

In the Studio with Danni O'Brien

A conversation between Hannah Barco, Associate Curator at Tephra ICA, and artist Danni O'Brien

HB: Your titles are so evocative and playful. Can you walk us through one or two works from the exhibition and share either how you arrived at the work's title or how you see the title participating in our experience of the piece?

DO: My practice is riddled with play and humor. I employ humor at almost every step of my studio practice – initially by wedging together disparate, identifiable objects and asking them to misbehave in egregious ways, up through the final step, titling the work. The embedded humor in my titling system is meant to contextualize, demystify, and make the works more accessible.

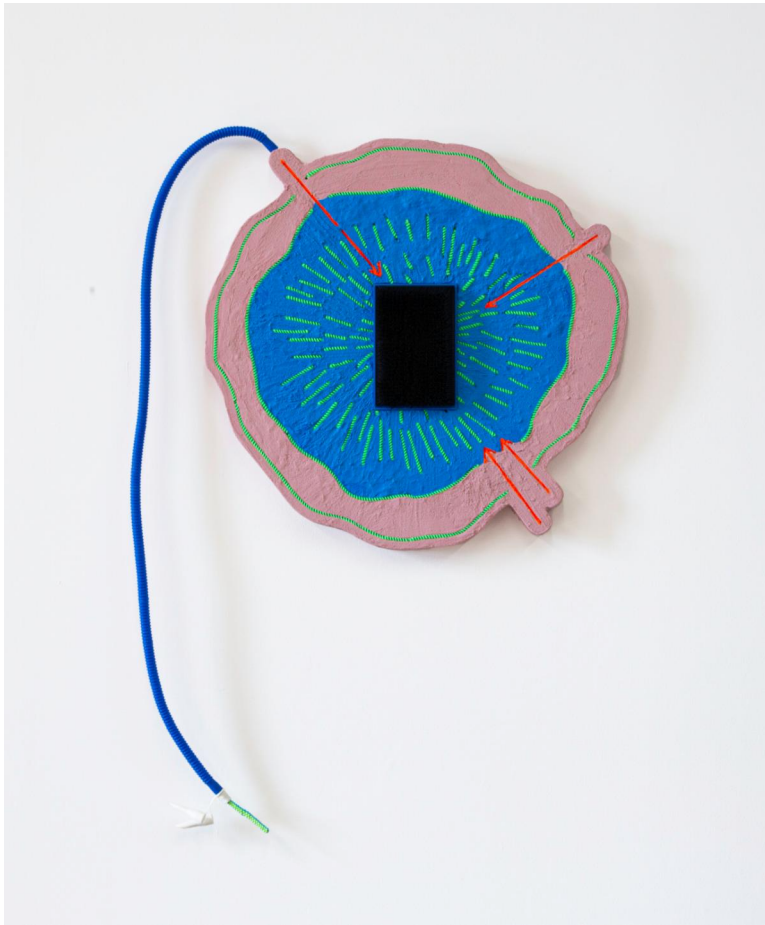
One of my tricks for overcoming getting stuck in the studio is to write poems to my sculptures. Often the poetry is sillier and more absurd than the work itself. They describe, interrogate, and anthropomorphize the work all at once. A majority of my titles for work come from reviewing these poems and pulling out specific words and phrases.



Danni O'Brien, *Hot Dog Mitois*, 2021

Two of the most playful titles in this exhibition are *Hot Dog Mitois* and *Stoney Baloney Jewelry Box I & III*. They came about at around the same time, at the very beginning of this ongoing series of tablet-like sculpture reliefs. I was toying with and fine-tuning the surface material I wanted to apply to the works. The batch of paper pulp I mixed up was dyed with a warm pink hue and had flecks of white material and a granular quality that reminded me of sausage meat. Both titles spurred from this association. The central element of the piece titled *Hot Dog*

Mitosis is a suspended dog food bowl designed to help dogs eat more slowly. The diagram is from an outdated science text, calling to mind forms I recall from biology class.



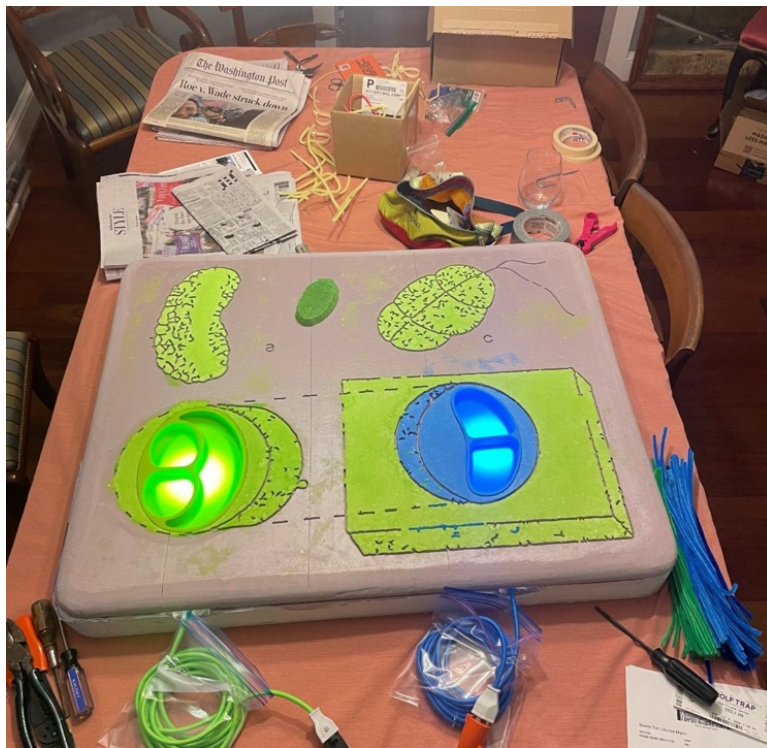
Danni O'Brien, *Tutorial for a Bruise (Homage to Eva Hesse)*, 2021

HB: The artwork *Tutorial for a Bruise (Homage to Eva Hesse)* is striking. Can you describe what you are drawn to in artist Eva Hesse's work and why you were compelled to make this artwork in homage to her? Are there particular aspects of this work that you see specifically in conversation with Hesse's?

DO: Thank you! Eva Hesse is one of my all-time favorite artists. In a world dominated by male sculptors, Eva Hesse presented a scrappy, resilient, and revolutionary practice, concocting an impressive body of work in a relatively short career before her death in 1970 at the age of 34. Her forms are visceral and her use of found objects, transformative. When confronted by her work [*Untitled \(Seven Poles\) \(1970\)*](#) at the Centre Pompidou I wept.

In 1964, Eva Hesse and her husband Tom Doyle were invited to be artists in residence in Kettwig an der Ruhr, Germany. Hesse's studio was located in an abandoned textile factory where she collected material such as

defunct machine parts, tools, and scraps, and began embedding them into her drawings. She described the works she made at this time as ‘...clean and clear – but crazy like machines...’ for example her work [Oomamaboomba \(1965\)](#). My works in *Cross Sections* borrow much of the logic and modes of making that Hesse employed at this time. Pulling materials from disparate sources and layering found diagrams with collected domestic material is not dissimilar to the layerings Hesse was constructing at that time. The series presented in this exhibition are quasi-machine or mechanical like, quasi-bodily, and all together, alien, with a tangible tension between wall-based, flat imagery, and a spatial /sculptural yearning— a statement that could also be made in response to Hesse’s early work. Specifically, *Tutorial for a Bruise (Homage to Eva Hesse)* borrows her repeated form of a tail or protruding object that leaves the primary plane and straddles the line between drawing and sculpture.



Work in Progress View of *Homemade Barriers*

HB: In preparation for this exhibition, we had a lot of conversations about whether or not your artwork is political. And we ended up framing this exhibition, *Cross Sections*, in relationship to current political discourse without claiming any particular political agenda as the content of this work. Can you talk about the ways that objects and ideas find their way into your work physically and carry with them these connections to current political discourse. In particular, I would love for you to speak to the piece *Homemade Barriers*.

DO: The work intentionally resists simple distillation to political stances. What draws my attention and focus is how the mechanisms at work in understanding structures such as our current political system, for example the

gathering and synthesizing of information, and sometimes, misinformation, leads to sites for confusion and conspiracy. I became interested in comparing the piecing together bits of decontextualized information to the assemblage style practice I employ in my work. The forced reunion of once informative diagrams, stripped of their context and therefore educational capacity, with plastic tokens of the domestic landscape, similarly stripped of their typical function, create microcosms for the clashing evident in our current socio political landscape.



Danni O'Brien, *Homemade Barriers*, 2022

In *Homemade Barriers*, it's a little more explicit. The source diagram comes from a book from the 80s enthusiastically titled *Contraception Naturally!*. In its initial context, the diagram is meant to convey the nature of how a homemade sponge may work as a contraceptive. When selecting this diagram for an artwork I was drawn first to its origin, then to the ambiguous undulating shapes with their cartoon pickle-like line quality, as well as the geometric forms teaching about space, reminding me of decontextualized white lines on a geometry class chalkboard. I chose to embed objects such as a soft silicone brush and two silicone baby

food bowls because of their similarities in form to the diagrams, like a 3D incarnation of the drawing itself, and conceptual connections to the diagram.

The work is a raised, rounded, rectangular set of information articulated with paper pulp, pipe cleaners, light, and the suspended found objects. I recently began incorporating light into my work to think about comfort and hope and specifically the nostalgia I have for night lights in my childhood home. While I was finishing this work for the exhibition, the news broke that Roe v. Wade had been overturned. I wanted the light to be more abrasive, loud, and scream, "pay attention!". My aim is that this piece may first appear playful, colorful, and hopeful in its crisp and coordinated cerulean blue and lime, but upon further reading and identification of the source materials, may also serve as a warning (light) of what's at stake.

