

Myers, Holly. "O'Neill's layered looks," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2004.

Pat O'Neill's 2002 film "The Decay of Fiction" - the most recent of 20 films included in a terrific retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum of Art - begins in a small, empty room that appears to have been long abandoned. A thin white curtain flutters in the breeze of an open window and, in the course of only a minute or two, a sunbeam slides across the littered floor, accentuating the passage of time.

An inter-title identifies the room as belonging to the Ambassador Hotel, the Wilshire Boulevard landmark that's been boarded up for 15 years, suspended in bureaucratic purgatory since acquisition by the L.A. United School District.

As O'Neill's smooth, melancholy camera explores the remains of this grand institution, ghosts begin to emerge: translucent black-and-white figures dressed in the fashion of classic Hollywood noir. A cocktail waitress, two detectives, a starlet, a reporter - they shed fragments of conversation as they pass, tracing loose narratives through the faded corridors and ballrooms as vaguely familiar melodies float in and out of earshot.

The film, which is 74 minutes long and took more than a decade to produce, is O'Neill's first foray into scripted narrative and among the most accessible of the films included in the show. There are moments, as with most contemporary imitations of noir, when the acting feels self-conscious, strained or a little corny, but the overall effect is mesmerizing and a fitting tribute to the place and the facet of L.A. history it has come to represent.

I toured the Ambassador myself a few years ago, and my own experience of the place was uncannily similar to the film, imagined narratives and all. Walking past the broad, paint-chipped pool, I also imagined leggy women in broad straw hats with tropical drinks and magazines. Traversing the scarlet carpet of the Coconut Grove, I saw the same glamorous couples laughing and sipping martinis.

This layering of external and internal perception - the compiling of the tangible, the impressionistic, the intellectual and the imaginative, all on the same picture plane, often with a layer of sound overtop - is among the more distinctive and profound qualities running through O'Neill's remarkable *oeuvre*, in these films (his best-known works) as well as the photographs, collages, digital prints, drawings and sculptures that make up the rest of the exhibition.

"The Decay of Fiction" limits itself primarily to two layers: the physical space of the hotel and the narrative space of the characters wandering through it, with occasional eruptions of other images here and there along the way. (A DVD-ROM version of the work, made in collaboration with USC's Labyrinth Project, includes a layer of historical information and commentary.) More dense films such as "Water and Power" (1989) and the breathtaking "Trouble in the Image" (1996), however, compile dozens.

There are landscapes shots, urban shots, shots with actors, classic film clips, fragments of old educational films, figurative and abstract drawings on the film stock itself, still drawings and animated drawings, original music, film music, atmospheric sound and fragments of movie dialogue - all jostling together in much the way that images, sounds, smells, words, numbers, memories and fantasies jostle together in the human brain at any given moment.

On film, each of these layers is distinct and luminous. Made with an optical printer and a truly mystifying variety of techniques (the fact that O'Neill has run a commercial special-effects studio on the side for much of his career gives some idea of the sophistication), the works have an exquisite sense of depth and a lush quantity lacking in the more common video art of today.

Similar qualities characterize O'Neil's early photographs and collages, which are modest in size and often very spare. One of the most evocative is simply a found photograph - an old sepia-toned print made in an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century portrait studio - with a hole roughly the size of a human figure carefully torn out of the center.

Most of these early works feel like sketches in which we find O'Neill exploring surfaces and textures and experimenting with qualities that will come to define later work: the interplay of light and shadow, the tension between presence and absence or surface and depth. The layering is delicate and precise, yet poetic. One of the most beautiful is a virtually abstract black-and-white photograph from the early '60s that overlays two contrasting textures: a piece of floral upholstery – perhaps a cushion or part of a suitcase – and a glossy gray slab of what looks like shale.

In the 1990s, O'Neill began making large-scale digital collages and the shift illustrates many of the advantages and the limitations of digital media. Viewed at close range, these prints lack the fine quality of photographic work: the layers are compressed, the surfaces flat, and lusterless. The relative ease of their construction leaves them feeling less labored and therefore less intense than many of the other works. It would be easy, one senses, for O'Neill to whip out a dozen of these a day, all more or less equally appealing.

That said, they are appealing works: big, flashy, spontaneous and often enchantingly peculiar. Most have the same dense, frenetic tone as the films – they could be stills – but also in their stillness allow for a more sustained, thorough contemplation.

Born in Inglewood, educated at UCLA, onetime faculty member at CalArts, a founding father of the avant-garde film scene and occasional player in the mainstream one, O'Neill is a quintessential L.A. artist. The city itself is one of the principal subjects and I can think of few – Ed Ruscha, Joan Didion and Raymond Chandler come to mind – who get it quite so right. It's not only that the city appears in so many of his works but that the works embody its spirit and texture: its energy, its density, its breadth and depth. Like the city, the work reveals itself in layers. It may take time – indeed, with more than a hundred works and nearly six hours of film footage, this exhibition is downright overwhelming – but it's a rich and thoroughly rewarding process.