

FIRST LOOK



View of Boru O'Brien O'Connell's *I Can Only Tell You What It Does For Me*, site-specific performance by Izzy Sherman at the Los Angeles Public Library, Oct. 3, 2013.

Boru O'Brien O'Connell

by William S. Smith

A 12-YEAR-OLD GIRL paced around the atrium of the Los Angeles Public Library speaking to no one in particular about the importance of good time management skills and the difficulty of distinguishing fantasy from reality. Throughout the performance—part of *I Can Only Tell You What It Does For Me* (2013), a site-specific project scripted and produced by Boru O'Brien O'Connell this past October—the girl's affect remained calm and reassuring. However, her words—a mix of lines culled from advice books for children and elliptical aphorisms penned by the artist—cast in doubt the stability of the subject behind the monologue. Was this child offering helpful hints for staying productive? Or was she verbalizing some kind of schizoid intrapersonal dialogue?

"I'm interested in language that is simultaneously earnest and self-undermining," O'Brien O'Connell said recently in an interview with *A.i.A.* Whether written by the Brooklyn-based artist or sourced from texts such as Gregory Bateson's treatises on the mind and Malcolm Lowry's 1947 novel *Under the Volcano*, the language that permeates O'Brien O'Connell's videos and performances can raise knotty questions about cognition, creativity and perception. While he is "interested in how external source material can be used to explore interior, subjective experience," the scripts O'Brien O'Connell prepares for actors to deliver imply an inner life that is as disjointed as it is reflective.

Is It the Wood? (2011), a two-channel video he made while in the MFA program at Bard College, appears to be an inter-

view with a small-town thespian eager to discuss his interest in theater. But the man's genuineness is called into question as he is seen alternately taking directions from a voice outside the frame, operating a professional camera and sliding awkwardly on his belly across an antique wooden table. The deadpan humor is cut with anxiety as viewers witness an uneasy balance of sincere expression and contrived performance.

Cameras and audio recording equipment are recurring formal devices in O'Brien O'Connell's practice, where they often function as mechanical aids to memory. His recent projects have also incorporated objects that resemble cabinets and desks—furnishings designed for storage and organization that serve as what he calls "low-tech mnemonic devices." Accompanying the performance at the Los Angeles Public Library was a stark Art Deco-inspired valet, a simple box for storing everyday items such as keys and wallets. Tellingly, this repository of the familiar was empty and painted by the artist with an ominous black finish.

Like the valet, O'Brien O'Connell's upcoming installation at the Kitchen in New York is inspired in part by the work of John Vassos, an industrial designer whose subway turnstiles, radios and microphones embodied 1930s techno-optimism. On the side, however, Vassos produced an illustrated catalogue of phobias in which he used clean, Art Deco lines to depict nightmarish scenes of obsessive fear. The two sides of Vassos's career merge in O'Brien O'Connell's work, as the polished veneer of his videos conceals unruly psychological tensions. ○

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
New works by O'Brien O'Connell in "Draft, Capture, — —," a two-person exhibition at the Kitchen, New York, Jan. 23-Mar. 1.