

**John Hawke**  
**Art Review**  
**BROOKLYN RAIL 2002**

John J. O'Connor  
Schemes Out  
at Pierogi

In his first solo show, John J. O'Connor presents drawings which push schemes of faux systemization to the maximum, resulting in unforeseen and beautiful blooms of decorative data. He begins by trying to chart the indeterminate-- areas of itch on the body, passing mundane memories, then uses these amorphous graphs to generate large-scale drawings in colored pencil and graphite. Because of the initial eschewal of taste in favor of "canned chance" procedures, the works are difficult to describe as a body, but individually might recall Native American crazy quilts, the Book of Kells, or Peter Frampton album covers.

The work has a bedeviling way of resisting comprehension, of dangling humorously on the cusp of legibility. In current parlance, it could be said that they problematize viewing-- both by the optical urgency of their brilliant and burnished colored surfaces, and by their circuitous means of exhausting attempts at "reading" them. On the one hand, he shows you something you don't yet know how to look at and so forces the clanging mechanisms of the mind to work to unravel the causal structure of the forms. The habits of pattern recognition are so illuminated. On the other hand, the richly worked surfaces of velvety graphite may lead one to wonder if the deflated conceptualist practice serves more simply as an armature for solo flights of formalist fancy. There are purposeful contradictions at work here.

At the bottom of the largest work in the show (Earthquakes and Wars, 82" x 53") is stenciled in large lean letters: "Major American Wars" and the dominating vertical bars of the piece would seem to promise a diagram; but O' Connor perverts his own earnestness, for at the top of the work, stenciled upside down, is written "Major U.S. Earthquakes." The opposing bar graphs collide and weave at the drawing's center in a thicket of snarled information. In crashing cataclysms-- natural and manmade, the drawing triggers a kind of psychedelic final stage of a rationality exhausted.

As one investigates the dense surface of the blob shaped Scratch (75" x 53"), bits of text are raked up by the viewer's scanning eye--mathematical marginalia, quipping schizophrenic asides-- a looping letter is discovered to belong to a phrase, the phrase suggests a possible "read" for the piece-- it is a chart, yes? The eyes swerve around in anticipation of a coherence which falsely seems imminent. The color must be coded, it must hold the key... instead the cacophonous color tends instead to throw the viewer's eye right out of the piece, in effect, crashing the system.

The scattered calculations stemming from the work's facture linger like residue and at times seem more decorative, in the sense of extraneous filigree, than the Jetson-like colored areas, which gain an ontological fixity by virtue of their luxuriant density. The quasi scientific authority of the stenciled lettering is countered by loopy beginning cursive and fuzzy dropped shadows which have the effect of hollowing out the meaning of the text, turning it into mere script, an act of drawing rather than writing.

In Ebbinghaus Map, an initial gestural scribbling provides an outer limit for a tight geometrical rendering of the interior which resembles parquetry. The procedural concerns for the creation and the resolution of the limit conditions overrides any concern for the nature of the limits chosen. The drawing expands to the bounds of its' randomized creation, but leaves those limits intact, and in doing so presents the entire evolution from chaotic randomness through to refined execution.

We might ask, does the optical brush back of the colors and the labyrinthine information serve to distract from an underlying despair at the current unavailability of certitude, and so become a kind of decadent surrender to the oblivion of the indeterminate; or, in this age of personal cosmologies, is O' Connor's form of serious noodling a means to move beyond dialectics of form/antiform, process or product and in so doing intuitively cutting a path back to the frontier?  
I think the latter.

