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ARTFORUM

Philadelphia

John J. O'Connor
FLEISHER/OLLMAN GALLERY
1616 Walnut Street suite 100
June 17–August 20

John O'Connor gets back to basics in his Philadelphia debut, confirming his commitment to the conceptual fundamentals of his project over and above the trademark hallucinatory style he has developed. For the past decade, the Brooklyn-based artist has been visualizing simple statistics in ever larger and more polished drawings, steadily carving a niche between ego-driven mark-making and straightforward recording of information. Characteristically, each of his new large-scale drawings originates with some curious preoccupation—the fluctuations of the Dow; the phases of hypnosis; an asteroid's potential for destruction. O'Connor filters data about the subject through invented codes, so that numbers become letters, shapes words, measurements colors. The operations underlying the aesthetic choices are consistently logical, but he conceives and combines them so instinctively that the idea itself is entirely obscured. You know there's a puzzle there, but you can't possibly solve it.

O'Connor's new drawings are as big as ever, and their complexity and acreage reflect many hours of painstaking labor, but this show also features dozens of small, rough works on paper that capture a flash of typically wacky energy and stop there. For one series, he measured found wads of wet newspaper, assigned letters to the dimensions, and typed the resulting nonsense word into his pocket dictionary so that it would suggest an English word—inviting the cast-off object itself to "speak." Paradoxically, while O'Connor abjures his own artistic license, in the end he creates visual patterns out of chaos—a potent allegory of a quasi-mystical quest for meaning behind chance and fate. Here the quest is emptied of all sense, and in these stripped-down new drawings there is not even the hint of redemption through visual virtuosity. Especially for a mature artist, this is a fresh and promising phase of experimentation in inquiry unmoored, a bold investigation into the struggle to make sense of existence, in art and beyond.

— Nell McClister



John J. O'Connor, *Apophis*, 2008, graphite, colored pencil on paper, 58 3/4 x 48 1/2".