

ARTFORUM

by Colin Gardner
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In his well-known parable “Borges and I,” Jorge Luis Borges drove a linguistic wedge between Borges the writer and Borges the individual, creating, in effect, two Borges. “I live, let myself go

on living,” he wrote, “so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me.” This dislocation between the ego and the self expressed in the art object, and so between the ego and the art object itself, is of a type common in post-Structural thought, for example in the split between signifier and signified. Predictably,

its popularity with many conceptual artists has taken on a pluralistic guise, linking issues of authorship, originality, and persona with elements of Michel Foucault sociology, Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, and Roland Barthes’ late rhetorical excursions into language as depersonalized desire. John Boskovich’s mixed-media wall pieces, most of them declared as self-portraits in their titles, epitomize the notion of the semiotic construct as a substitute self. Shown in an auspiciously provocative debut exhibition this winter at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, the work generally combines airbrushed original photos and appropriated historical prints, or anonymous thrift-store paintings, in meticulously framed and matted tableaux. Sometimes incorporated in the image, sometimes affixed on an engraved brass plate, almost every piece includes a caption—a fragment of text derived from eclectic archetypal sources running from the Bible, *Das Kapital*, and Shakespeare to e. e. cummings, Sylvia Plath, and the *Los Angeles Times*. These extracts are used less as illustrative descriptions or literary metaphors than as floating signifiers, stripped of the weight of their original sources.

At first glance, many of the works appear arch and precious, wallowing in the sentimental pathos of the sensitive, angst-ridden artist. *Portrait of the Artist and His Mother*, 1987, for example, juxtaposes a black and white photograph of an elderly woman holding a ball of string, a found still life depicting a vase of flowers, and a large blow-up of the artist himself, floating in orbit around the moon. A brass plate below it announces that “John Boskovich was born December 8, 1956, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.” Any possible accusations of transcendental narcissism, or any symbolic extrapolations (the vase as a death omen, the woman as one of the Fates), are quickly dispelled, however, by the subtly wry humor of the work as a whole, no matter how convincing the symbology may be in an individual piece.

In *Portrait of the Artist and His Dog*, 1986-87, a preppy-looking Boskovich

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daydreams about his dog, who appears as a smoke-shrouded vision issuing from the artist’s pipe. This “touching” scene is accompanied by an extract from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which reads, “Who is the third who walks always beside you?/When I count, there are only you and I together.” Who (or

what) indeed is this third party? One suspects that it’s the structure of language itself, that rhetorical discourse in which the expressive self is forever alienated in its search for the “true” sign. Boskovich’s choices of surrogate personae—including a manacled creature from the *Black Lagoon*, in *Double Portrait*, 1987, and a morose figure dressed in a rabbit suit, in one of the self-portraits—suggest that art as a confessional discourse is itself victim to the inevitable, schizophrenically alienating effects of language. The monster/id of the Hollywood B-movie and the buffoon as repressed Other not only act as stand-ins for the artist, but also represent broader semiotic clichés, cultural doppelgängers, in their own right.

Boskovich reinforces this linguistic opaqueness by employing the familiar photo/text/collage methodology of his California Institute of the Arts mentor, John Baldessari. Thus the work can also be read as a critique of conceptualism’s own stylistic conceits. Boskovich pushes this tactic to a deconstructive extreme by literally eschewing most notions of authorship. The photography, typesetting, matting, and framing are all farmed out to subcontractors, so that Boskovich takes on the role of art director-cum-editor. The intimate confession is thus depersonalized by mechanical reproduction into pure discourse, as ripe for engagement as any other text.

Paradoxically, this “Art & Language meets the Yale School of Criticism” approach treads a very thin line between dismantling and reinforcing the Romantic persona. Boskovich seems to be aware that even the most rigorous demythologizing presupposes a larger ideological framework that is in turn open to criticism. However, perpetually alienating your audience from the absent creative source through parenthesizing devices doesn’t necessarily make for interesting art. Boskovich solves the problem by using the viewer as both surrogate confessor and potential confessee. By stepping into the lacuna between artist’s ego, the art object, and its public reception, we end up, like Borges, unsure who actually “wrote” the text. It could well be us.

Above left: John Boskovich, *Portrait of the Artist and His Mother*, 1987, gelatin silver prints, oil painting from ca. 1930, and brass plate, 47 1/4 x 84 1/2". Above right: John Boskovich, *Double Portrait*, 1987, gelatin silver print with gouache and engraved brass plates, 50 x 65 1/4"; private collection. Opposite: John Boskovich, *Portrait of the Artist and His Dog*, 1986-87, gelatin silver print with gouache, 24 1/4 x 22 1/8"; private collection,