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Dargerism and Robyn O'Neil: A Q&A

Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger, on view now at the American Folk Art Museum, is an unlikely, fantastic show. It features nearly a dozen early-career contemporary artists willing to be associated with a key influence. That's unusual: Often artists don't like to discuss or acknowledge influences until they're so far along in their careers that influences become supporting rather than defining material. Apparently the artists in the show trusted the curator, Brooke Davis Anderson, to demonstrate relationships rather than outright appropriation. For the most part, that's what's here. I asked one of the artists in the exhibition, Robyn O'Neil, to join me for a Q&A about influence. This is the first of three parts. Part two is [here](#).

All but the last part was conducted by email. [At left is O'Neil's 2005 These Moving Bodies, These Numb Processions.]

MAN: Artists are often wary of 'influence shows.' There's rarely a specific and direct relationship between two artists -- that is, good artists absorb a lot more than one or two artists as they determine what kind of work they're going to make. And then they often add lots of other stuff from other places before making work. So participating in a show as specific as "Dargerism" could be considered a bit of a risk. Did you have any trepidation about the whole idea?

Robyn O'Neil: I know there were artists who were asked to be a part of the exhibition that were concerned with that notion. That perhaps this would mean people would think their work is too derivative. My position is that anyone that had that concern probably had reason to worry.

As for me, it honestly never occurred to me to be uptight about it. I'm always breaking things down. It was as simple as, "Well, my work is certainly influenced by Darger and I know I'm not alone... I can't wait to see who else Brooke has noticed in relation to Darger." To me, this doesn't mean my work is derivative. It doesn't mean my work is a tribute. It means that there are particular artists who, when I've digested them, have left a piece of themselves in me. This happens at times when certain artists meld with my chemical makeup for whatever reason. With Darger it was the repetitive figures, re-occurring characters, catholicism, weather, and the apocalypse. Also, a cinematic scope.

MAN: Speaking of Darger specifically, do you remember when you 'discovered' his work, and what in it you responded to? [At right: Darger's *At Sunbeam Creek*...]

RO'N: I first saw Darger's work in a small catalogue when I was in undergraduate school. I was about twenty years old. My professor handed it to me and I was quieted. I [felt] I had just discovered work that stood apart from anything I had previously seen, and that included a great deal of 'outsider' work. I found Darger to be more individualistic and more genuine. Also more beautiful. I know people can question and question that word

'genuine,' but I think at heart, we all know what it means. And most of us know it when we see it.

I think the most important thing I understood about the work was that he found a way to visually narrate a story that would never get old. It's a labyrinthine effort with infinite twists and turns. Great art should baffle, but how often does that truly happen? When images bewilder and quiet, they resonate forever.

JULY 23, 2008, 8:50 AM

Dargerism and Robyn O'Neil: A Q&A, part two

Yesterday I started a three-part Q&A with Robyn O'Neil, who is included in the American Folk Art Museum show Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger. We're talking about influence and how the work of other artists finds its way into O'Neil's work. Here is part one.

MAN: One thing I like in your work is that you don't shy away from making your influences clear, from explicit art historical references. I'm thinking of "The Fall" [below] from last year, for example, which recalls Winslow Homer's famous "Right and Left." When starting a piece, do you start with a specific point of reference or influence and go from there? Or as you're conceiving of a drawing do favorite paintings just kind of pop up in your mind while you're game-planning?

Robyn O'Neil: I definitely have no hang-ups about these things. On the one hand, it's inevitable. Anyone who denies that is an egomaniacal idiot. Secondly, it seems important to riff off of one's influences. Furthering ideas and images that have already proven to be resonant can only aid in progression.

Homer seems to be the artist I "use" the most. I definitely felt like Right and Left was a gorgeous allegory, but doesn't it look a little goofy? I don't know if it's the face of that left-side bird or what, but I thought it could use a revision. Not an "improvement", of course. Just a revision. Another example is when I did my own version of The Life Line. [O'Neil's version is above] Rather than there being the slightly sexually provocative man/woman pose, [I used] just a lone male struggler. No real hope. [Below.] But I loved what Homer did with that composition. To have no idea from where that harness is coming from is just bizarre. *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past* (in the Dargerism show) also came from *The Life Line's* influence.

The way this happens for me is very natural. While looking at art, certain pieces stand out as something I will want to work with some day. I very consciously catalogue that thought or idea into a certain part of my brain and let it digest. Sometimes it sits there

marinating for years. There are some van Gogh drawings that I've wanted to work with since I was in 5th grade, and that is not an exaggeration. Who knows when that will take place. That marination process ought to be downright rank by now, so that will surely be interesting.

I don't make sketches before making my drawings. I write down concepts and edit from there. Once an idea is solid, I'll quietly look at it and determine from where it came. Often I realize it came directly from the piece I catalogued in my brain years before. So, basically, I don't sit down and make concrete plans to find a certain piece from art history that will work with my next ideas. I do, however, naturally pull from the subconscious. That means, I hope, the work is closer to me and not affected. Not too overtly derivative.

MAN: Speaking of how you synthesize influences, I saw [this image](#) from your studio on Flickr.

RO'N: I make signs and put them all over my house. If I don't see something written down and in front of me, I won't do it. Besides drawing, nothing sounds all that enticing. I know I need to eat, but going to the grocery store? In that amount of time, I could have gotten two clouds drawn. Going to an opening? I can see the show during the week when no one is there and I'll see it in a quarter of the time it would have taken to see it when 150 people are in the space. I'm paranoid about not having enough time and not doing all I can. So, that is just one sign I made for myself. The ones like this, about trying to be healthy, are all over the place. I had a roommate in college who would write really mean signs to herself to get herself to eat right and work out. The one next to her alarm clock was, "Get your fat ass out of bed". One on the refrigerator said, "You're gross." I thought they were sad, but hilarious.

A better sign that is up in my studio is this one. [Above.] I was talking to my friend about how I always say yes to everything, but I don't have enough time for everything I say I'll do. He suggested I put a big sign in my studio that said, "Let me get back to you," and that way I will have time to calmly think about if I want to do what the person has asked of me. My mom came into town, saw the sign and asked me about it. I explained and she said that it was too nice. She revised it. Brilliant.

JULY 24, 2008, 8:06 AM

Dargerism and Robyn O'Neil: A Q&A, part three

.MAN: It seems to me that *StaringÂ into the blankness, they fell in order to begin* [above, and the 'first' work in the Dargerism show] is deeply influenced by Gustave Courbet's magnificent *Gust of Wind*, which is in the collection of the MFA Houston, where you live.

Robyn O'Neil: Ahhh, *Gust of Wind*. [Left.] I love it as much as you do. The economy in the conception of this painting is so marvelous. It's a gust of wind. It's simple, but huge. It's invisible and it's not. It's so pared down that it is perfect. And that damn sky! I was a volunteer weather watcher for most of my adult life. That means you log the highs and lows of the day and take rain gauge measurements, and then call them in to your favorite meteorologist. A true nerd's obsession. (Henry Darger was also obsessed with the weather and constantly wrote about the temperature. He took particular pleasure in noting when the newspaper's weather predictions were wrong.)

I think it was the mere mention of wind in Courbet's painting that did it for me and I was reading a fabulous book called

Defining the Wind

by Scott Huler. It's basically a long essay on how the Beaufort Scale, and wind in general, is poetry. Such a great sentiment. I also loved the quote in the beginning from Hemingway (writing to John Dos Passos): "Remember to get the weather in your goddamned book -- weather is very important." I couldn't agree more.

MAN: So I'm guessing that as you started *Staring...*, that you started in the upper left, with that dramatic bit of weather in the Courbet? RO'N: Absolutely. That was the jumping off point. I don't know if it is to you, but I always thought it was a gorgeous passage but also so incredibly strange. Look at the way the weather is at a 45 degree angle, and on a diagonal. As someone who makes images, I look at nature all the time and you realize how those things happen constantly, things that look bizarre in a painting or drawing aren't bizarre at all. But the way you crop an image can haunt people and make them feel eerie, but it's natural in real life.

Courbet and Frederic Church did this as well. If that image, the Courbet, were cropped -- say he's planning the painting and we're it to cut off even six inches further on the left hand side than it does, the weird sweeping of the clouds might not have looked so weird. What I love imagining is a painter like Courbet knowing how much more strange and threatening it looked with that dramatic diagonal. That's one of the reasons painting resonates with people. Looking at it, it's a fucking wave, it's the ocean, it's a humongous wave in the sky.

Back to your very basic question: The wind and the weather. It's the weather that was definitely the main thread and connection between my drawing and the Courbet.

MAN: I noticed in the Flickr picture to which I linked yesterday [

and at right

] that you had tacked up onto the wall of your studio several pictures of dramatic cloud formations, and that next to them was a small sketch for *Staring...* Were you working off of those too? RO'N: I have those all over my studio. I forgot about that.

When I'm working on anything there's usually some image of weather hanging near it.

What I've been doing for the last seven years is making the world eat up anything human-like. Anything that's living and is trying to maintain a life is being enveloped by nature or clouds or the weather. It has become bigger and bigger - the atmosphere has - while the people have become tinier and tinier.

When I started doing these pieces many years ago, the men in my drawings were as big as my hand. Now they're barely the size of my pinky nail. I kept making them smaller and the world bigger so as to literally eat up the humans.

So back to these clouds: Being an avid weather-watcher, I have tons of weather books. I bought doubles of the National Geographic series on weather, so I could cut up one because they have insanely great images of clouds and weather. Those photographs have those pure blacks the way my drawing and Courbet's painting does.

JULY 28, 2008, 10:39 AM

Dargerism and Robyn O'Neil: A Q&A, part four

MAN: So speaking of weather in your drawing, the Courbet and its influence: I think it's interesting that there's no real evidence of wind in the Courbet, which is titled, possibly or probably posthumously *Gust of Wind* [above], but in your drawing there's definitely wind: the grass in the lower left-hand corner. I'm guessing that's the title of the painting creeping into your thinking? RO'N: Yeah. Let me think about that.

MAN: I mean, if you look at the storm and where it seems to be going, and the trees and how they're not exactly blowing... well, something doesn't compute. If anything in the painting is actually moving, it seems to be moving in opposite directions from the storm, which is Courbet mainly composing a massive diagonal to dramatize his fictional landscape. RO'N: You're right, the [vegetation] would have to be much more feathery. The treatment of everything in the painting... it would have been more obvious that there was a gust of wind coming through. I probably wouldn't have seen wind were it not for the title. I wouldn't have seen wind as the main issue in mine or in the Courbet. But yeah. It got me going.

I think it's funny because those are tricks you can play when you draw or you paint trees to make them maybe look like they're blowing. And yeah, Courbet has his tree blowing in the opposite direction. But I knew that just kind of counting from the corners, just technically that's the way to go about it.

As a viewer of the scene in my drawing, it looks like you're peering into HUGE pieces of grass -- they're up to my thigh or something. [Ed: *Staring into the blankness, they fell in order to begin*, is 76.5 inches by 144 inches. It's at left, and a detail is below.] So I thought it would be even more threatening to have the grass like that. It definitely doesn't look safe. The pastoral landscape which I've drawn as still and serene is really a trick. Some of the wind is coming from behind the viewer with the way it hits the grass.

MAN: The tree in the Courbet has recently fascinated me, probably because when the Fontainebleau show was recently at the NGA I noticed that there's some pretty serious art historical fudge on whether Gust of Wind is a Fontainebleau landscape or not. I'd bet not. Houston says yes, the NGA suggested, uh, no. I'd bet no - and my guess is that Courbet saw a Ruisdael print and based the painting on it. It's funny - Gust of Wind has or had never been considered a major Courbet - Gerstle Mack, Courbet's biographer, never mentioned it.

RO'N: There's one distinct tree in my piece that may be a very, very minor hint at the Courbet tree. The van Ruisdael -- I know what you're talking about. The trees are pretty much identical. Maybe we artist think we're real clever - just like the big diagonal weather in my painting gets at a part of the Courbet, I go the opposite direction with the tree, and hide it. We artists kind of disguise influence that way.

MAN: The last thing I wanted to ask you about is this big, dominant horizontal in your drawing. It's implied in the Courbet, behind the landscape and the hill on the right and all, but it's not even remotely visible. **RO'N:** That's a good question. It has a lot to do with where my work has gone from the beginning of the days when I was making large scale work. I started making work that had so much to do with mountainscape and traditional landscape-type imagery in the background and using that as a stage set for what was happening with 'my men,' whether they're throwing a ball or fighting or killing each other or whatever. All of those things happened amidst a romantic landscape. If you did a timeline of my work it all was very mountainous and you never would have seen a flat landscape like that.

Then as the weather began enveloping what was happening in my work, the mountains - they were always snowy landscapes and the snow began to melt and the mountains began to crumble and the men just got smaller and smaller and more and more in the dist.

There are no trees in my new drawing and in the early days of my work it was all about trees and mountains. The skies became bigger. The skies would be a tiny strata at the top of my drawing -- and here, now the horizontal line is way low, which normally you don't do if you have mountains. So basically it was knowing that the work was starting to be about nature winning over the men. It's more stark and bleak to have nothing.

MAN: So the MFA Houston should obviously acquire your drawing. You live in Houston, it may be the best painting in the museum. But they haven't yet?**RO'N:** (Laughing.) Tell them to!