

Glory Whole



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JACK O'BRIEN
WORDS BY
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Jack O'Brien is a master of the tease. Though culturally laden with sexual connotations, its potency is driven less by the carnal than the suspense of desire at once roused and withheld. Dissonance is heightened by promise shrouded in the false illusion of realization. Tension is fundamental to the tease — yearning is nothing if not titillated by anticipation — and like the siren's song, we remain susceptible to the innate clash in the veneer of attainability despite knowing it is not as it seems. It is a state steeped in contradiction, yet to covet what appears to be just within reach is a paradoxical phenomenon embedded in human experience.

O'Brien's practice, which encompasses installation, sculpture, painting, and drawing, explores the conflict between desire and consumption and chaos and discipline alongside concurrent tenets that dominate life under structures of late capitalism. As such, he considers desire and longing in relation to other contemporary concerns, including industrialization, the commercialization of contemporary art, the construct of the city (London, in particular), austerity, and eroticism.

Together, these topics create a framework for O'Brien to explore how these seemingly disparate areas are interconnected; as a result, he argues they form an overarching network of realms that all operate according to the same basic code. At its core, O'Brien is interested in the innate discrepancies in the idea of streamlined systems — which he often refers to as "closed-loop systems" — and the inevitable disruption of such sleek, modernized processes by the messiness of the human hand. For O'Brien, a code — a term he uses near-interchangeably with language — is used to address tensions that sit at the center of human life. The disparities he depicts, including the tug-of-war in desire, inherently render the work all the more compelling.

In speaking of both his process and his conceptual basis, O'Brien says: "Some of the ways I'm structuring the work is so that there's an order at play. Quite often, there's symmetry, and I add gestures that are perhaps irrational, like gestures that kind of trick the loop system. As with any algorithm, it can be planned in a particular way, but I'll add something that kind of shifts that plan, in a way that, in my opinion, is reflective of the unpredictable nature of human existence."

Eroticism does factor significantly in his practice. In an example of earlier work, his 2021 show "Waiting For The Sun To Kill Me" at Ginny on Frederick, London, focused heavily on shame and sexual desire (particularly queer), and explicitly cited a glory hole in *Lover* (2021). Yet any remaining element of patent prurience only pulsates subtly, and it would be both naive and irresponsible to relegate this idea of the paradox in O'Brien's work exclusively to the sexual domain. To examine his practice solely within the confines of the libidinous would be to ignore the way he cleverly employs objects associated with the erotic to look at how they function when weighed among other aspects of contemporary life.

For instance, with *Volent* (2023), O'Brien's presentation at Ginny on Frederick's Frieze London booth last year that earned him the prestigious 2023 Camden Art Centre Emerging Artist Prize, his ideas around desire, industrialization, and the contemporary art industry are merged. The work, consisting of a nineteenth-century horse carriage wrapped in tight layers of clear cellophane and adorned atop with a chrome-plated steel ball, embodies this concept of the tease: the carriage becomes both a symbol of early industrialization and today's commodity of the art object, having been placed in the sterile atmosphere of the Frieze art fair tent, yet it also remains at a careful distance rendered by a protective shield of plastic. The artist's proclivity to enswathe certain objects deemed covetable — such as wine glasses, cello scrolls, or silver spoons — in contrasting material is intentional. He will take these fragile, alluring objects of desire and then wrap them in tightly bound cellophane, industrial netting easily confused with dainty ribboning, or elasticated stockinette; in doing this, he's making this coveted item appear attainable when, in reality, it's just slightly beyond reach. The material itself is of equal importance as that which it conjures mentally: "I think there's a flamboyance or Baroque-like feature to some of these objects. You have, like, the cello, the double bass, the carriage, the wineglass: they share this theatricality. It's two separate components: luscious, erotic objects and late hyper capitalism working at once."

O'Brien also frequently uses the phrase "assembly and collapse" in asserting that which he values and purposefully imputes into each work: again, the concepts initially strike one as frenzied opposites in the ostensible cycles that govern human functioning. That same paradox dictates how his work and process functions. While he is defined by codes — a language of starkness and regiment that often comes through in his work's aesthetics — those same codes are intentionally disrupted: therein lies the paradox.



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01 *Glance*, 2024. Detail. Medical grade polycarbonate film, ribbon, epoxy putty, soft pastel and spray paint on digital print mounted on aluminium. 149.9 x 299.7 x 14.6 cm. Photography by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles / New York. 02 *Boundary II*, 2024. Medical grade polycarbonate film, ribbon, epoxy putty, electrical cord, soft pastel and spray paint on digital print mounted on aluminium. 83.2 x 118.1 x 19.7 cm. Photography by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles / New York. 03 *Wrest*, 2024. Detail. Streetlamps, spray paint, industrial pallet netting, medical grade polycarbonate film, and metal cable-ties. 53.3 x 205.7 x 623.6 cm. Photography by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles / New York. 04 *Wrest*, 2024. Streetlamps, spray paint, industrial pallet netting, medical grade polycarbonate film, and metal cable-ties. 53.3 x 205.7 x 623.6 cm. Photography by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles / New York. 05 *Volent*, 2023. Detail. 19th Century horse carriage, Cellophane, Ventilation duct, Chrome plated steel, Aluminium Pip Evolent. 318 x 156 x 186 cm. Photography by Choro. Courtesy of Ginny on Frederick, London. 06 *Curtain*, 2023. Wood, chrome-plated steel, wire mesh, wine glass, epoxy putty, acrylic plastic, and spray paint, cellophane. Courtesy of King's Leap and Ginny on Frederick, London. 07 *Ruse*, 2024. Detail. Medical grade polycarbonate film, ribbon, epoxy putty, steel pipe, soft pastel and spray paint on digital print mounted on aluminium. 83.2 x 117.8 x 19.7 cm. Photography by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles / New York.



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<https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/66720/no-you-re-not/>

Jack O'Brien (1993, London) lives and works in London. O'Brien's practice bridges connections and examines the relationships between the built environment, materiality, and aesthetics that exist on the fringes. Recent solo exhibitions include: Matthew Brown Gallery, London; Aro, Mexico City; Between Bridges, Berlin; sans titre, Paris; Lock Up International, London; Pola Magnetyczne, Warsaw; Ginny on Frederick, London; and White Cubicle, London. His work has been included in group exhibitions at Captain Petzel, Berlin; King's Leap, New York; LINSEED, Shanghai; Kunsthaus Zürich; Gathering, London; N/A, Seoul; general information, London; LOVAAS Projects, Munich; Kunsthalle Bratislava; DZIALDOV, Berlin; Hollybush Gardens, London; Ridley Road Project Space, London; SET, London; Intersticio, London; and V.O Curations, London. O'Brien's solo show at Camden Art Centre, London, will be on view from October 4 through December 29, 2024.

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His materials are also used as a means of punctuation to pull together otherwise disparate components. Standardized objects reappear across many iterations of exhibitions and individual works; a chrome-plated steel ball is a primary example. "The chrome balls became almost an expanded device to connect all of these objects and materials together. So they're very much the driving force that consolidates everything," he explains. "Basically, I've always thought of them as points of punctuation, like I think about intonation in language."

More recently, he's played with a shift in scale, making a double commentary on austerity in the UK and life as an artist with reduced studio access in London by using ornamental, fragile objects or the aforementioned large carriage. This shift is both an involuntary and an intentional reflection upon constraints imposed by the changing circumstances of London: studio space itself is an elusive find, and studios continue to close in general. The city's mood overall is tense, and this tone is reflective of the decade-plus of austerity.

He notes Keller Easterling's 2016 text in *e-flux*, "No You're Not," as having impacted his approach to making work as he continues to develop as an artist, including further consideration of the city. Easterling's argument is rooted in the concept of the "ironed cage" of rationalized culture,¹ in the same vein as the "closed loop system," which gives birth to O'Brien's consideration of such in relation to the city of London: "From the initial conception, systems feel quite heavily planned. They're already kind of a closed loop, but the lived experience of it is very different. So the modernist-style tower block is idealistic, but lived and experienced in a totally different way. Or, the Hyde Park Rose Gardens are very ordered and planned in a particular mode, but they're navigated by cruising homosexuals very differently."

His forthcoming presentation at Camden Art Centre, London, will continue this examination of the city; O'Brien plans on suspending in the space two spiral staircases typical to exteriors of new or updated London buildings.

An early seed of this current pathology can be found in the first scene of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). The film opens with Audrey Hepburn, who stars as Holly Golightly, exiting a taxicab outside of Tiffany & Co. deserted at dawn in New York City, which is perhaps London's greatest competition as the symbolic seat of capitalist-driven desire. The sequence is short, lasting roughly thirty seconds (I timed it), yet profoundly telling: we watch as Hepburn's glance slowly turns skyward, the camera panning along with her gaze, while she takes in the storefront, absorbing the sterile design and typography bearing its iconic name. Within half a minute, it is clear that we as viewers are meant to share Golightly's reverence for the establishment, which she seems to regard with religious-like fervor as a sanctum of sorts, but is in reality a purveyor of luxury jewelry. Hepburn stares, head cocked, at beautifully designed objects that hold cultural weight and resonance, yet remain suspended behind the pane of heavy glass separating her from her object of desire, and thus, remain a fantasy. Capote's writing was regarded as visionary for its ability to diagnose what he accurately perceived to be societal maladies at the time, and, in a similar way, O'Brien is identifying the acceleration of those afflictions, brought on by the same themes of industrialization, consumption, desire, and the city in modernity: the infirmities and whole glory of our human existence.