well as his wall-based conglomerations of paintings, objects, and fabrics achieve in a more densely materialistic fashion.

O'Brien refers to this body of work as *Death Rattle*, and a tenebrous mood is indeed set by both the black pedestals and the eerie-looking masks that sit on top of them. Masks are often used in traditional African