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 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.

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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 confessees. 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.