

Harvey, Doug. "Moving Pictures: The layered images of Pat O'Neill, L.A. Icon," *L.A. Weekly*, September 10-16, 2004.

Fade in on a close-up of a frantically spinning desk globe, superimposed over a time-lapse landscape of an L.A. hillside — Echo Park, maybe. As the camera pulls back and pans left, the landscape fades out, and we see we're in some kind of old workshop, complete with broken radios and a wood stove. A new landscape — downtown now — fades up and commingles, then what appear to be the translucent silhouettes of two men drinking beer and engaging in an apparently heated discussion, though the soundtrack consists of comical kazoos. In the background, a small neon sign is reflected in a vanity mirror, reading "STUN NUTS," and we realize the two men are actually the same figure, doubled. The entire scene fades except for a window, which shows the rapidly setting sun. The window flips into a high-contrast graphic image, and the camera pans back to a close-up of the "STUN NUTS" sign, and pauses. Between the sign and its reflection is a statuette of a catlike entity. Tiny fireworks go off above its head, and a rectangle of flickering light appears behind it, then begins showing a fragment of a silent-film version of Moses leading his people to the Red Sea. This tableau darkens and is absorbed into the shadows of a new landscape — the salty desiccated rock forms of the Owens Valley. This describes just a couple of minutes from Pat O'Neill's dazzling 1989 experimental documentary, *Water and Power*, winner of a Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, featured in the Whitney Biennial, and now included as a portion of O'Neill's retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

O'Neill's films are first and foremost audio-visual experiences, with only provisional allegiances to linear verbal models like cinema theory or narrative. Even today, when many of the intricate superimpositions he built up frame by frame using an optical printer can be replicated with a few clicks of the mouse (and turn up in debased form in commercials and music videos), his films retain a breathtaking beauty and cognition-jamming novelty. "O'Neill's images," laments film-studies professor Paul Arthur in his essay for the lavish exhibition catalog, "tend to elicit agonizingly detailed accounts of what is happening on the screen at any given moment; how an image first appears then is transformed, rather than what it contributes to our understanding of the world." But it's hard to resist the temptation to simply marvel at the visual complexity and inventiveness of these dreamlike passages, rather than offer up some theoretical interpretation. His layering of images is as accomplished as that of master painters like Robert Rauschenberg, Vernon Fisher or Sigmar Polke. Had he been working in a less ephemeral medium — painting or photography or even installation — he would be an art-world household name.

One of the revelations of SMMOA's "Pat O'Neill: Views From Lookout Mountain" is that the artist's lengthy engagement with film is in fact bracketed by considerable bodies of work in traditional media, and that he was actually a pioneer of the projection installation. Born in Inglewood in 1939, O'Neill gravitated at an early age to custom car culture and the Beat scene in Venice before enrolling at UCLA — first as a design student, but finally graduating with an M.A. from the fine-art department. Although his earliest film works date from this period, O'Neill was also pursuing a number of static visual avenues, including photographs, glass-mounted collages and — toward the end of the decade — gorgeous abstract sculptures like *L'il Neverbetter* (1969–2003) that combined the vocabularies of the lacquer fume-inspired eye candy of *Finish Fetish* with the idiosyncratic cartoonishness of *Funk Art*.

At the same time, O'Neill's reputation as an avant-garde filmmaker was growing. In 1970, he was invited to teach at the newly created CalArts, and his non-film studio work ground to a halt. He lasted five years, just enough to influence a generation of L.A. experimental filmmakers. He quit CalArts in 1975 after establishing his own commercial studio, Lookout Mountain Films, which went on to produce effects for the *Star Wars* movies among others. During this period (apart from working in the Industry, helping run the Oasis film screenings and surviving an aneurysm that obliged him to spend several years re-acquiring the ability to read), he began creating and exhibiting film installations like *Let's Make a Sandwich* (1978), which was seen for only a few days at LACE, and hasn't been re-staged in its intended form until this exhibition. Meanwhile, he began filling sheets of typewriter paper with intricate all-over pencil doodles, a sort of pretending-to-pay-attention-while-Mr.-Lucas-is-talking pastime that continued into the late '90s and eventually led into his second substantial body of non-cinematic artwork — the ink-jet prints that have occupied him for the last five years or so.

In truth, imposing these kinds of timelines on O'Neill's artistic progress is misleading. As with the films, his entire oeuvre has a layered, looping, nonlinear quality that frustrates any attempts at narrative reduction. He's used the McLaren-Brackage-Smith (still fighting it out in avant filmmaker hell as we speak, no doubt) technique of drawing directly onto film stock for most of his career, and his vocabulary of stock ideograms — coils and waves and coronas of energy — has remained consistent. Many of the contemporary iris prints could be stills from his '80s films. Without the context of the film work, O'Neill's sculptures, drawings and prints conjure innumerable (mostly West Coast) art associations: Max Ernst, Bruce Conner, Ed Kienholz, Alexis Smith, Mark Tobey, Lee Mullican & the Dynaton, Wallace Berman, Craig Kauffman, John Baldessari, William Wiley, David Salle and so on. Presenting them, as they are in this exhibition, as aspects of an overarching multimedia vision lends the work further dimension, informing them with the history of experimental cinema — Dziga Vertov, Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Michael Snow, etc., etc. (It would have been interesting to see some of Lookout Mountain's commercial work included to further confuse things, though I'm not sure I'd want to sit through Superman IV — The Quest for Peace).

O'Neill's genius is one of synthesis and brinkmanship. While creating luminous and innovative pastiches that successfully integrate an encyclopedic array of modern visual tropes, he constantly toys with how much narrative and free-floating symbolism are needed to keep the audience hooked — incorporating enough structuralist emphasis to intrigue the intellectual set. His latest feature-length work, *The Decay of Fiction* (2002), is his most accomplished hybrid to date, superimposing intricately choreographed actors going through vague but archetypal film noir routines on top of gorgeous full-color time-lapse footage of the entropy-shredded Ambassador Hotel. But O'Neill's greatest balancing act is a much subtler one, between the different durational modes of viewing still pictures and film. Contemplating paintings requires a willed passivity, while cinema requires the viewer to commit a certain amount of a certain kind of attention. Both have their unique rewards. Andy Warhol and Bruce Conner successfully oscillated between the two. And while there have certainly been previous overlaps — great cinematographers have hidden ravishing images in the most mundane potboilers, and many a picture's worth a thousand words — Pat O'Neill is the only artist I know of whose work hinges on blurring the distinction to the enrichment of both. Move over, Thomas Kinkade, here's this century's Painter of Light.