



**Paul O'Keeffe**  
painted, more or less

Cover:

*Natural's Not In It*, 2010  
steel, plexiglas, dayglo and  
flashe paints  
104 x 87.5 x 4.75 in.

Right:

*Other Moments*, 2010  
steel, modified gypsum,  
dayglo and flashe paints  
22.5 x 58.5 x 64 in.



*The Space Between*, 2010  
steel, modified gypsum,  
flashe paint  
18.75 x 48 x 48 in.



Paul O'Keeffe  
*painted, more or less*

Nov 19–Dec 31, 2010

William Busta Gallery  
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## Seeming not to signify: the work of Paul O’Keeffe

Given that the forms Paul O’Keeffe uses might be called “abstract”—in that they are not truly mimetically referential—his work seemingly does not signify anything. This term, formalist, is all too commonly used to describe works whose content does not take on an anecdotal form, or partake of a socio-cultural narrative, or critique—in other words a mere arrangement of forms, and materials. This suggests that work such as O’Keeffe’s are about nothing other than itself. Yet, when something is about its “self,” this means it is concerned with the articulation of terms and conditions of its own existence (in the world).

Obviously, if O’Keeffe’s work is about its “self,” one needs to ask what is the nature of this “self” that he seeks to present to us? Not to ask is to miss the point of truly engaging his aesthetic and conceptual enterprise. If the subject of “selfhood” is at the core of O’Keeffe’s work, perhaps the clues we need to determine what this is are to be found within the narrative frame-work in which the rational, the associative and the subjective respectively order his works.

Perhaps, most relevant to the work’s identity is how O’Keeffe uses shifts in color to divide or unify diverse elements, to denote a form, to privilege, emphasize or supply a given element a function, or suppress an element’s identity. Within these categories are recognizable subsets in which O’Keeffe uses color as a means of differentiation between object (thing), support (structure), surface (exterior) and decoration (adornment,) or between material identities (processes) and the very logics and concepts that define their use.

It is the destabilizing effect of color on form and the visual intensity that individually and serially orders each work, which makes it difficult to grasp the overall relationship between the physical size, material, compositional, and form choices. The changing qualities or effects that can be discerned in terms of appearance and structure, and which are specific to each work or series of works, cannot be assigned a consistent a priori meaning, or function. This is because no one quality may be extracted in any clear manner; their specific sense lies within the context of how they have come to combined or juxtaposed. As such the very elements that characterize the appearance of these works are the product of a wide range of issues, concerns and effects, whose implementation is potentially determined, ordered, or marked by the associative, psychological, historical, and contingent conditions to which the artist is responding.

If you have come this far with me then you may be open to the notion that O’Keeffe’s works are speculations: they are the result of the what “if” question applied to differing lines of thought concerning the subject of “self” as such. O’Keeffe’s work might be viewed as a response to the question, what if I made something that appeared to follow logically, yet in actuality, is nothing more than an assemblage

of differing terms submitted to an overriding aesthetic logic. Such works are not only assemblages of materials and forms, but also of concepts, and reference. Once these are set into motion in the form of questions, probes, and prompts, they in turn are used to generate multipart and multi-dimensional mechanisms/responses.

In the very process of seeking to fix meanings to these works as if they were signifiers meant to give representation to some-other, these assemblages come to be have symbolic content. Within this context, O’Keeffe’s work might be thought to be concerned with how things formulated, planned and developed within the context of one frame of production come to be experienced, and interpreted. The chain of events this initiates may be understood as being analogous to the effort we make when we are trying to understand the meaningfulness (identity) of the shifting relationships of everyday life. Within this frame we come to understand how O’Keeffe’s work can be understood as discursively traversing and rhetorically addressing the varied fields and economies that might be thought to constitute the “self,” as well as demonstrating the complex nature of that inquiry.

—Saul Ostrow

*Saul Ostrow is the Editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture published by Routledge, London, Since 1987, he has curated over 70 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in numerous art magazines, journals, catalogues and books in the US and Europe. He presently reviews regularly for Art in America. His interview with Michelle Grabner appeared in March 2010 and Women in Pop in the September 2010 issue of Art in America. He is also Chair of Visual Arts and Technologies, at The Cleveland Institute of Art.*

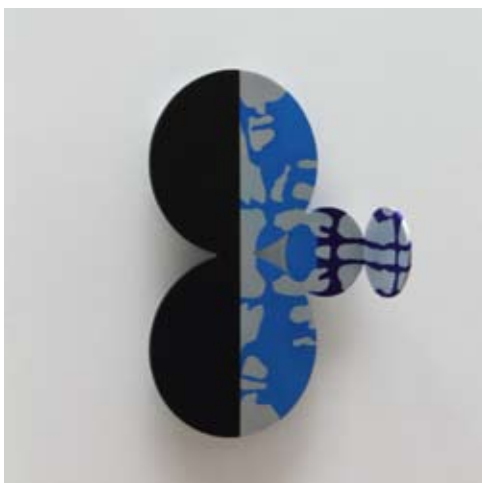
## Subject/Objects



My work over the past decade is situated in two strains of thinking about contemporary practice that tend to be seen as oppositional but that I want to put into play. First, there is the effort, characteristic of late modernism, to remove the work from narrative. Color, form, and materials are used in such a way as to defy the viewers' desire to make meaning of the work apart from the immediate encounter with the form. My latest work is similarly about this initial moment of engagement. The pieces are often large, the colors are somewhat jarring, and there are few immediate clues as to the meaning of the work. It is the corporeal experience that first impresses. Intense fluorescent hues often destabilize the form and make an overall image difficult to grasp.



At the same time, there are indicators that encourage a more analytical approach, and that therefore move the work beyond the phenomenological. The titles of these pieces might be apparent to fans of late 70s bands like the Sex Pistols and the Gang of Four, music that emerged contemporaneously with the decline of the modernist era and were an integral part of my formative years. My work is imbued with other personal and cultural memories from my youth, although these are manifested in deliberately abstract ways. For example, the freestanding sculptures in this show utilize casts of parts of Waterford Crystal decanters from my late mother's house, while the small circular wall pieces employ images of fragments from an upholstery design that my late father used to cover the couches in the lobby of his advertising agency. The original design, by the late English artist Harold Cohen, is reminiscent of the Turin Shroud.



These objects, images, and designs belong to a bygone era which is also my recent past. For me they serve as a "memento mori" and they motivated much of the work in this show. But my intention, in these works, is not to express my "self." Instead, I have chosen to put these fragments of meaning and memory into play in a way that makes sense to me but doesn't impose my experiences or life story on the viewer. Ultimately, the viewer's experience of these objects, as objects, is what interests me.

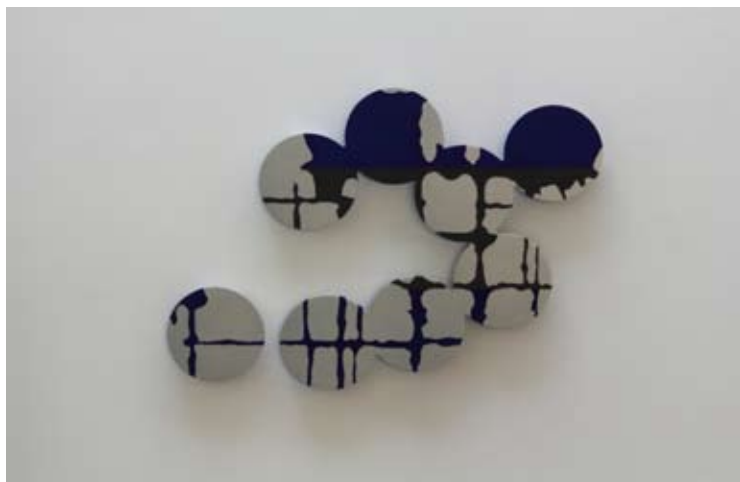
—Paul O'Keeffe

*Top:*  
*Minim*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
24.25 x 20.25 x 1 in.

*Middle:*  
*Cadenza 2*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
20.125 x 13 x 6 in.

*Bottom:*  
*Cadenza*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
20.125 x 13 x 6 in.

*Chorus*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe and  
micaceous iron oxide paints  
19 x 26 x 1 in.



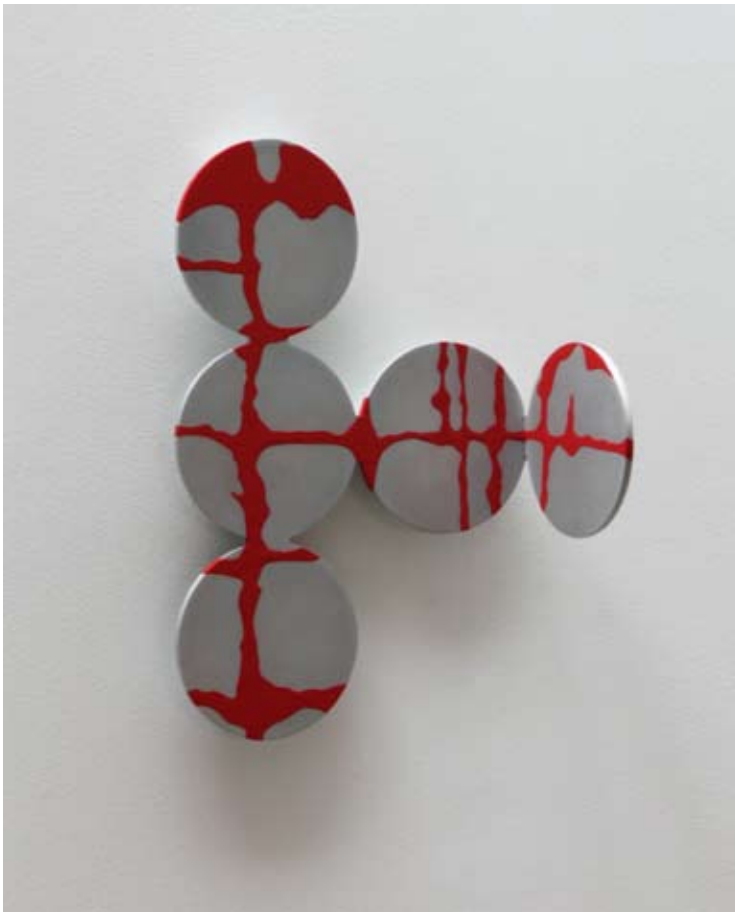
*Quintet*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
20 x 17,5 x 1 in.



*In Memoriam*, 2010  
steel, modified gypsum,  
plexiglas, flashe paint  
28.75 x 61.5 x 36 in.



*Colour From The Tube,*  
2008–10  
steel, plexiglas, flashe and  
micaceous iron oxide paints  
103 x 99 x 9 in.



*Translinear*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
18 x 12 x 7 in.



*Tremolo 2*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
16 x 14.25 x 1 in.



*Heart of Glass*, 2010  
gypsum, steel, flashe paint  
3.5 x 9.75 x 10.5 in.



*Tremolo*, 2010  
aluminum, flashe paint  
14.25 x 16 x 1 in.

# Paul O’Keeffe

Born 1957, Dublin, Ireland  
Lives and works in Cleveland Heights, OH

## Education

- 1979–81 MFA, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1978–79 Diploma, National College of Art and Design, Dublin
- 1976–78 St. Martin’s School of Art, London
- 1975–76 National College of Art and Design, Dublin

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2010 William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH (also 1998)
- 2006 Firelands Association for the Visual Arts, Oberlin, OH
- 2002 Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1999 Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, OH
- 1996 McDonough Museum of Art, Youngstown State University, OH
- 1991 Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin (also 1986, 1983 and 1981)
- 1990 College of Wooster Art Museum, OH
- 1989 Sandford Gallery, Clarion University, Clarion, PA

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2010 *Site Specifics 2010*, Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY
- 2008 *Color in 3-D: Found, Applied and Readymade*, Westport Art Center, Westport, CT
- 2007 *Celebration of Creativity: OAC Fellowships 1980–2005*, OAC Riffe Gallery, Columbus, OH; Aronoff Center for the Arts, Cincinnati, OH
- 2005 *Dreaming of a More Better Future*, Reinberger Galleries, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH  
*The Neo Show*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
- 2000 *Painting Function: Making It Real*, Spaces, Cleveland, OH
- 1996 *Urban Evidence: Contemporary Artists Reveal Cleveland*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH  
*Steel Cities*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, PA
- 1995 *Smells Like Vinyl*, Roger Merians Gallery, New York, NY  
*December Twentieth*, Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1994 *Material and Substance*, Penelec-Bowman-Megahan Art Galleries, Allegheny College, Meadville, PA  
The Lobby Gallery, Deutsche Bank, New York, NY
- 1993 *Ohio Perspectives: Five Sculptors*, Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH
- 1991 *The Invitational: Artists of Northeast Ohio*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH

*Biennial III: New Works*, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH

*Irish Art of the Eighties: Modernism and Abstraction*, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

*Drawings*, Althea Viafora Gallery, New York

1989 *The 1989 Ohio Selection*, Dayton Art Institute, OH  
*Before or After Form And Function*, White Columns, New York NY

1988 *May Show*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH

Paul O’Keeffe, Michael Shaughnessy, Spaces, Cleveland, OH

1987 *Artists Exchange*, Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY

1985 *State of Ohio Sculpture*, Sculpture Center, New York

*Bursary Show*, Arts Council of Ireland touring exhibition, Belltable Art Centre, Limerick

1983 Paul O’Keeffe, Cecil King, BIMC, Paris, France

1982 *Biennale Europeene de Sculpture Contemporaine*, Jouy-sur-Eure

A.D.C.A., Paris, France

1978 *New Contemporaries*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London

## Selected Awards

2008 Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Award (also 2005, 01, 1998, 95, 92, 90, 87, 85)

1991 Arts Midwest/National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

1982 Hammerschlag Memorial Trust Travel Award

Arts Council of Ireland Macauley Fellowship

1980 Arts Council of Ireland Visual Arts Bursary

1979–81 Fulbright Travel Scholarship

## Professional Experience

1983–present Professor, School of Art, Kent State University, OH

1981–83 Assistant Lecturer, National College of Art and Design, Dublin