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## The Flame of the Youth

### Robin Rice on Visual Art | Kate Abercrombie: making, joining and repairing

by Robin Rice

Each piece on the walls of Fleisher/Ollman Gallery this month represents a record of the two young artists' chosen processes rather than the achievement of a pre-envisioned goal. Although the execution is precise, a sense of exploration and something like playfulness infuses each work and ignites the viewer's pleasure.

The folk-related, lighthearted fabric designs of mid-20th-century master Alexander Girard are an influence on Kate Abercrombie, now completing an M.F.A. at the University of Texas at Austin. Perhaps the artist's experience working at the Fabric Workshop further enabled her tweaks and transgressions on the grid and her smart subversion of decorative motifs. She appropriates the Victorian belief that an environment saturated with visual stimulation is more harmonious and relaxing than a stark, minimal one. Abercrombie's wallpaper of repeat digitized images (pictured) recalls Impressionist painting, partly through color harmony, but mostly through the broken, color — recording an image that's undecipherable because we are too close. A paper-covered panel is completed with the superimposition of two gouache paintings: one in yellow-greens and one in blues.

Abercrombie likes gouache, an opaque water-based paint, because "it is systematic and can't be reworked." Nature is a touchstone. Art historian Oleg Grabar's important work on Islamic art, which is generally nonrepresentational with the exception of plants, may have contributed to her choice of accretion and decoration over narrative.

A trio of related gouaches is based on a friend's collection of ex-votos. Another piece is based on a collection of dolls. "I'm not really a collector, but I like seeing the relationship between the works in a collection," Abercrombie says. References to the body are encrypted, no doubt, but not recognizable in the finished work.

Inevitably, the first question one might ask John O'Connor is, what does his show's title, "C'OD(e)R," mean? The answer is a clue to the riddling nature of the artist's work. O'Connor is, he says, fascinated with "personal methods of making the nonvisible visible."



This show, his first since the birth of his son, is a tribute: The "R" represents his son Ronan's first initial. O'Connor's process is based on codes, encryptions by which he imposes systems on visual information. As in Abercrombie's repeated digitized samples, the result is not clarity but abstraction.

O'Connor's Apophis is based on the projected improbable, but not absolutely impossible, collision of an asteroid with the Earth in 2036. The resulting explosion would have the power of "1,000 Hiroshima bombs." O'Connor used a stencil to trace the shape of a real atomic explosion and repeated it 100 times, working out from the center of the paper and imagining the effect growing like a bomb. With eyes closed he drew wobbly circles around the explosion center and kept building out (eyes now open) into an encircling garland of layered chevrons. Within the predetermined process, O'Connor maintains control over the results, correcting and refining them for an optimal whole.

He is an admirer of John Cage and the application of chance to art-making. "What happens with these drawings

is I get totally lost,” he says; he points out, too, that he will not repeat a drawing. “If it becomes too predictable, I become bored and have to obliterate what I did.”

Abercrombie and O’Connor, far from boring, are typical of the promising younger artists whom Fleisher/Ollman Gallery has shown recently. Processes and elements of automatic (chance-based) surrealism link these well-trained, well-read artists with the self-taught ones who were a mainstay of the original Janet Fleisher Gallery. The goal of many artists today is to synthesize ideas that have personal resonance and embody them in a cohesive, effective visual form. That’s easier said than done, but these two make it look easy.

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“Kate Abercrombie: making, joining and repairing” |  
“John J. O’Connor: C’OD(e)R” Through Aug. 20, Fleisher/  
Ollman Gallery, 1616 Walnut St., Suite 100, 215-545-7562,  
fleisherollman.com