

Frank, Peter. "Pat O'Neil at Rosamund Felsen," Art LTD, September 2008

Pat O'Neill knows at least as well as we do that film and, say, wood—the two media he combined repeatedly in the works he showed most recently—are not simply two different materials, but two different experiences, and it's tough to marry or fuse them effectively. What O'Neill challenged himself to do in these works was not simply to make magic between projected imagery and obdurate objects, but to fashion integral phenomena from them.

Ironically, it is the very virtuosity O'Neill brings to the film-art fusion meld that here begged the invidious question of "is it film or is it art?" Exploiting latter-day narrowcast projection devices, O'Neill fits film-beam to crafted surface with a jeweler's precision. Although it shouldn't, in its rarity, that precision calls attention to itself. When someone achieves this level of prestimagination we perform pay rather too much attention to the how of it.

Fortunately, O'Neill's impulse to make enticing things and images—and images as things—lures us away from our obsession with his abilities. His objects are whittled from pieces of tree into whimsical gimcrackery, drawings in space or improbable furniture that play on and pay homage to the corny folksiness of rural artisanship. In this respect, O'Neill's aesthetic maintains the snark-free (but not unknowing) gee-wisdom of California Funk, H.C. Westermann, Red Grooms, and other postwar, para-Pop, proto-lowbrow sculptors. He's as American as popcorn.

And let's not forget how integrally visual, and implicitly sculptural, O'Neill's filmic imagery is. Although his experimental-film fame comes as much from his shaping of time and narrative as from anything else, O'Neill has a knack for rendering time a cinematic irrelevancy. His collage-animations tend not to chart the arch of a story or even of a period of time; they simply allow a visual experience to transform. O'Neill's art may be an art of time, but it is an art not about time but about change, about the potential and actual metamorphosis of what you see before you.

The majority of works in O'Neill's crowded show were recent, and were also film-free. Those "enhanced" with projections attracted the most immediate attention, but ultimately not more respect than the simple carvings and craftings that graced other spaces, not least because those carvings and craftings weren't all that simple. As art, and as craft, O'Neill's filmless sculptures are finally no less compelling than his filmful ones, just different.