Viewing in Discretion

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In naming his installation Viewer Discretion, Dan O’Neill engages us in a semantic but very serious form of play. The word “discretion” comes from the Latin discretion, meaning “separation,” “distinction,” and later “discernment;” these meanings are all connected to discernere, “to separate,” “to divide,” ultimately in order “to discern”. So initially when we see on exhibit a massive collection of previous work as well as new material, of singular pieces offsetting diptychs and triptychs, we feel no possibility at all of discretion, that is, of separating things off and perceiving them as singular and distinct. Rather, individual units are placed in tension with larger chains of meaning: colours, shapes, juxtapositions of incongruous icons, multiple media and production histories all tease us into sensory overload, a sense that our powers of discretion are forcibly numbed. While these juxtapositions are sometimes consonant and other times disjunctive, they all bespeak a political urgency. The enormous display of temperament and theme brings into focus the kind of work O’Neill has been doing over the past years, work that foregrounds the seductive, alluring, threatening, cocky, (faux) naïve sexuality of the adolescent boy. Drawing on the salubrious Boy Scout world of his 1997 Lesen und Lernen—a world that, as Kathryn Kent has recently reminded us, is hardly without its erotic magnetism (Kent; reprinted in Bruhm)—or the mythological pastiche of his 1998-99 Triple Action Relief, to the more contemporary Adventures of Young Tim and the hypertexual/cybersexual JPEG Notes, Dan O’Neill remorselessly teases us with half-narratives, coy hints, adolescently masculinist “come-hithers” that force us to wonder where that “hither” is that we are being invited toward, and what we would do if we arrived at it. For in naming his installation Viewer Discretion, O’Neill forces us to come to terms with the ways that “discretion” has come to form ways of seeing boys, maleness and the problematic mechanics of the erotic. These images allure and provoke; they force the viewer to enter the circuits of desire, whether that circuit be for the erotic (the beautiful boy of classical philosophy), the nostalgic (the “untouched youth”), the familial (the vulnerable or sentimental child) or the aesthetic (in icons familiar to both the Renaissance and 1950s America). The overall effect of this show is a kind of gestalt where the viewer’s investments—the viewer’s discretions—meet and merge, establishing and undoing themselves at the same time.

Let’s consider for a moment JPEG Notes, a suite of twelve lithographic triptychs that work in two-colour half-tones. The content of this suite, like The Adventures of Young Tim or O’Neill’s earlier collage work, plays with conventions of ancient Greek and Renaissance iconography to make visible the kind of adoration our culture so often brings to the adolescent boy. Here we find sections of the body discretely carved up as in the Renaissance tradition of the blazon, that poetic catalogue of the beloved’s body parts. Each of these body parts is enlarged and presented through multiple screens that bathe them in a simple yet suggestive colour (red, green, or purple). Written upon that body part, then, is a small, repeated, almost illegible image of beauty—the rose—which indexes the Renaissance ideal of perfection (though usually in the woman). The effect here is precisely to challenge the viewer’s discriminating eye: what exactly do we see on this body? Do we see a complex negotiation of figure and ground, where the figure of the exquisite rose complements the innocent, uncorrupted delicacy
of the youthful body? Or do we see a rose that is merely redundant when placed atop a body already seen to be perfect, inspirational, culturally desirable? Do we see in the almost Lichtensteinian faces the same problematic ecstasies Georges Bataille perceives on the rapturous face of Bernini's St. Theresa (Bataille 240), a rapturous ravaging that also produced for the Renaissance images of the crucified Christ with an erection? (see Steinberg). Are we most taken with the almost pointillist obsession with dots, discrete moments of colour that produce their images only through a kind of gestalt, an effect that changes literally with the viewer's point of view as s/he moves before the work? Or, as in the bold case of the seven-palette cruciform, do we wander among the palpable yet troubling associations of the religious, sentimentalized boy-child? Is this cruciform a jeremiad on the innocent boy who has been crucified on the cross of our hungry visual gaze; is it a celebration of the boy-child in all his Christmas pageantry as he incites us to fall on our knees and worship; or is it a satire of the kind of commodity fetishism that has transmogrified the boy-Christ into the sentimental kitsch of a Vatican souvenir shop? Perhaps all of these, and perhaps this is O'Neill's point. This is where the artist's strategies make themselves most profoundly felt: for we desire discretion, a separation and distinction of signs, icons, words, that will help us discern their meaning, separate them from other signs that might distract us, seduce us, render our response impure. O'Neill certainly isn't averse to playing with commodities. He describes the works of The Adventures of Young Tim as “oversized kitschy placemats,” “elegant and playful” at the same time.) And it is precisely the comforting politics of that “discretion” that we are acutely denied. Discretionary problems underlie this show, then, at the very level of O'Neill's art-making practices. Whether he is showing us hand-coloured lithography (The Summer Adventures of PIN and Hero), carbon tracings, acrylic on prepared masonite (Are You Looking for Danny?), oil painting (Overture/Ground Luminosity), or photo-enlargements of collage (The Adventures of Young Tim), O'Neill uses his medium to replicate the problems of his subject matter, the ways in which we see individual, discrete instances of colour or line and construct of them a meaning that depends upon—and thus calls into question—our historically conditioned ways of seeing the erotic juvenile body. He reminds us that, even though we have long abandoned the Shakespearian notion that art should hold the mirror up to nature, art can continue to function as a reflection of what the viewer brings to it, what s/he desires to see, what s/he insists on seeing, as this array of discrete dots or incongruous images form themselves into a signifying practice. That is why each part of Viewer Discretion foregrounds its reliance on context. Some of the suites constantly gesture to an elusive and often cryptic narrative of O'Neill's own making (The Adventures of Young Tim or The Summer Adventures of PIN and Hero, for example). Other suites (Triple Action Relief, Lesen und Lernen, Are You Looking for Danny?, Peter Dan Divertimenti) draw their resources from cultural and Jungian mythology, thus engaging us in social, even universalizing, significations of the boy, his body, his relationships, his investments. Still others (JPEG Notes) intervene in current uses of child-culture, including the relation of our contemporary child-worship to panicked debates over internet imagery and artistic representation of the sexual child. This work is informed by the
contemporary theories of cultural critics like James R. Kincaid on the erotic child and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the dynamics of queer visual knowing. In *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, Kincaid catalogues the incessant and volatile habits our culture has of rendering the child as a sexual and sexualizing being so that we may simultaneously fulfill our desire for perfection and project that desire onto the monstrous, fantastical figure of the child-lover. This act of projection, for both Kincaid and Eve Sedgwick, is ultimately an act of disavowal and censorship that insists on constructing as other the very child-loving dynamics upon which North American culture is built. O'Neill’s work exposes visually the thesis that Kincaid and Sedgwick have been pursuing: he attacks the smug, potent assumption that sexuality—anyone’s sexuality—can somehow be bracketed off from the cultural forces and discretionary measures that produce it, invigorate it and police it. This artist’s in-discretion makes inescapable the realization that art, the male body, “the Child” is not a singular, pure, uninflected phenomenon but a complex relation of seduced and seducing signifying practices.

One example of such a signifying practice is the 2001 lithograph entitled *Mirror Stage I*. This piece, which takes its title from Jacques Lacan’s 1949 essay, “The Mirror Stage,” presents the top half of an unclad boy who is reflected back to himself as if in a mirror. The images of the boy are identical, if reversed; it is only their background and context that changes. That background plays with the mechanics of mirror reflection in such as way as both to replicate the mirror and to upend it. For example, a galumphing Dr. Seuss character flanking a row of animated spoons dripping multi-coloured viscous liquid appears on both sides of the mirror but without the typical reversals of mirror reflection; they face the same direction—right—on both sides of the image. While their bodily outlines remain intact, the content of those outlines differs: what is a healthy, complete, and colourful image on the left side of the lithograph is a skeleton or silhouette on the right, as if the mirror were giving us a reflection of some internal essence, some phenomenological awareness of death inside that joyous, infantile form. Or, that would be the case if we read from left to right, the usual Western mode of “reading,” rather than from right to left. Read from right to left, the skeletal, x-rayed, death-like Seuss forms and amorphous, hollow spoon-forms get filled in on the left side of the screen. They are given flesh, life, health and meaning for the right-hand boy gazing at them and at himself in the context of them. Read from right to left then, the lithograph bespeaks an act of construction—albeit illusory—in which the perceiving child invents or misrecognizes a world of pleasure that he prefers to the skeletal hauntings of death and absence. In other words, the print, when read from right to left, demonstrates the invention of an ecstatic placement for child sexuality and narcissistic beauty that it dismantles when we read it in the conventional direction of left to right. O’Neill doesn’t tell us in which direction our gaze is to flow: that is up to our discretion. What he does tell us implicitly, though, is what’s at stake in our choice of interpretive strategy.

What’s at stake for O’Neill is exactly what Lacan was getting at in “The Mirror Stage,” an essay that has become crucial to thinking about contemporary constructions of gender and sexuality. Lacan argues that at a certain point in the child’s life, he (I’ll use the male pronoun, since both Lacan and O’Neill are working in that camp) first beholds his own image in
a mirror or other reflective surface. In "a flutter of jubilant activity" (Lacan 1), the child begins to construct a sense of himself as a whole, complete human being, autonomous from his mother and from the Other of his surroundings. This moment of self-recognition and self-construction, Lacan emphasizes, is precisely that—a construction. For what haunts the child throughout his life is the (usually unconscious) knowledge that the self in the mirror was an other self, the self reflected back, guaranteeing to the child a body that, paradoxically, cannot be the child's body but the reflection in a mirror. Hence, Lacan's (and O'Neill's) subject: a self that is created from reversal and negativity, jubilantly yet desperately believing in a self and a body that is and is not autonomous at the same time. It is a self whose singularity—its quality of being discrete—is always doomed to failure yet is continually assumed through acts of gestalt projection, through the misrecognition that this image is him, in short, through a kind of viewer (in)discretion.

From this irreparable division between our "selves" and the only "selves" we can ever know—that which is reflected in our mirror, that which embodies our fantasies of identity and our fears of hollowness and death—comes, says Lacan, sexuality. In sexual desire we are looking to find, at an imaginary level, that which will heal us and make us whole. Thus we are doomed to work out our lives in this impossible quest to become who we already assume ourselves to be. That is our role in the sexual field, and it is our role as we view Dan O'Neill's show. We are viewers in the mirror refractions that his work performs. The boys we see, their forays into sexual discovery, the shameless eros with which they regard their own bodies and the bodies of other boys, become our mirror crisis. Through them—that is, through O'Neill's works—we come to intuit what it is we invest in the erotic child and in our outrage at the very notion that the child should "be" eroticized (as if any child were a priori free of the erotic). Viewer Discretion forces us to enter, through the looking-glass, the narratives we bring to the iconography of the erotic child—the narratives we bring and, in true mirror fashion, the narratives we withhold. For in the gestalt of O'Neill's work, these two conflicting narratives are often versions of the same one. Most importantly, O'Neill shows us that "discretion," the act of behaving within social norms, has taken on a different valence in our contemporary moment; for in the twentieth century, to be "discreet" is to have a secret, to hide, to be in a closet, to have the good taste not to tell. O'Neill's boys tell. What they tell, though, is up to us.

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WORKS CITED


