



John A. O'Connor

WHITE LIES MATTER





White Lies Matter, 2017-18, 21x17 inches

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.

—Joseph Goebbels

White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionism is a visual history of American hypocrisy.

"The Illusory Truth Effect: Exploring Implicit and Explicit Memory Influences on Consumer Judgments" states, "Repetition does not seem like a sound basis for determining truth, but researchers have consistently found that people rate repeated statements as more true than non-repeated statements. This effect is known as the illusory truth effect and appears to be quite persistent."¹

The illusory truth effect affirms that what Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda from 1933-45—and one of Adolf Hitler's closest associates—said is quite true! If a lie is repeated over and over, the chance that it will be accepted as truth increases each time the lie is repeated.

This phenomenon didn't just occur. It wasn't the result of Stephen Colbert's constant battering us with "truthiness." The idea of repeating a lie to convince someone that it was the truth goes back to Roman times and was also used by Napoleon, Ronald Reagan, and probably every politician and advertiser who was aware of its effects.²

This introduction is based on my research on the illusory truth effect, lies, and the "illusion of reality"—and it also provides the context for the "decoding" that occurs on the following pages.

Beginning in the early 1960s, John A. O'Connor, "the punning, painting, pedagogue" began a series of paintings, drawings, and works on paper that included satire, social criticism,

and anti-mainstream commentary on a variety of issues. Taking his lead from artists like Hieronymus Bosch (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Last Judgment*) William Hogarth (*A Harlot's Progress*, *A Rake's Progress*) and Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (*Los Disparates* [*The follies*, *The Proverbs*, and/or *The Dreams*]; *Los Desastres de la Guerra*; and, especially *Los Caprichos*), O'Connor initiated a second side to his better-known Bay Area Figurative work. Including word-plays made with stencils, irreverent dialog, and a take on the more serious works by Jasper Johns, O'Connor started to develop a group of themes and images that would recur throughout his career and subsequently lead to the current digital art series, *White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionism*.

This series of "fake slates" explores many popular misconceptions that we all share about what is really going on in our lives. From early American treatment of the native population to a symbol of the only Irish pub on communist soil at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba "where it don't gitmo better than this." After careful consideration, Bill Clinton's "little blue dress" episode looks downright insignificant when compared to JFK's real exploits. What is the real story behind Obama's "red line in Syria?" Other issues include the ubiquitous "1%," is its rule "The New Normal?" What about the CEO of BP whose infamous remark following the disastrous Gulf Oil Spill was, "I want my life back"—as if his life were the one at risk, and the only one that really mattered. There is also the re-revelation of NASA's Nazis. Who alive today remembers them, or how our government officials hid their illegal actions from then-President Truman while importing some of the greatest war criminals the world had ever witnessed?

Numerous other issues are also revealed, or uncovered—such as the government's role in suppressing contraception by using the U.S. Postal Service as its agent. The support of blood libel, the yellow cake incident, the cover-ups at Abu Ghraib, and many more ask you tough questions about what you really know about "the greatest country on earth."

White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionism reveals the deceptions, lies, and cynicism of America and the "fake news" and "alt-facts" that permeate contemporary society.



White Knights, 2018, 21x17 inches

WHITE LIES MATTER



What is the Ku Klux Klan? When was it founded? Was the Klan the result of the Civil War?

A Christian organization that attacked blacks, Jews, gays, people from other countries—and even Catholics, it has had exalted Cyclops, Imperial Wizards, and Grand Dragons and utilized tar and featherings and rape as its greeting card—a "hallmark of the Klan."¹

"The Ku Klux Klan is now the oldest single-purpose terrorist organization in the world maintaining the same title and focus."² Ironically, one of its initial founders was named James R. Crowe.

In 2017, the KKK is an active, widespread group of people located in California, Delaware, Florida, New York, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington—as well as all over the South.³

"When Trump buoyed the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis who had marched in Charlottesville with Tiki torches, Confederate flags, Nazi slogans, swastikas and banners reading 'Jews will not replace us'—even as one of their leaders told a Vice News reporter how disgusting it was that Trump's "beautiful" blond daughter was married to a Jewish man—the president made it clear which category he is in."⁴

But, before we blame Trump, Republicans, and the Alt-Right, let's take a hard look at the Southern Democrats following the Civil War. Formed in Tennessee in 1865, the KKK was a social club for former soldiers of the confederacy, but it soon evolved into a group of activists opposed to Republican political power and Southern blacks.⁵

There seem to be innumerable theories about why they named the group the Ku Klux Klan. One reliable source suggests that Ku Klux was derived from the Greek word "kyklos" which is translated as "circle" and the word "klan" is a variation on the Gaelic word for a "clan."⁶

Hmm. So, the Confederate soldiers who formed this group were conversant in Greek? Or, perhaps the origin of the phrase is the sound of cocking a rifle? Some sources attribute its origin to the latter—invoking Sherlock Holmes in the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle story, "Five Orange Pips." But, since this story wasn't published until 1891, how could that be the source—unless the Confederate soldiers had glimpsed the future?⁷ After all, their garb—white hoods and robes—were symbols of their ghostly, unearthly nature.⁸

By the 1940s, the Klan, following its efforts "to create a more stable social order," had become opposed to labor unions and Communism "claiming the Klan was the only 'all-American patriotic, fraternal, and political movement in the U.S."⁹

And a final thought: Don't they sound just like all of the fiercely patriotic Americans of our day?





Interment? Internment!, 2018, 21x17 inches



Falls Alarm, 2018, 21x17 inches

WHITE LIES MATTER

Interment

Interment took place in the churchyard.
—Oxford English Dictionary

Internment

He was threatened with internment in a concentration camp.
—Oxford English Dictionary

On February 19, 1942, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, signed Executive Order 9066 that authorized the government to remove Japanese men, women and children—whether alien or American citizens—from any area designated by the Secretary of War. It also provided that the people removed would be provided "transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary . . ."

Major Karl Bendetsen and Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Command, each questioned Japanese American loyalty. DeWitt, who administered the internment program, repeatedly told newspapers that "A Jap's a Jap" and testified to Congress, "I don't want any of them [persons of Japanese ancestry] here. They are a dangerous element. There is no way to determine their loyalty. . . It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. American citizenship does not necessarily determine loyalty. . . But we must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map."²

The U.S. government authorized detention camps to provide the forced removal of more than 120,000 Japanese—of whom 80,000 were American citizens. But where was the relocation of German- and Italian-Americans? After all, we were at war with Germany and Italy as well as Japan?

Earl Warren, Attorney General of California at the time of Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, was frequently chastised by conservative Republicans for being too progressive. Warren, however, really was "all over the ballpark." He once prosecuted a woman for attending a communist meeting, was a member of the secret society at the University of California, Berkeley, known as "The Gun Club," and rose to the level of Grand Master in the Freemasons in California.³

In developing the executive order to "relocate" the Japanese living in the U.S., three military leaders and Warren were the chief supporters of this program. Warren would, subsequently in his memoirs, state that he "deeply regretted the removal order and my testimony advocating it because it was not in keeping with our American concept of freedom and the rights of citizens." But before he said that, he already had said, "If the Japs are released no one will be able to tell a saboteur from any other Jap. . . . We don't want to have a second Pearl Harbor in California. We don't propose to have the Japs back in California during this war if there is any lawful means of preventing it."⁴

Japanese-American, Fred Korematsu refused to obey Executive Order 9066, had plastic surgery to alter his appearance, and changed his name. But in May 1942, he was arrested for not reporting to a "relocation center." He was convicted for violating military orders, but his attorney appealed his case all the way up to the United States Supreme Court. On December 18, 1944, the Supreme Court upheld his conviction on a 6-3 ruling. And, astonishingly, it held that the decision was "not based on race."⁵

Almost forty years later, the case was re-opened based on "government misconduct." Documents existed showing that Japanese-Americans "posed no military threat to the U.S." On November 10, 1983, Korematsu's conviction was overturned, ironically, in the same courthouse in San Francisco where he had been convicted.⁶

Finally! A victory! Right? Well, not quite. The U.S. Supreme Court decision still stands. Yes, a district court cleared his name, but the highest court did not. In fact, the highest court's original decision has been characterized as "the legalization of racism."⁷

WHITE LIES MATTER

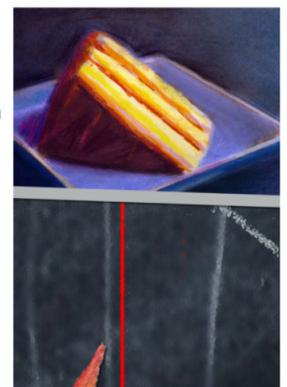
It ain't as bad as you think. It will look better in the morning.¹
—Colin Powell

The United States war in Iraq was partially based on manufactured "intelligence" that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had WMD, or weapons of mass destruction. This action relied on "reports" from as early as 2001 that Hussein, in an attempt to rebuild Iraq's nuclear program, had attempted to buy "yellowcake" from Niger and several other countries. Although these reports were suspected by numerous intelligence agencies and many individuals to be fake, incomplete, or inaccurate, nevertheless they formed a significant part of the basis and justification of what then-President George W. Bush, aka "Dubya" relied upon when making his decision to invade Iraq.²

But, far earlier, the groundwork for an invasion of Iraq was being laid. In 1993, it was reported that Saddam Hussein attempted to assassinate former President George H. W. Bush, Dubya's father. In October 1998, then-President Bill Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act making regime change there the official United States Policy. During this time Al Qaeda had bombed U.S. embassies in Africa and attacked U.S. assets elsewhere. By 2002, Vice President Cheney claimed that Saddam Hussein was pursuing nuclear weapons. The list of fabrications and lies goes on and on, just like the war.³

By June 2002 the massive bombing of Iraq had begun although the war had not officially begun. And on February 5, 2003, Colin Powell told the United Nations that, "Every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." The war officially then began on March 20, 2003.⁴

Saying, "If you broke it, you own it," (the so-called "Pottery Barn rule") was Colin Powell's way of letting Dubya know about the potential consequences of a protracted war in Iraq. Ironically, even this is a lie. Michael Daley wrote in the *New York Daily News* on April 8, 2004, that Pow-



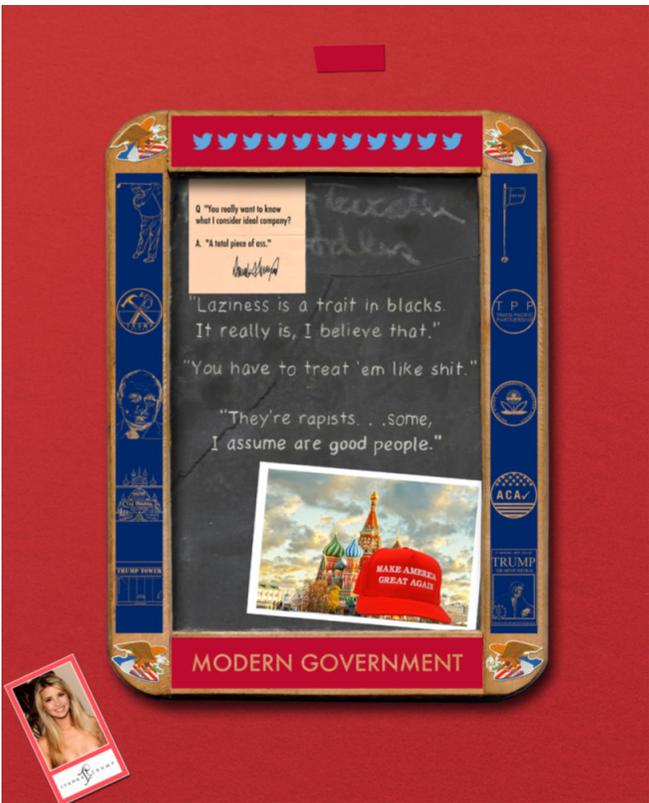
ell apparently picked up that saying from a baby furniture store he had worked at as a teenager.

The borders on this slate are images that can be interpreted in many ways—except for two of them. Can you find those images, and do you know what they represent? Hint: Their history begins toward the end of World War II.

And, by the way, since 1776, a number of sources (not necessarily credible but compelling nevertheless) claim that the United States has been at war for 224 of its 241 years of existence!⁵ And, at least one quite credible source says that the world has been at peace for "just 8 percent of recorded history."⁶



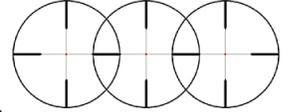
Blood Libel, 2018, 21x17 inches



Ill Eagle, 2018, 21x17 inches

WHITE LIES MATTER

"Journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel. . . .!"



Democrat Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was brutally shot by Jared Lee Loughner in a murderous onslaught against a crowd attending her meeting of constituents near Tucson, Arizona, on January 8, 2011. Of the nineteen people injured, six died.

At that time, Sara Palin was vigorously campaigning for her 2008 partner, Arizona Senator John McCain. Also playing a prominent role in this happy version of Tea Party politics was Janice Brewer, then-Governor of Arizona—the state ranked number one for gun owners.²

What most people didn't know when Palin uttered her infamous "blood libel" comment was that Giffords was Arizona's first Jewish Congresswoman. So, what of it?

So, what of "bomb, bomb Iran," John McCain's famous mantra in the 2008 election? Think about it. McCain chose Palin to be his Vice Presidential running mate. Both were supported by Governor Brewer. McCain is not only a known, military hawk and avid gun rights supporter, but also he has received more money from the National Rifle Association than any politician in

American history! How fitting is it then, that McCain blamed former President Obama for the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida?

It is also common knowledge, that during the 2012 campaign, Palin was roundly criticized for marking districts with cross hairs that the Republicans sought to take back.

So, what is blood libel? Does it refer to the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews as some Christians contend? Mentioned in Matthew 27:25, it has often been interpreted that way.³

Usually, blood libel is described as an inhuman act involving Jews kidnapping and murdering children in order to use their blood in ritual religious practices—or in their food (as in matzo and wine) although it is prohibited by the teachings of Judaism. Described as a horrible practice, it has been attributed throughout history by many as a particularly Jewish practice. Catholics and Muslims have frequently derided Jews for this heinous act.⁴

Numerous defenders of Sarah Palin, both on the left and right, have concluded that she may not have really understood what the phrase "blood libel" actually means. Palin has, of course, routinely criticized the press for inaccurately and savagely attacking her for using the term. She has also routinely attacked journalists for many other things. Ironically (or is it coincidentally?), Palin was born a Catholic who then converted to Pentecostalism, and is a graduate of the University of Idaho with a degree in communications with an emphasis in journalism!



WHITE LIES MATTER

Donald John Trump, the 45th president of the United States, a real estate mogul and former reality television star, is also a supposed billionaire. I say supposed because no one—except maybe those in his inner circle—really knows. He was the only major-party presidential candidate since Gerald Ford not to release at least one income tax form.¹

Trump was a very successful TV show host of *The Apprentice* for fourteen seasons even though he had initially told producer Mark Burnett that reality television "was for the bottom feeders of society."²

But, as a businessman, prior to becoming president, he probably was best known for Trump Tower, the Taj Mahal, Trump Castle, and Mar-a-Lago, a Florida estate in Palm Beach.

He is also well known for his comment on John McCain. "He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured."³

DONALD TRUMP IS BEST KNOWN FOR

- Real Estate Tycoon
- Worth \$3.1 billion (estimate by *Forbes*)
- Reality TV Star: *The Apprentice*
- "You're fired!"
- Book: *Art of the Deal*
- Trump Tower
- Taj Mahal
- Birther Movement
- Barack Obama was born in Kenya
- Crooked Hillary
- "Lock 'er up"
- Miss USA Pageants

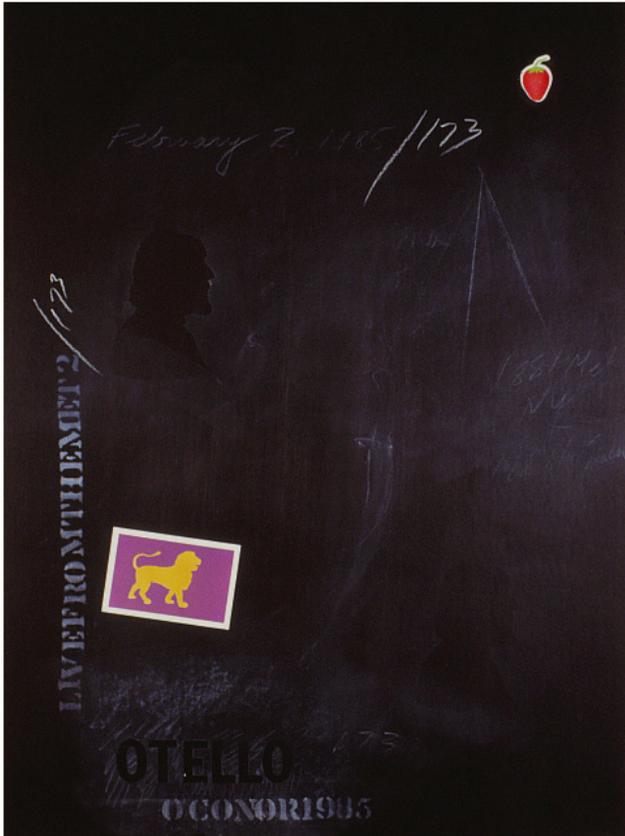
TRUMP PENCE

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

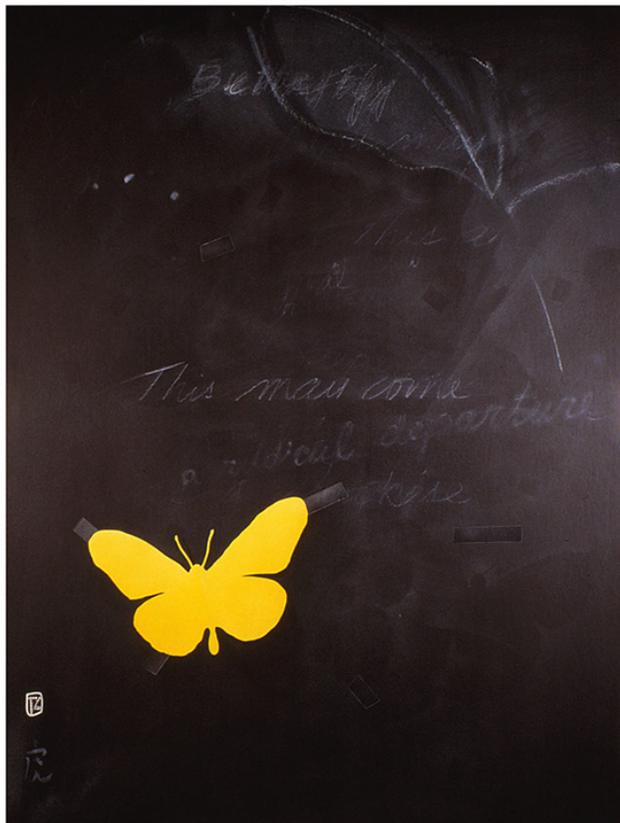
2016

Miss Universe Pageants

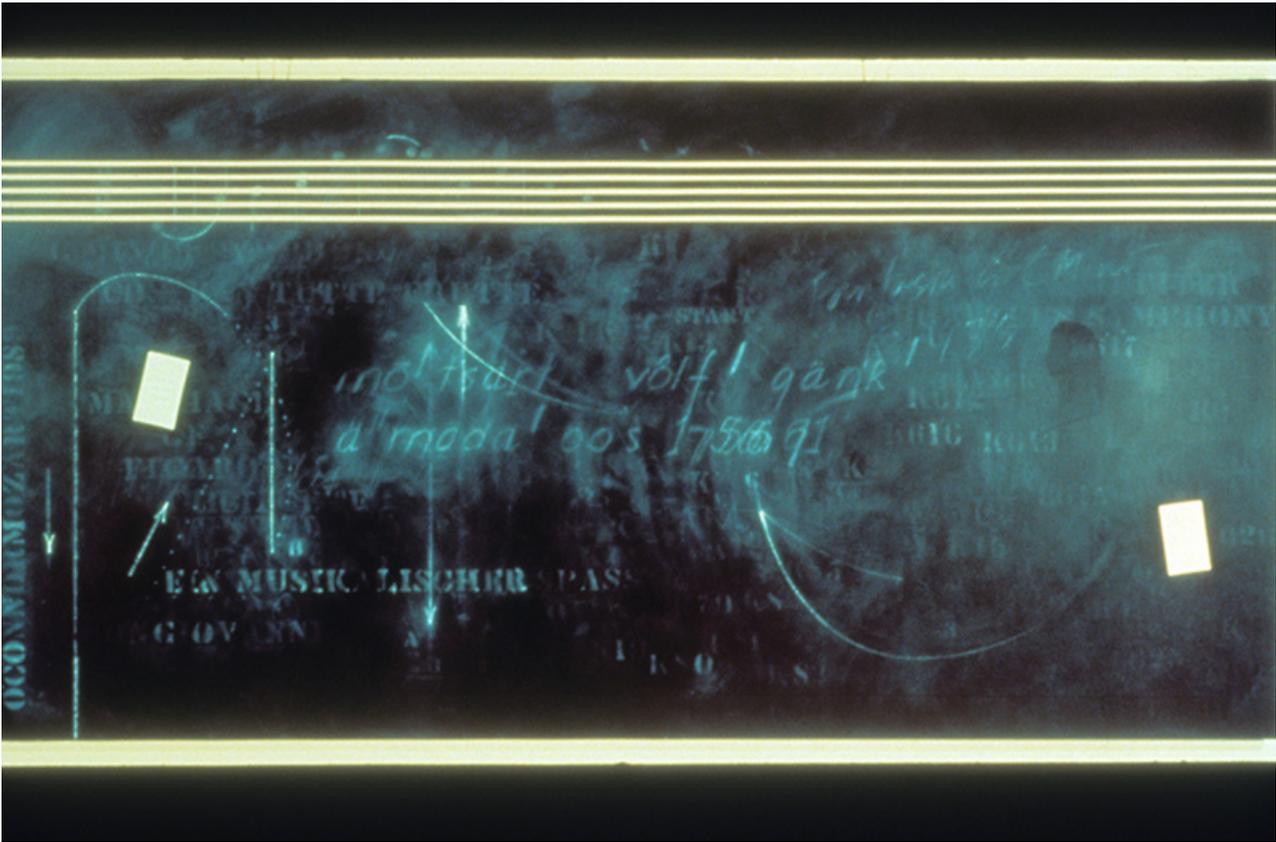
- Megyn Kelly
- Trump University
- Mexican Border Wall
- Repeal ACA
- Rebuild Military
- Defends Gun Rights
- Vladimir Putin + The Russian Connection
- Anti-Transgender
- Withdrew from Trans Pacific Partnership
- Fired FBI Director James Comey
- Married Three Times
- First marriage presided over by Norman Vincent Peale
- Supports increased use of Fossil Fuels: Coal in particular
- Says the EPA is a "disgrace"
- Says "Global warming is a Chinese hoax"
- Never releases income tax returns
- Withdrew from Paris climate Agreement



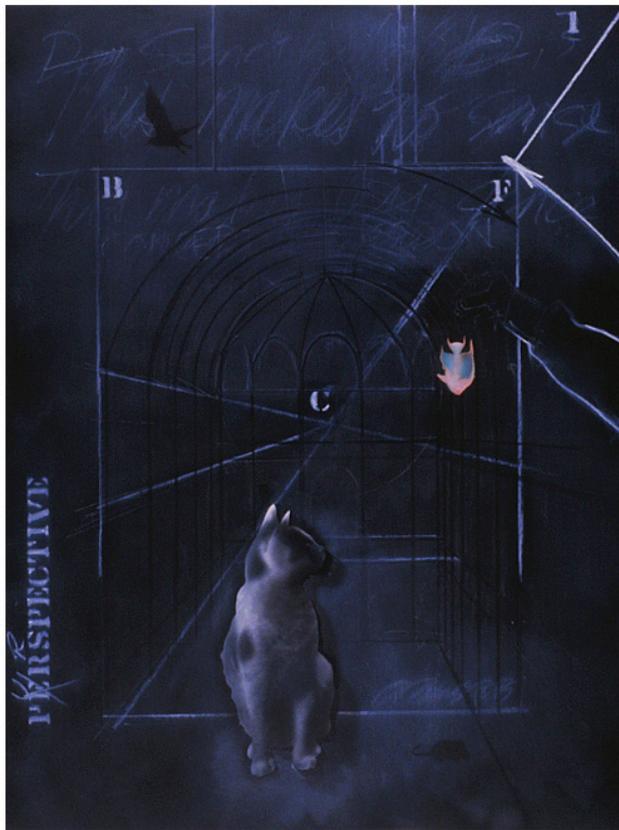
Othello, 1985, 40x30 inches, acrylic on board



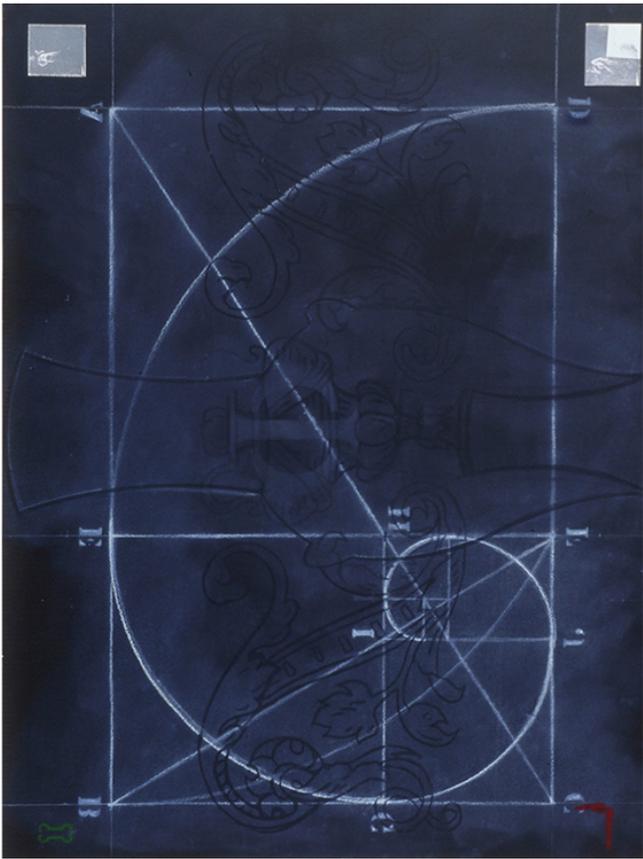
Butterfly, 1985, 40x30 inches, acrylic on board



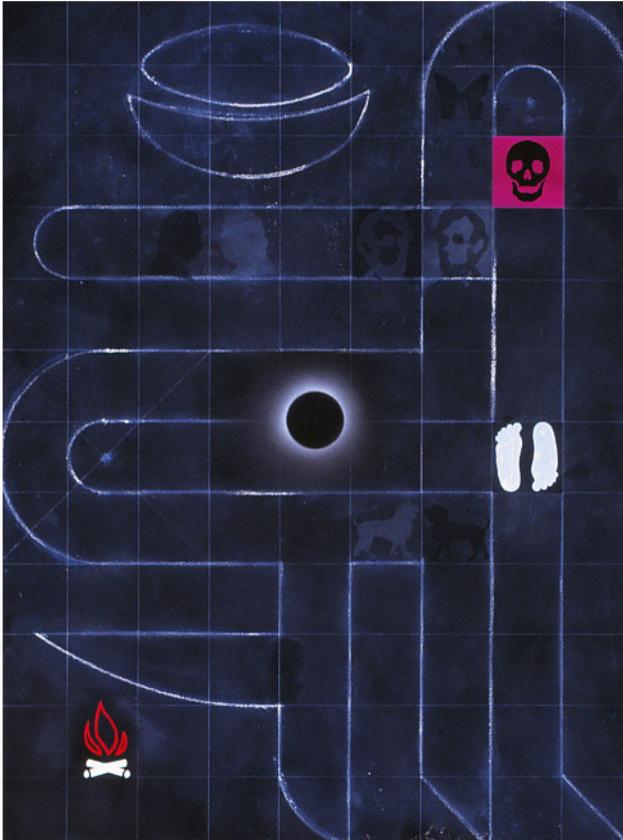
Mozart, 1988, 48x96 inches, acrylic on HIS



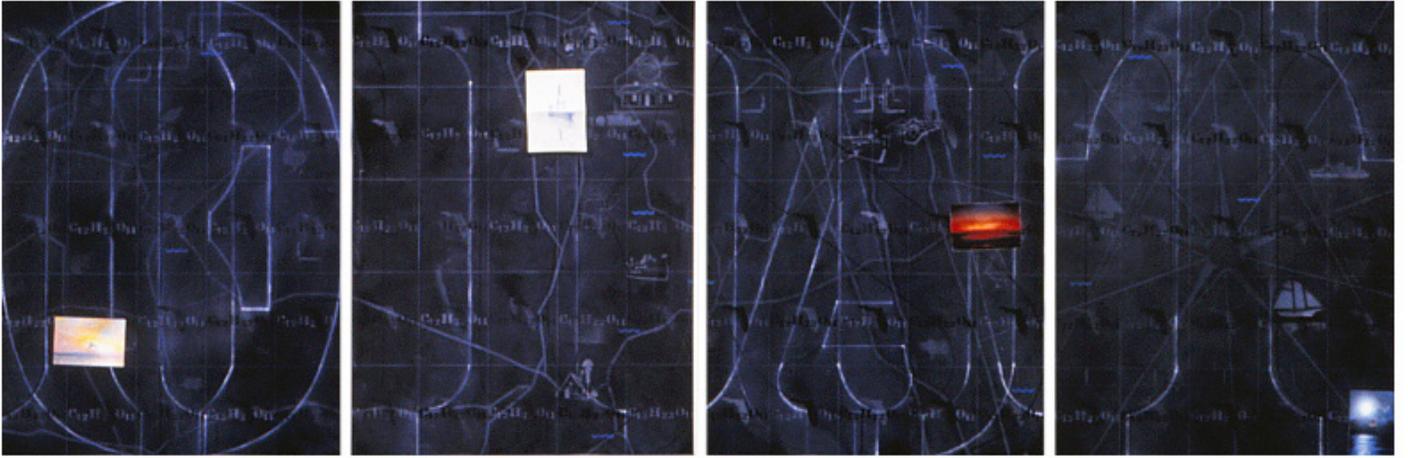
Purrerspective, 1988, 40 x 30 inches, acrylic on board



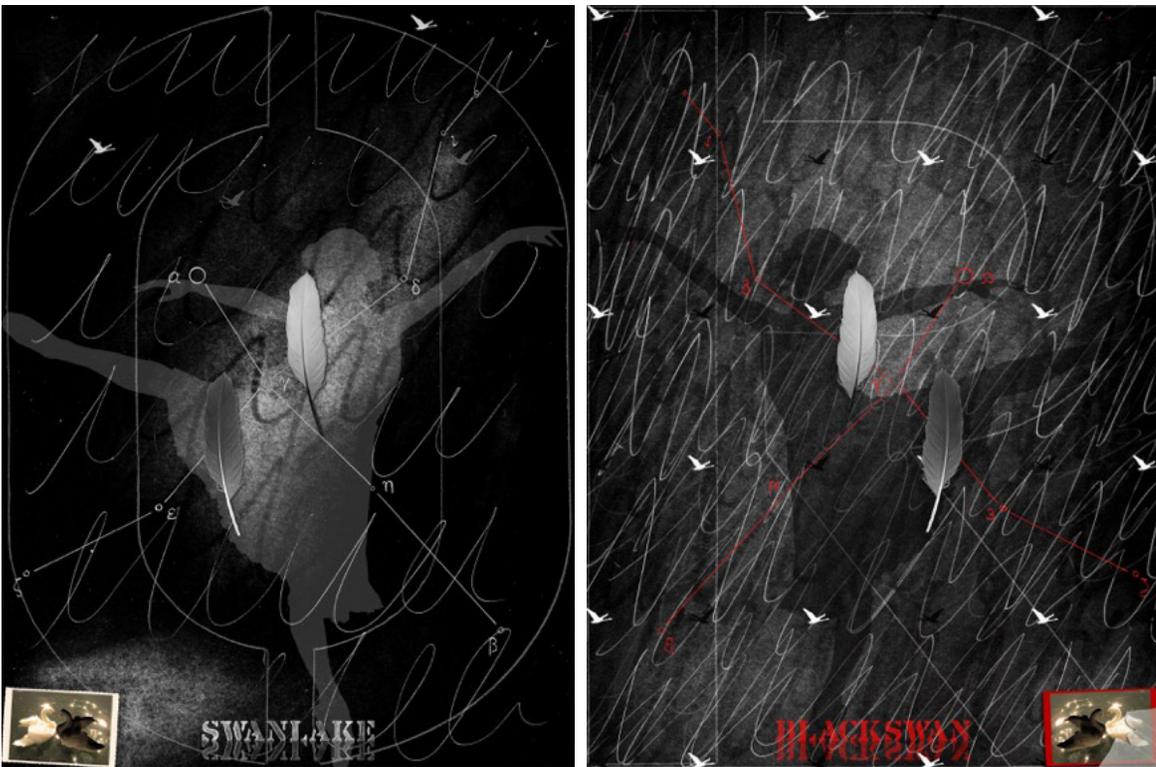
Irrational, 1994, 40x30 inches, acrylic on board



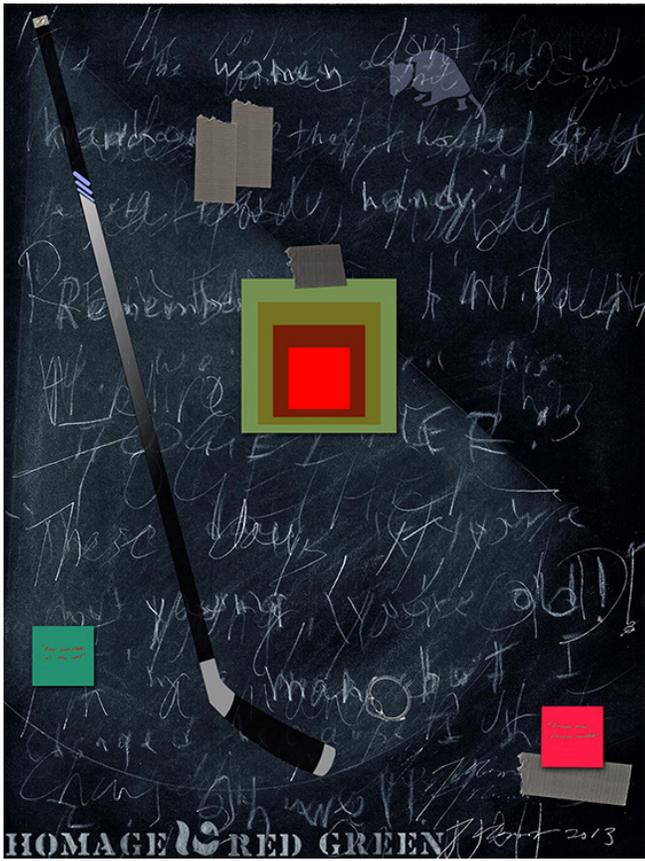
Silent Knowledge, 1998, 40x30 inches, acrylic on board



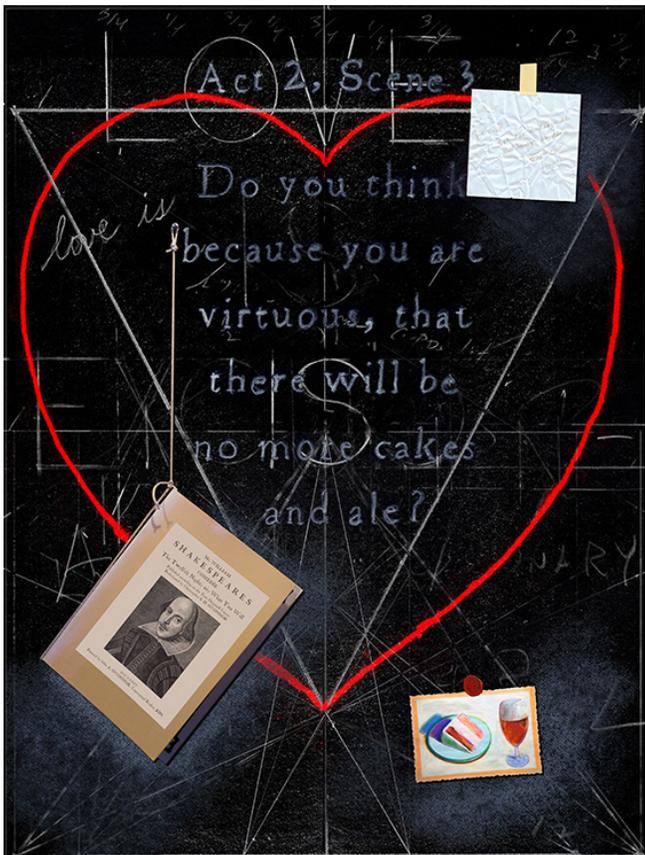
Florida Suite, 2004, 4 panels, 40x30 inches (each), acrylic on Sintra



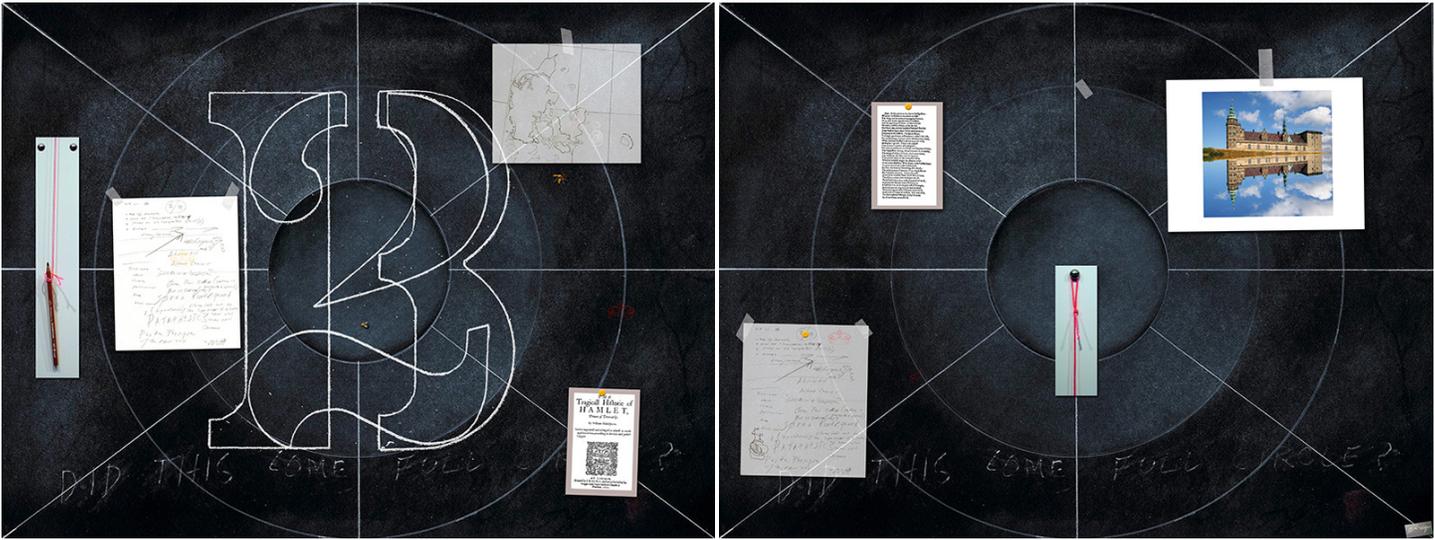
Swan Lake/Black Swan, 2015, 2 panels, 40x30 inches (each), acrylic on Sintra



Homage to Red/Green, 2015, 40x30 inches, acrylic on Sintra



WSWD (Cakes and Ale), 40x30 inches, acrylic on Sintra



2B or (not) 2B, 2015, 2 panels, 40x30 inches (each), acrylic on Sintra

John A. O'Connor

Reality and Illusion by John A. O'Connor

In 1968, I began to explore new ways of working. I had moved to Ohio in 1965 to teach at Ohio University, and my new environment was a shock to me. The landscape was completely different, the light softer, the air much more humid, and the sky was frequently filled with lightening of an intensity that I had never encountered. Although I continued to work in the Bay Area Figurative style after arriving in Ohio, I found it harder and harder to do so. As I responded to my new environment, I began to experiment with new ideas.

In 1969, I moved to Florida to take a teaching position at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Although it was déjà vu all over again, I had less difficulty continuing with my work because, since I was painting from my imagination, it was less environment-dependent than ever before.

I called the paintings from 1968 to 1986 Conceptual Realism. They are the record of a journey to explore the mystery of illusion and reality. My goal was to provoke thought about how we create our reality. Humor, paradox, deception, and riddle are aspects of this working/process. The result is conceptual realism—not new realism or photo realism. Everything in these paintings is invented. I didn't paint from objects, I painted from my mind. I was interested in things the mind thinks it knows, things seen but not apprehended, things perceived but not truly experienced. By 1986, this particular period in my art practice had completely evolved into the Blackboard Series.

Since 1985, the Blackboard Series has been the predominant form of my art. It grew out of work produced in the early 1970s, but the impulse that led to the blackboards was largely undeveloped and not recognized by me. Art has a peculiar way of telling an artist something that he may not understand for many years.

The blackboards images, obviously originated from my classroom experience where I had been surrounded by them for most of my life—first as a student, then as an artist-teacher. As early as 1963, I was interested in the idea of how natural processes could contribute to making a work of art. The blackboards are created using those kinds of processes. Erasing and moving borders become a history lesson: a history of the work itself. Wiping out and/or covering up images and messages goes far beyond the processes themselves. The procedure raises significant questions: What is covered up? Why? What is missing? Within this context, I have become interested again in the concept of the "history painting" in the tradition of such eighteenth century artists as Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley. In a 1989 painting titled Erasing History, I explored the practice of manipulating "historical facts" as a form of propaganda; more recently, in paintings such as America and The New Ivory Tower, I have focused on the manipulation of words and symbols as "historical documents" used to sway public opinion and to reinforce popular mythology. In addition, the didactic quality of the blackboards allows them to be utilized to fulfill their real function: to inform, to explain, and to teach. It is interesting to note that one of the most influential educational innovations in America in the 1870s was the introduction of drawing as a required subject in public elementary education. Drawing instruction was justified as valuable training in visual literacy. Teachers used the classroom blackboard to illustrate the basic principals of line, shape and proportion. For my own purposes, the blackboard is the ideal conceptual vehicle because it is the medium par excellence with which to manipulate ideas and material.

A critic once said that my blackboards reminded him of "those waxy tablets with the thin vinyl sheet over the top that some folks still remember writing on as a child." He pointed out that such a device is called a palimpsest, a magic slate on which images could be drawn and then magically erased by lifting the vinyl sheet. Interestingly, the palimpsest was one of Sigmund Freud's favorite metaphors for the unconscious. Encountering my blackboard paintings, the viewer is invited to enter an environment of palimpsests: ghosts of gestures, the residue of images and words linking thoughts and concepts of visual entities and written language. They are the tracings of a life's journey. Partially erased, but not forgotten, my blackboards provide a dark window into the modern psyche. Like us, they may be but fleeting illusions, or they may establish our own reality against eternity

It is tempting to suggest that both my Conceptual Realist paintings and their transformation into the Blackboard Series owe their form to nineteenth century trompe l'oeil painting and are merely an extension of that genre. However, that would be erroneous. One of the concepts that I have steadfastly developed is that of going beyond traditional illusionism. Typical trompe l'oeil painting, no matter how initially deceptive, inevitably breaks down under close scrutiny. In my blackboard paintings, I invite the viewer to question the nature of reality itself. Consequently, I have developed concepts and techniques to create realities that are the vehicle for such transcendence. All of my blackboard paintings are done in acrylic on board or Sintra—there is no collage. While I enthusiastically admire the trompe l'oeil masters of the past, my own work has evolved primarily as a result of twentieth century influences found in the works of William T. Wiley, Jasper Johns, and particularly, Marcel Duchamp.

John A. O'Connor

***White Lies Matter* by John A. O'Connor**

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Praise for *White Lies Matter*

"White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism" reveals the deceptions, lies, and cynicism of America and the 'fake news' and 'alt-facts' that permeate contemporary society."

– Michael Wilson, New York-based author of *How to Read Contemporary Art: Experiencing the Art of the 21st Century* (New York: Abrams, 2013).

"O'Connor, a retired professor of art from the University of Florida, offers readers a series of 60 digitally produced works of art that aim to shake up Americans' preconceptions about their nation's history. [The book provides] a provocative confrontation with U.S. exceptionalism." Kirkus Indie Review

For a public numbed by fake news, John A. O'Connor's digital masterwork, *White Lies Matter*, provides a brilliant corrective curriculum. The lesson plan is a delightful, often provocative, format of old-fashioned school slates, small hand-held chalkboards, enhanced by design motifs and text. The serial slates, in turn, evoke today's student lap-top computer screens. Reading is a visual art, and viewers are free to browse, as in a gallery. Participatory by intent, *White Lies Matter* has great potential to crowd-source. In debate, We the People can create our own slates. The larger question remain. What words to erase? What emblems to retain? Who decides the symbols of history?

– Charlotte M. Porter, Ph.D.

"A remarkable and timely book, *White Lies Matter* is an elegant 'coffee table book,' but with significance."

– Dr. Barbara Newell, former Chancellor of the Florida State University System.

"Primarily recognized for his Chalkboard Series, a group of works that repeatedly question the boundaries between reality and illusion, John A. O'Connor is an artist who believes that it is very important to re-establish the artist's historical contributions to the formation of public policy and social justice issues. A closer look at the art reveals layers of meaning. The details seem subtly balanced between 'found' and slyly, sarcastically 'manufactured,' a style the artist calls 'conceptual realism' with which he conveys an uneasy, compromised American past with the madness exposed. "

– David Todd, BookTrib review

"White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism" is a unique and compelling contribution to our understanding of how political operatives (including elected officials) manipulate the general public through the use of lies, exaggerations, misinformation, disinformation, and what has commonly come to be called Fake News. A timely and impressively presented expose and study, "White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism" is especially and unreservedly recommended for personal, professional, community, college and university library Political Science collections.

– Michael J. Carson, Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

THE BLACKBOARDS by Ruth Weisberg

Ruth Weisberg is an internationally acclaimed artist and the former Dean of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California.

John O'Connor's blackboard paintings are based on a series of compelling paradoxes. What seems like an accumulation of spontaneous gestures is really the product of painstaking planning and premeditation. Verisimilitude and conceptualism are usually thought of as polar opposites, but in O'Connor's oeuvre they form a thought-provoking and poetic alliance. In this work, tromp l'oeil realism is placed at the service of such complex ideas as creativity and extinction. The paradox of joining a self-conscious process of cognitive associations with the visual manifestations of the unconscious reflects some of the major currents in twentieth-century art. O'Connor seems to draw on the rationality of late modernism, the free association of Surrealism, and the primacy of questions of representation in Post-Modernism.

Since 1985, the blackboard has been the basis of O'Connor's work. It re-creates both the autobiographical setting and the quest for knowledge that are the core of O'Connor's experience. In the artist's words, "The Blackboard Series has its origins in the classroom where I have been surrounded by blackboards for most of my life—first as a student, then as an artist-teacher. They are the environment of palimpsests, ghosts of gesture, the residue of images and words linking thoughts and concepts of visual entities and written language."

Typically, O'Connor explores concepts that cluster around a central idea. *A Clean Slate* (1986) is the repository for the artist's thoughts on the war in Viet Nam. The blackboard evokes both the idea of a "clean slate," a record showing no discrediting marks, and "to slate," which is colloquial for severe punishment or harsh criticism. This punning and associative word play is overlaid by visual images: a leaping white tiger, oriental calligraphy, the Lincoln and Washington Monuments. The ideas manifested are also reflected in the visual gestalt of the individual paintings. For example, in *Works In Progress II* (1988)—which is a complex representation of entropy and the relationship of order and chaos—the progression of marks from left to right move from a platonic order to a frenetic mark-making that dissolves any recognition of individual signs into a field of energy.

Many of O'Connor's paintings feature simple diagrammatical constructions that, in some cases resemble mathematical proofs as in *Winter* (1992) or *Irrational* (1994). The sense of palimpsest and dusty overlay has given way to charting and mapping, but the conceptual projections remain very dense.

The open-ended and questioning nature of O'Connor's work over the last decade is manifested in both its contradictions and in its playfulness. He depicts the inverse reality of the white mark on the dark ground, which can be read as the familiar chalky and didactic blackboard or a constellation of marks defining a deeper mindscape. Whatever readings the viewer brings to these works, John O'Connor's poetic and enigmatic paintings have a profound appeal to both the mind and the eye.

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

BACK TO SCHOOL by Gerard Haggerty

Gerard Haggerty has received support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Ford Foundation. He writes for ARTnews, and teaches at Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

*“As a well-known cabalist once said, ‘If you wish to attain the invisible, you must penetrate the visible to the uttermost.’
– Max Beckmann*

The dust of history is more than a metaphor. We’ve all seen it. In fact, we spent our formative years—day after day—sometimes hungry for knowledge but always eager for recess, staring at that dust. Most folks are likely to think they behold it again when they see the work of John O’Connor, an artist who has spent more than a decade painting representations of blackboards that are virtually indistinguishable from the chalk-dusted slabs of slate they depict.

Three centuries ago, the philosopher John Locke proclaimed that we all enter the world a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. O’Connor’s blackboards are anything but blank. Logarithmic spirals, Golden Sections, perspectival diagrams, and other cornerstones of Western visual culture are inscribed on a surface that appears to have been repeatedly rewritten and erased. In more than one sense, there are lessons here: knowledge is ever changing, and history itself can be wiped out. These bittersweet truths are as old as the defaced statues of headless pharaohs, and as modern as the Cultural Revolution that allowed centuries of Chinese art to vanish in the blink of an iconoclast’s eye. As Picasso said of pictures, a culture is also “the sum of its destructions.”

To be sure, some of the messages on these blackboards aren’t part of the public domain. Works depicting the painter’s palm prints, Florida’s palm trees, a family cat named Mau and a host of other autobiographical references are often playfully punctuated with decals (an apple for the teacher, for instance) and *trompe l’oeil* stencils that seem taped onto the faux-erased surface. This private iconography suggests that personal memory is also ephemeral and mutating.

Realism has always involved the creation of reasonable facsimiles. In certain *trompe l’oeil* instances, the facsimiles are more than reasonable. They appear to be the real thing, and so we look again. In this game of “trick the eye,” artist and onlooker are like two chessmasters, each trying to see one move ahead of their opponent. The painter must double-check every detail and hone his skills in an effort to create a seamless illusion; viewers examine the image ever more carefully to find the telltale clue that unmasks the hidden truth. It’s a difficult challenge; barring the few forgers, who have managed to avoid prison, John O’Connor is the best contemporary “counterfeiter” in the business.

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

THE TRUTH OF ILLUSION by Richard Vine

Richard Vine, the current managing editor of Art in America, has served as editor-in-chief of the Chicago Review and of Dialogue: An Art Journal. His articles on art, literature, and intellectual history have appeared in numerous journals, including Salmagundi, Modern Poetry Studies, and New Criterion.

John A. O'Connor is engaged in one of the oldest—and arguably one of the strangest—endeavors in the history of Western art. The impulse toward pure illusionism, the desire to fool the eye and mind of the viewer, was a major component of Greek naturalism. This shift from symbolic to lifelike representation is commemorated in the 5th-century B.C. legends of Zeuxis, who painted grapes so realistic that birds tried to peck them, and his rival Parrhasios, who tricked Zeuxis into trying to draw aside a painted curtain in order to see another “work” behind it.

Plato, the godfather of all conservatives, deplored these confusions as a dangerous distraction from reality and truth. Ever after, nonetheless, certain artists have striven to enhance illusionism not merely for the fun of the trick (an element not to be denied) but also for the sake of a greater philosophical point. The means were dynamism, architectural framing (often extended or faked), cartellino (a object), imagistic windows and vistas, etc.—but the end effect was generally one (or more) of three. In rough terms, religious artists sought to confirm the wonder of God’s creation (the multiplicity of His creation, the perfection of His cosmic design); secular artists to celebrate the fleeting glory, the poignancy, of earthly life; and empirical, post-Enlightenment artists to point out the degree to which any model of concrete reality is a mental construct, subject to deception, preconditioning, and error.

O'Connor’s works—particularly the “blackboard” paintings, in which the invocation of a lesson is most direct—would seem to be firmly entrenched in the postmodern questioning of discourse, both visual and verbal. Clearly this is how the artist, a veteran professor, speaks of the project. Calling his method “conceptual realism,” he stresses that the teaching slate’s multiple erasures and emendations trace a history of infinite approximation, of constantly altered “certainty.” The chalkboard palimpsest refutes fixed reality, or at least any hope of an unshakable human grasp of its essence. The half obliterated letters of *America* (1998), reflecting a sensibility largely formed in the Vietnam War era, invite us to ask what is myth and what substance, what is transient and what permanent, in the country they name. Indeed, the link between naming and conjuration is strong throughout the oeuvre: from the insistence upon an object that is not in fact there—in works like *White Slate #1* (1976), *Page from a Book of Ours* (1976), and *Brown Bagging It* (1978)—to the suggestion of the power (and fallibility) of signs: Chinese characters in *Erasing History* (1989), words and letters in *The Play’s the Thing* (1988), numbers in *The Definitive Journey* (1999), and even diagrams in *Johns’ Theory* (2002).

Such is O'Connor’s announced stratagem. But an outside observer might well ask if there is not an implicit agenda in his work as well—one perhaps beyond conscious intent. Trompe l’oeil illusionism creates for the viewer a phantom reality, a second existence. Once, in the age of faith, this alluded, in part, to a realm of spirit behind the material. Today, in an era that no longer subscribes to transcendence, it seems to imply a love of physical reality so intense that the world must not only be made present but made present a second time—as though the artist were saying, in a protest against the loss of immortality, that one life, one encounter with earthly things, is not enough. Perhaps this is a desire O’Connor shares with the advocates of high-tech illusionism, too. What is the ultimate wish behind high-definition TV, computer assisted video effects, and virtual reality except to have this world, and have it more abundantly?

New York City

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

JOHN O'CONNOR: HOW YOU SEE IT, HOW YOU DON'T by Peter Frank

Peter Frank is editor of Visions art quarterly and art critic for the LA Weekly. In New York he served as art critic for The Village Voice and The SoHo Weekly News. Frank has also organized numerous theme and survey exhibitions for such prestigious institutions and organizations as Independent Curators Inc., The Alternative Museum, and Artists' Space in New York; and most and most notably, "19 Artists—Emergent Americans," the 1981 Exxon National Exhibition mounted at the Guggenheim Museum tent.

Almost from the inception of his career, John O'Connor's art has explored that fertile interstice between idea and image, that place where language sprouts, flourishes, fails, and rises again. He is not alone in plumbing these heights and scaling these depths: what he calls "conceptual realism," where word and picture, concept and concretion mesh and metamorphose one into another, is a durable tendency in American art. But O'Connor has embraced it with a thoroughgoing passion—as well as a quick intellect and slippery wit.

Indeed, from a certain angle—one the art-historically-minded O'Connor would encourage—O'Connor's work is summative, recapitulating various modes and aspects of conceptual realism and making them play off one another. The trompe-l'oeil still lifes painted by late-19th century American artists such as Harnett, Peto, and Haberle brim with the same kind of mundane but dense information, and deliver that information with the same optical trickery, as fills O'Connor's deceptively lucid panels. The word games, image games, word-image games, and other meta-rebuses that moved from Victorian parlors to the art of the surrealists' American inheritors, from Cornell to Comix, recur, in spades, throughout O'Connor's oeuvre. The anti minimal, pro-regional hi-jinx of Funk art—a kind of thinking hick's Pop—encouraged the conflation of language and image, thought and picture, medium and message.

O'Connor was schooled in the epicenter of Funk, pretty much at the moment of it's apex, by William T. Wiley, one of its most prominent, and most extravagant, exemplars. While studying in the Sacramento area, O'Connor also benefited from the more demure, but no less heady and startling, teaching of Wayne Thiebaud, whose take on the "common image" proposed a heightened realism that worked like, but didn't look like, both the Pop Art from back east and the trompe-l'oeil stuff of old.

Thiebaud, and in a different way Wiley, also provided O'Connor a healthy regard for studio pedagogy, encouraging him to become a teacher as well as artist and, indeed, to regard his teaching as part of his art and vice versa. Lightly but firmly didactic in their visual diction (and/or, if you would, their verbal appearance), O'Connor's pictorial notations constantly show us how to view a pictorial notation as well as how to make one. Like an opera singer who has carefully cultivated a dramatic stage presence as well as a golden voice, and who has done so in part to be able to pass on such crucial ambidexterity as part of his or her legacy, O'Connor trains us by showing us by example—example that has not been dumbed down, but cleaned up. He entices us into his intellections not by making them less elusive (or for that matter allusive), but by making their elusions (and certainly their allusions) more inviting. If Americans can learn to eat spicy food, they can learn to "read" art.

The importance of pedagogy in O'Connor's artistic personality—in his art as much as in his professional standing—has manifested with a kind of ecstatic clarity in his blackboard paintings. After all, as he observes, "I have been surrounded by blackboards for most of my life." Rather than run from this recurring constant, O'Connor has made it a leitmotif, and explored it in depth—looking behind the blackboard's obdurate surface not (just) to its associative resonance, but to its inherent visual-verbal depth and the versatility of its physical as well as social context. It is a context that allows graffiti, imagery, signage, informal notation, and pure painting to co-exist. Blackboards, he writes, "are the environment of palimpsests, ghosts of gestures, the residue of images and words linking thoughts and concepts of visual entities and written language."

O'Connor is not alone in musing on the blackboard as physical presence and as epistemological field; artists as diverse as Arakawa and Vernon Fisher have been drawn (as it were) to the same motif for many of the same reasons. But O'Connor's blackboard works assume a reflexive intensity not found in the art of the narrative-driven Fisher or the semiotically engaged Arakawa. In their work, as in the work of other artists (again, mostly American) who have created photo-realist chalkboard-paintings, the blackboard is a supportive construct for related concepts; for O'Connor, the blackboard is the icon—or, more accurately, the iconostasis, the defining framework for iconic presentation and discussion. The blackboard is O'Connor's page—perhaps his book.

If O'Connor's earlier work, before 1985, is not "framed" by the blackboard motif, it is similarly powered by the painter's sly and technically assured exploitation of what is apparently a native gift for exactitude and concomitant disdain for the merely illustrative. O'Connor's art has always been full of tricks, but he is one of those magicians who delights in instructing his audience in the slight-of-hand, because he knows that if the audience knows how the picture works, they'll approach with greater confidence and broader mind what the picture says. A little knowledge may be a dangerous thing, but John O'Connor, the punning painting pedagogue, knows that a little knowledge leads to a little bit more.

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

REAL ILLUSIONS by John Grande

John Grande is the author of numerous articles that have appeared in Artforum, Sculpture, Art Papers, Canadian Forum, Vie des Arts, British Journal of Photography, On Paper, Vice Versa and Canadian Art. His most recent books include Balance: Art and Nature (1994) and Intertwining: Landscape, Technology, Issues, Artists (1998), both published by Black Rose Books, Montreal.

John O'Connor's paintings are neither a window on the world nor are they abstract in the purist sense. The pictorial language of representation, the iconic language of abstraction, even the act of painting itself are all challenged in O'Connor's work—not as process, but in terms of how we conceive of representation in our mind's eye. Formal and structural precepts (the role and function of the art object) are usually defined as effects that involve a process—although they are, in fact, more often end results that have their beginnings in our cultural coding, our social precepts about the role of art.

Just as avant gardism has become a self-perpetuating social convention, much like a snake that eats its own tail only to see it grow back again, so the act of painterly representation has become histology of the meanings it rejects in circumscribing its own visual definitions. O'Connor's "Real Illusions" move in the other direction. The imagery is temporal and trace-like—a distant echo of some pre-cognitive state of mind. The visual process is conceived as a kind of alliteration. O'Connor seems to suggest our beingness, or soul, is out there and not within us at all. Reality is elusive. Reams of material have been written on the conscious act of painting, yet no one has ever been able to prove where consciousness really exists. O'Connor's paintings are ahistorical in the sense that no image can exist as an entity if the culture that brought it into being does not have a holistic conception of its place in the universe. O'Connor's art is anti-metaphor, a surreal extravaganza of colliding visual anomalies. This is visual reportage in a world of virtual and visual excess.

The diverse elements painted into John O'Connor's airbrushed acrylic paintings often resemble collage. At other times, the trompe l'ceil effects imitate object appropriations. These visual devices cause us to question the way objects and signs are used as metaphors for a reality that devalues the act of painting, rendering it merely an approximate metaphor for representation in whatever form it takes.

The experiential monoreality of today's urban environment includes a forest of signs and symbols as confusing as the myriad of visual tricks and devices brought together in O'Connor's paintings. The various manifestations of image culture that exist as physical entities in today's real environments are no different in their conception than J. M. W. Turner or John Constable's romantic nineteenth-century landscape paintings. Images and signs reaffirm humanity's dominion over a holistic concept of nature and deny any direct connection between the two. This is a mindset that O'Connor's unusual brand of art challenges. By juxtaposing image fragments, as they might be used in advertising, product packaging, or street signs, he reverses the effect. Instead of looking into these works, we read them as collective representations and are made aware of how chaotic image metaphors have become. The mimetic language of painting often relies on our reading of various abstract, representational, or conceptual elements. Few artists address the dilemma of illusionistic representation as a stereotype—where imagery serves to reaffirm the ingrained historical and cultural assumptions inherent to representation—as O'Connor does.

In *2 RD for the Muse* (1988), what looks like a torn fragment of a Diebenkorn-esque landscape affixed to a blackboard background is, in fact, a painterly fabrication incorporated into the overall composition. The formulation of the piece is pure Pop Art, but the configuration is an informational mirror of O'Connor's reflections on object appropriation in Pop Art. The artwork becomes a refractive planar surface prism of representation—where the objects, symbols, and abstract and figurative stereotypes are entirely self-construed. O'Connor's paintings simulate these effects, questioning the dichotomies lying beneath any discourse on art and objecthood. In *Mozart* (1989), gestural arcs, musical bar lines, and stenciled letters further the sense that representation cannot, ultimately, be measured or quantified. O'Connor fills the Blackboard Series with humorous sleights of the eye. As such, any process of representation is seen to hinge its meaning on a visual language that embodies a sense of reality through the act of representation. The pointed image—be it figurative, gestural abstraction, or comprised of image fragments—seems no different in its cultural relativism from any mass produced object or symbol per se. *Blackboard Jungle II* (1986) achieves this effect by painting a realistic-looking piece of red chalk and yellow paper onto an ethereal background of glyphic-and-linear painted fragments that appear to have been partially erased. Using the blackboard as a metaphor for the act of pointing, O'Connor subverts the Pop Art paradigm of commercial object and image appropriation. Here is a "real" object—the blackboard as cultural artifact—that is merely a representation of itself, onto which diagrammatic, graphic, mathematical, notational words and symbols are painted. The imagery is ambiguous and suggests a cyclical, temporal illusion that parallels the way we conceive of imagery.

John A. O'Connor

Critical Writings

JOHN O'CONNOR'S 2005 RETROSPECTIVE by William Zimmer

The late William Zimmer, an art critic for the New York Times, New York City, wrote this review in 2005.

More than most artists John O'Connor is comfortable with contradiction. It's the dynamic of his career. Some of his major paintings are exemplary specimens of trompe l'oeil that required the discipline and attentiveness of a monk copying a manuscript. Narrowness is far from all, however. For example, as a teacher he introduced the first courses in performance art in an American college.

He recently had a full retrospective of his career at two venues in Gainesville, Florida. They brought out major shifts but the road he was on was far from bumpy. There's a logic to O'Connor's moves, much of it based on the simple facts of his life. Early paintings influenced by the renown Bay Area Figurative Movement, whose major artists he knew, including Richard Diebenkorn and Paul Wonner, vividly portray a fine domestic. Paintings feature his wife and young son and also chronicle the rock vibrant music scene that helped make San Francisco a radical culture capital in the 1960s.

But O'Connor has never been one to slavishly follow a major style, and he found it hard to resist the influence of William T. Wiley who was teaching at the University of California at Davis with O'Connor. It is perhaps due to Wiley and his sense of the absurd that has been likened to that of a Zen master. O'Connor's keen observation and that skill came to the fore in a kind of absurd way in the trompe l'oeil paintings that followed. The new focus of O'Connor's paintings became the sky. To be able to imitate the stuff of life in a painting, like 19th century painters such as Harnett and Peto did, is a kind of feat. In their manner, O'Connor could make it look like a real piece of cellophane tape was holding down the objects, admission tickets and crumpled receipts from daily life which he copied, making them look astonishingly real.

The next enthusiasm is widely considered to have engendered O'Connor's most important work, the *Blackboards*, which began in the 1980s. In a way they are directly related to the trompe l'oeil paintings; both feature flat surfaces covered with information, momentous or not. But the power of trompe l'oeil is that it presents its ephemera as lasting for eternity, while blackboards are erased leaving palimpsests. Such traces of time keep the paintings fluid. They can hold any kind of content even the absurd kind, as they implicitly state that they are records of the transient nature of thought and ideas.

O'Connor rightly sees Jasper Johns as the immediate source of the Blackboards. Early on, Johns postulated a blackboard when he created his mutable numbers and letters. He has always favored gray, which hints at gravity and deep thought, even though what may appear is finally incomprehensible Dada. O'Connor also makes great use of the stencil, which is practically a Johns trademark. Stenciled writing signals something profound and lasting. Whatever O'Connor's myriad influences, he openly acknowledges them, but he also digests them, along with what has been imparted over the years, to create an art that is fully his own.

The most recent paintings have ascended into grandness. First of all they are very large and polyptychs have appeared. If rock and roll was the impulse for some of the 60s paintings, Opera is now. Mozart's "Idomeneo" was summoned up in a large black painting, and in 2003 O'Connor paid lavish homage to Strauss's "Arabella." Butterflies have gotten their majestic due on a large canvas replete with them. Although they might resemble pinned-down specimens, the butterflies might be a symbol of O'Connor's mutableness, and above all, freedom.

Exhibition Fact Sheet

John A. O'Connor

Artist and art professor, John A. O'Connor, characterizes his series, *White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism* as “a history of American hypocrisy.” Using the image of the slate as a consistent base, *White Lies Matter* ranges across historical and contemporary America, touching down at flash-points of inequality, misunderstanding, and conflict. From the gradual decay of national institutions to more immediate political crises, O'Connor’s project traverses a list of illegalities and cover-ups, oppressions and suppressions, tracing links between individuals and institutions in positions of influence. It begins with Christopher Columbus and the First Thanksgiving—mythologies that crumble very easily by now—and moves on through the contradictory and belated embedding of religion in the nation’s founding documents, to the calamitous installation of Donald Trump as its 45th president. *White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism* reveals the deceptions, lies, and cynicism of America and the “fake news” and “alt-facts” that permeate contemporary society.”

- Michael Wilson

NUMBER OF OBJECTS:	17 works total: 6 “White Lies” prints framed and 11 “Chalkboard” paintings, all ready to hang; 12 books provided for reading room table/set-up, or if computers preferred, the hosting institution will be provided with digital content.
ITEMS FOR SALE:	“White Lies” prints at 21” X 17” and the “White Lies” catalogues are available for sale in the museum gift shop (pricing based on percentage required). John O’Connor is offering to gift a “Chalkboard” painting to the hosting institution for their permanent collection at the conclusion of the tour.
SPACE REQUIREMENTS:	125 running feet approximately.
PARTICIPATION FEE:	Round-trip shipping, wall-to-wall insurance of 50% of retail value, in-transit and on-premises.
INSTALLATION:	Work will be sent ready to hang; standard 2D wall hanging apparatus required.
TRANSPORTATION:	The exhibiting institution will provide all shipping and insurance for the exhibition and cover all related costs. This will include full responsibility for delivery to venue following and return to artist at the conclusion of the exhibition. Work must be fully insured during transport and on premises.
COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT MATERIALS:	Katharine T. Carter & Associates will provide a \$200 credit towards the production of a color announcement card, and museum wall text. All pre-written press materials, to include biographical summary, artist statement, petite essay, press releases, media releases, pitch letters and radio/television spots, to be provided by Katharine T. Carter & Associates.

TERMS:

All publicity releases, invitations/announcements, catalog, exhibition brochure, and other printed materials concerning the exhibition shall carry the following information: "The exhibition was organized through Katharine T. Carter & Associates." Copies of any printed matter relating to the exhibition shall be sent to Katharine T. Carter & Associates at the close of the exhibition. The critics' essay may be quoted provided there is attribution.

CONDITIONS:

1. Exhibiting institution must provide object insurance to cover replacement costs should items be damaged or stolen while on premises. Minimum insurance required: 50% retail value. Should loss, damage or deterioration be noted at the time of delivery of the exhibition, the artist shall be notified immediately. If any damage appears to have taken place during the exhibition, the artist shall be informed immediately.
2. Security: Objects must be maintained in a fireproof building under 24-hour security.
3. All packing and unpacking instructions sent by (artist) shall be followed explicitly by competent packers. Each object shall be handled with special care at all times to ensure against damage or deterioration.
4. As stated above (see space requirements), the number of works to be exhibited can be dictated by the space and needs of the exhibiting institution.
5. Exhibitors may permit photographs of the exhibition and its contents for routine publicity and educational purposes only. Exceptions may be made pending discussion with the artist.

CANCELLATION:

Any cancellation of this exhibition by the hosting institution, not caused by the actions of the artist, shall entitle Katharine T. Carter and Associates to an award of liquidated damages of \$3750.00. The hosting institution further agrees that any suit brought to recover said damages may only be brought in Columbia County, New York.

Contact and additional information:

Katharine T. Carter
Katharine T. Carter & Associates
518-758-8130
fax 518-758-8133
ktc@ktcassoc.com

P. O. Box 609
Kinderhook, NY
12106-0609



For exhibition inquiries contact Katharine T. Carter & Associates

Email: ktc@ktcassoc.com

Phone: 518-758-8130

Fax: 518-758-8133

Mailing Address:

**Post Office Box 609
Kinderhook, NY 12106-0609**

Website: <http://www.ktcassoc.com>