

Singerman, Howard. "The Persistence of Pat O'Neill." *Pat O'Neill: Views From the Lookout Mountain*. Ed. Stephanie Emerson. Germany: Steidl, 2004. 114-125.

Pat O'Neill has been an internationally known filmmaker since the 1970s, perhaps even since the late 1960s: his *7362* was included in the prestigious Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1968 and *Runs Good* took first prize there in 1971. He screened films at the Millennium Film Workshop in New York in the early 1970s and had his first retrospective in New York at the FilmForum in 1978. When I mentioned to artists I knew in Los Angeles that I was working on an essay about O'Neill, most of them recognized the name immediately. Some had been his students or acquaintances at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he taught in the film program from 1970 to 1976. Many had seen his films, or, if they were older, had seen him at Oasis screenings at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. When I mentioned my essay on O'Neill to a couple of longtime Los Angeles art dealers, however, they couldn't place the name. While there was, as I recall, a fairly fluid and open relationship between the art world of studio artists and galleries and the community of independent filmmakers in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s, those worlds were not coterminous, and the art world may well have thought of independent film as a subsidiary, or a particular subculture. Though O'Neill has envisioned certain of his films as installations and as multiple or continuous screenings, part of the attraction of film to him very early on was that it could not be owned, that is was "only available for the brief moments when it was on the screen."¹

Even those artists who recognized O'Neill's name and his achievement were surprised about the aspect of his work I was trying to assay. None knew about his "studio practice," although that might not be quite the right phrase for the photographs, photomontages, collages, and digital prints he has made for the past three decades: O'Neill hasn't had a traditional artist's studio since 1970. Truth be told, I didn't know until recently that O'Neill has made static works since the early sixties and has an exhibition record that begins shortly after his graduation from the masters program in art at UCLA in 1964. He showed photographs and assemblage early on, had a one-person exhibition of sculpture at Orlando Gallery in Encino in 1967, and was included in a number of group exhibitions at the Esther Robles Gallery on La Cienega between 1967 and 1970, as well as Fidel Danieli's 1968 survey "Plastics: L.A." at Cal State L.A. and Gerald Nordland's "A Plastic Presence," which opened at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970. I saw my first of O'Neill's static works in person just this fall in the foyer of his house in Pasadena; entitled *Virginia Red* (see page 00), it dates from 1969. Made of polyester laminate on a wood armature and finished in lacquer, the work's materials recall La Cienega Boulevard and the L.A. Finish Fetish, but O'Neill cautions that "compared with the perfection of John McCracken's polyester laminate pieces of Craig Kauffman's vacuum-formed shapes, my work is much cruder, subject to inadvertencies, and at the same time almost representational, in an odd way." Born and raised in Los Angeles, O'Neill shares the car culture that helped to form the palette and material and technological choices—and perhaps the sensibility—of a number of the L.A. plastics artists; he built his own car when he was in high school, he wanted to go to Art Center in automobile design, and took his B.A. at UCLA in product design. A tilting, gently ridged, floor-bound mound, *Virginia Red* is built out of that knowledge, but it is more direct, more process oriented, or at least more "handmade" than a McCracken or a Kauffman. Rather than starting with a given geometry or a readily graspable, designed and profiled form like Kauffman's "thermometers," O'Neill addressed the mold sculpturally, carving away at the plaster with a model-maker's sweep. Looking back, he compares his use of the mold-makers "sweep" with the motion-controlled arc of a camera pan: "Both are the result of rotation about a center. The camera's lens absorbs some version of the world surrounding it, while the sweep lays a shape into plaster which becomes a surface."

O'Neill's sixties sculpture tends toward the biomorphic and eccentric rather than the geometric, toward the assembled or multipartite rather than the unitary, and toward San Francisco or Chicago rather than the L.A. with which we've become familiar. Reviewing Danieli's "Plastics" show in *Artforum*, Jane Livingston singled out O'Neill to remark on the "unfortunate tendency in L.A. artists working in a latter-day Surrealist and/or Pop vein to imitate earlier styles, particularly in San Francisco and, perhaps, Chicago."² She describes the piece that drew her attention, *Safer than Springtime*, as "comprised of three discrete shapes—a lumpy green one, shaped like a pickle, below it a shiny orangeish drum and, spreading over the floor like a pool of blood, a red component." Livingston's geography is essentially correct; the green pickle form rubbed up against the orange drum, is obviously, even adolescently phallic, and the sculpture's slick, plasticized funk sexuality is closer to

Jeremy Anderson or Robert Hudson than to Kauffman or McCracken. While O'Neill does speak of Kauffman as an influence, he points not to any specific sculpture, but to an early film, *7362*, and to its flattened symmetry. O'Neill's list of early influences also includes Bruce Conner, "both as an assemblage artist and also a filmmaker"—he saw Conner's *A Movie* shortly after it was completed at the Coronet Theater, one of the few L.A. venues for experimental cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s—and H.C. Westerman, whose work he first saw at Dilexi Gallery in 1962. Most of O'Neill's mid-sixties sculptures were pedestal top assemblages and in their finish and their trophy verticality, works like *Carved Clouds* and *War Toy* are closer to Westerman than to either Conner or the L.A. plastics artists. O'Neill began to make assemblages while he was still in high school in the early 1960s, and like any number of sculptors in the fifties and sixties his was a scavenger's aesthetic: "My work at the time involved the inclusion of found, and altered objects, mostly cast iron, aluminum, and zinc consumer product parts from the thirties and forties. These were attached together to form alternative industrial configurations." The scene, and one could say the sensibility, of that work is visible as well in his early photographs. The Atlantic Auto Parts series is set in a scrap yard; in it the decaying bodies of 1930s and 1940s automobiles take on the formal gravity of a Henry Moore or the sexualized anthropomorphism of Surrealism. O'Neill's scavenging has also marked his filmmaking, not only in his use of found footage, but also in his experimental, handmade methods of processing and shooting, in his war surplus film stock and jury-rigged cameras and printers.

Across the 1960s and into the 1970s, O'Neill's visual repertoire included the highly finished pop surrealism and cartoonish sexuality of car and comic subculture; in a review of his 1967 one-person exhibition at Orlando Gallery, William Wilson referred to his sculpture as "Rococo Funk," and the work of a "mad genius hot-rod maker."³ That description could easily fit the work of other artists, well outside the art world, he was looking at at the time. O'Neill encountered the work of car and motorcycle designer Von Dutch while still in high school and lists the *Zap* comics illustrators Victor Moscoso and Robert Williams as sources as well. Moscoso's metamorphosing Mr. Peanut might be there in the highly finished biology of *L'il Neverbetter* (see page 00). Cast in polyester laminate in sheet acrylic molds in 1969, *L'il Neverbetter* is a sleek, thirty-two-inch long, tri-segmented form, like the body of an ant. O'Neill initially envisioned it as a "free-floating object," one of a series of handheld sculptures, but it turned out too big to be held comfortably and was shelved. The sharp, jagged ended, but equally sleek yellow plastic rods that pierce the body now are a 2003 addition, as is the flattened bottom that allows it to lay flat on the floor, to evoke landscape as well as body. In its early plan as well as in its recent recasting, *L'il Neverbetter* is "full of unprepossessing associative overtones," to borrow Livingston's language. The references to sexual forms or to sexual violence and penetration seem obvious and formalized in a way that very much owes to surrealism after Pop—to "eccentric abstraction" as Lucy Lippard put it.

Speaking in an interview with David James about the experiences that were important for him as an artist and filmmaker early on, O'Neill recounted how, as a freshman at UCLA, he found finding Salvador Dalí's *Persistence of Memory* in the pages of a *Life* magazine plucked at random from the shelves in the library stacks.. He was struck not just by the work but by a recognition, the realization that he had seen it and that same issue of *Life* in his parents' house as a four-year-old child. O'Neill tells the story in part to suggest his hands-on autodidacticism, or, perhaps, the peculiarity of his formation—"there was no art in my parents' house; there was nobody interested in art or talking about it"—and in part to situate his development away from the school style of UCLA's art department, which favored a figurative abstraction after Matisse: "I tended to be involved with Surrealism and my instructors were appalled."⁴ One can understand why; from their point of view, Dalí's version of Surrealism represented middle-brow taste at best, and its appearance in *Life* in 1943 or 1944 would have been proof of the surrender of Surrealism to popular culture early on. Perhaps O'Neill's attraction to pictorial Surrealism and to Dalí in particular lay in its effect (and not just on his teachers) His *deja-vu* "flash" recalls precisely the displaced temporality of Surrealism itself, the "blasting out of childhood experience" that Adorno makes the central to surrealist practice, or even to what Dalí pictured, Freud's *nachtraglichkeit*, the persistence of memory. That experience requires an already seen, already used, even worn-out image and, perhaps, the kind of laminated, lacquered finish that Dalí shares with photography and with the glossy, photomechanical surface of *Life*. Of all images, the photographic one "wears out most quickly," says Hubert Damisch. "[Photography is] the capturing and restoration of an image already worn beyond repair."⁵

The oldest works in this exhibition are neither films nor sculptures, but photographs made while O'Neill was still a design student at UCLA in 1961 and 1962, taken in and around Venice and what is now Marina del Rey; what they record are worn out or scarred surfaces. "The first shooting I did was in Venice

working with the debris of oil wells and the oil industry—the way the tar merged with the sand and the shapes that it made. I was working close up at the time shooting things maybe two feet away or so. I regret that I didn't step back and document the area I was working in." As O'Neill's recollection suggests, the impulse behind those early photographs was not documentary but formal and symbolic; he remembers, in particular, reading Minor White on Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, on the possibility that photography could be "metaphorical right from the beginning." The close-up view tends not only to abstract the image, to separate it from recognition, but also to produce the photograph as a flat surface. The act of turning the camera toward the ground or focusing it on a wall closes off deep space and situates the image at and as the surface. O'Neill's early photos deny the open, perspectival space of the "world viewed," Stanley Cavell's description of photography's usual scene, its automatic cut in the continuous space of the world. They look instead like, and to, abstract paintings, bordered areas of tone and texture that take their frames not as a cut in the world but as a formal limit. O'Neill took his cues and the photographs' flattened focus from photographers like White, Frederick Sommer, and Clarence Laughlin, but his vision is not as lyrical or as rustic as White's nor as gothic as Laughlin's. In its urbanism, it is closer in the early photographs to Aaron Siskind's New York School, but L.A. in the early sixties wasn't as formal a setting, and O'Neill was already interested in its popular, sun-flattened projection of surrealist desire. The walls O'Neill records in *Untitled (25er)* (1965) (see page 00) or *See the Native Girls* (1963) (see page 00) are sign-painted and graffitied, already caught up in L.A.'s peculiar conjunction of sexuality, stilled motion, and the worn-out new.

O'Neill has made photographs throughout his four-decade career, not necessarily and not often as finished works but as visual studies; they appear as stills and backdrops in a number of the films, and as a central component, a setting, for many of the recent digital prints. He describes the process this way: "I photograph irregularly, usually taking several rolls in the course of a week and then none for months. I rarely make pictures with a particular final result in mind, but rather take pictures that are incomplete in themselves, that ask to be altered in some way. After some years of doing this, a considerable library has accumulated." Despite his regret that he didn't step back or look up in those early Venice photographs, his distance, even in his most recent photographs, is formal and compositional rather than perspectival or documentary. His photographs at the Ambassador Hotel, taken during the making of *The Decay of Fiction*, look down on its terraces and patios from above or, in *Untitled (Phone Boxes)* (1993) (see page 00), use its architectural grid to organize and flatten his composition. *Patty (Car with Graffiti)* (1990) (see page 00), returns to the scene, or at least the scenario, of *25er*. In the earlier, black-and-white image, the top half of a late model car is situated parallel to the picture plane and to a wall pentimentoed with an old advertisement for a soda fountain, part visible through whitewash, part still strong black silhouette. In the later image the camera looks down rather than head on: the car in the lower third of the picture is seen almost in full but it is far from whole. Instead it is wrecked and blown open and covered with graffiti that spills across its doors and hood onto the wall that rises behind it. O'Neill hasn't become a documentarian, but something like a history is told in the difference between the two images, by a kind of montage, or conversation.

As O'Neill says, "there is a dialogue between me at 64 and me at 24." Works like *L'il Neverbetter* or the Venice series might seem some distance from the visual and thematic sophistication of the recent films like *The Decay of Fiction* (see pages 00) or *Water and Power* (see pages 00), but there are links and visual traces of the early works in the later ones. In some cases, the dialogue O'Neill speaks of has been quite direct and physical: *Virginia Red* and *L'il Neverbetter* are both dated 1969–2003, and both bear the marks of their reencounter. O'Neill cut away the flat bottom of the piece now called *Virginia Red* and destroyed its axial symmetry; he made its stance less solid and its identity as well. Originally untitled, it was named *Untitled (Mound)* when O'Neill returned to it, and it was briefly retitled *Sinking Monument ToÉ* before it received its current name. The most obvious scars from O'Neill's return to the work are those on its sanded away surface, which was initially striped in blue, yellow, and tangerine, a color scheme that once again suggests L.A. in the 1960s and that gave the piece, when he returned to it, a "time-capsule quality." That is, it marked for him a relationship he once had to a particular historical moment, now seen in connection to an oeuvre that has continued in other directions. O'Neill sanded *Virginia Red's* lacquer finish back along the ridges to reveal a kind of archaeology of its painting and of his working methods. "Working on cars, I was interested in the way sanding revealed successive coats of paint, and the way a variable in the underlying surface would appear as a contour map rendered in rings or stripes of color. Depending on how the paint is applied and abraded, a range of phenomena appear and can be controlled to a degree. Thus a painted surface can be curiously atmospheric, even photographic, in its gradations and interruptions." The space O'Neill has opened up in *Virginia Red* is not an

interior or a depth, but a layering of surfaces, like those of automobile paint or of emulsion on film, or of strips of film through the optical printer, where images embed themselves in the spaces and contours of open surfaces left in others. As a number of critics have pointed out, the title of O'Neill's film *Let's Make a Sandwich* refers not only to one of the pieces of found footage that make up the film, but to the process of its making, to the layers and sandwiching of the image. That parallel physical surface and his artisanal production of it might link all of O'Neill's work across media and position it as well toward the graphic—the flattening contour line of the cut out—and to collage, both in its cut and its combination as its dominant term.

I am far from the first to situate O'Neill's sensibility around the surface and its craft. There has been a tendency for those who write about art, at least since the 1960s, to separate the handmade from the crafted. The handmade has come to describe the often deliberately unskilled, ersatz making of a kind of open, needy work. Skilled craft work, in contrast, is finished, closed off to the viewer and seen only be from the outside. O'Neill is familiar with that criticism, which appears even in very supportive reviews: discussing *The Decay of Fiction* in the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman wrote that, "like all of O'Neill's films, it's magically accomplished. (Too much so, perhaps: The muscular craft sometimes polishes the emotional content to a very fine sheen.)"⁶ Writing on *Saugus Series* (see page 00) a decade earlier, Grahame Weinbren and Christine Noll Brinckmann argued against the already common criticism that O'Neill's "films consist only of their surface; that they are 'visual' films," even as they acknowledged that he "presents a surface that is deceptively smooth, often conventionally beautiful (in that its subject is beautiful) and of incomparable cinematic technique."⁷ Their argument was that O'Neill's flattened surfaces were active and intentional productions, that surfaceness as such has to be represented or achieved, even represented. They quote Stanley Cavell, who, writing on modernist painting at about the same moment that O'Neill was its pupil, asserted, "phenomenologically the idea of flatness is either an idea of transparency or outline." Weinbren and Brinckmann add the category of the silhouette, or they take it as one of the implications of Cavell's argument; it is the filled-in area of the outline. Together these are the terms of collage: cutting out, filling in, seeing through, particularly the sense of seeing through a surface, an aperture, or a screen. And as O'Neill points out, they are there as well in the outlined, abraded surfaces that run along the ridges of *Virginia Red*.

O'Neill stopped making sculpture in 1970 when he began to teach at Cal Arts and gave up the studio he shared with Carl Cheng. Two small photomontages produced in 1974, *Untitled (Marble)* (see page 00) and *Untitled (Fish)* (see page 00), seem some distance from the concerns and the vocabulary—or at least the scale and physicality—of those earlier works. But O'Neill talks about the way the combined images work within the surface as though he was talking about assemblage, assessing their allusionistic effects as if they had physical weight. The montages, in retrospect, resemble the sculptures in the "way that the parts tended to talk to one another. Each one tended to erase the dominance of the other, in the sense that you had to hold more than one thing in your mind at a time." The pictures are wet composites, made in the darkroom; the source images are separate negatives exposed onto a single photographic single surface, and O'Neill links his experiments with the process to the attractions of late-Surrealist photography, to Frederick Sommer's superimpositions and Jerry Uelsmann's multiple composites. But in the combination of images on the surface and the process of weighing and holding them there, there is also a clear link to the films O'Neill had begun to make in the early 1960s and his approach to making them. The picture's compositions are gridded and formalized; the aquarium display that fills in over a used-car lot and the classical statuary on the British Museum wall that rises above an old, inverted car hood in the Mexican desert, flatten the space of the photographs and push it horizontally as though across a screen. The images fill the rectangle the way film does and, at least in *Untitled (Fish)*, one could take the line-up of cars and spectators below an expansive screen as a figure for film O'Neill has remarked that the influence runs both ways: his film work is indebted to his still photography. Since at least *Runs Good* (see page 00) in 1970, he has assembled found, usually narrative, and certainly "moving picture," footage, but he most often situates those filmed movements within a still frame, as an inset or episode. "My interest in the relationship between elements in static shots has led me to make films that either have no cuts, or that have pauses between shots"—as though each shot sets up another picture and announces another relationship.

Perhaps the early question for O'Neill in both film and photography was how to hold two images together. It began as a literal or experiential question. In 1963, O'Neill and his collaborator, fellow UCLA student Bob Abel, wanted to shoot their first film, *By the Sea* (see page 00), on a high-contrast stock that would generalize and flatten the forms, an effect O'Neill had already come to in his still photography; something equivalent to the graphic flatness and emotional blankness of *Fun* (see page 00), a picture taken that same year in an abandoned amusement part in San Francisco. The stock they found was a relatively obscure 35mm version

of a graphic design sheet film that O'Neill and Abel slit into 16mm and sprocketed; their initial contact printer was equally jerry-rigged, a Bolex running two strips of film and a light bulb. "I could see that if you had a device to hold an image steady in the gate the world would be wide open to you, you could do film work or single images in the same format." That world would be constructed and composited rather than viewed straight on.

The device existed, of course, and O'Neill began to work with an optical printer on his own films work shortly thereafter; the machinery became his livelihood by the mid-1970s and he began to produce still images that way as well. "I would be running film for a project of my own or for someone else and I would take a little bit of the leader at the end and do a composition spontaneously on the printer and some of those turned out to be some of those composites that I did." The composited images of the 1980s, works like *Punch Me* (1984) (see page 00), or *Coil, Seated* (1985) (see page 00), are not exactly film stills, but, as the framing and sprocketing along their edges suggest, they are produced on motion picture stock and begin as single film frames. O'Neill collected passing, almost inadvertent, visual material—fragments of advertising, commercial paint chips, doodles on napkins, and the like—and photographed them, one frame at a time, on a lightbox on an animation stand. These images and shapes were then used to mask and divide the image on a frame that contained still other photographic imagery. "I was never able to see a composition until it was completed in its entirety, and every variable I was using would have to be tested as to exposure and color balance in advance." *Punch Me* is, O'Neill suggests, an essay on the surface: "essentially it's four quadrants that are each made out of the same sort of ingredients, which are found diagrams and some tape and some spontaneous paint application that was made into a xerox and then copied. So everything that's added is referring to the surface: it's flat stuff."

The lightbox on which *Punch Me* was photographed, and the flatness it asserted, are thematized by the heavy frames and glass of a series of collages O'Neill produced from the mid-1970s to early 1980s. Made of ripped down 2 x 4s, a cut more closely linked to construction rather than to fine-art frames, these frames suggest quite literal windows, and were originally intended to act that way; O'Neill planned to exhibit them in front of lightboxes or in openings in the gallery wall. The collages are not matted or backed, but suspended, sandwiched between two panes of glass, a reference not only to windows but to the "gate" of a camera or projector or an optical printer, open to light on either side. Where O'Neill's film work often suggests the influence and presence of still photography, these heavily framed collages seem the inverse, an attempt to put film at the center of a studio practice in a way that would reference both the artisanal making of the sculpture and the hand processing of film. Here film sets the questions and some of what is sandwiched between the panes of glass, particularly in the earlier pieces such as *Untitled (Head/Tail Strips)* (1974) (see page 00) and *Untitled (Ruled/Scratched)* (1975) (see page 00) is film itself. In *Head/Tail Strips* O'Neill presents a different sort of found footage; film that lies, so to speak, outside the work, or at least outside the process of recording and of the lens: "In the course of doing commercial film work I handled hundreds of rolls a month and sometimes when I was throwing them out I would break off the leaders because I found them intriguing in the fact that they were never the same twice. Various kinds of odd color tints got into them—it's accidental light that gets on the film in the lab—and occasionally there would be a little bit of picture somewhere." O'Neill notes that in the 1960s or early 1970s, both Austrian experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka and the late New York filmmaker Paul Sharits exhibited film as a sculptural object (or in the case of Sharits's "Frozen Film Frames," sandwiched in Plexiglas, one could argue, as painting) but each to a different end. Kubelka pinned entire 35mm films to the museum or gallery wall, or across its windows as a way to insist on their materiality and his systemic, linear image production. Kubelka's description of "film [as] a transparent sculpture," seems to fit O'Neill's framed and mounted leader, but the kind of sculpture it is might be *objet trouvé*: film as found object. They are not about the film as a single object or system so much as they are about film as a surface and as an incident or moment.

The paper works sandwiched between glass—*Untitled (Camera)*, *Untitled (China/Food)*, *Untitled (Cathedral)* (see pages 00), all from the early 1980s—are more recognizably collages, *papier collés*. But they appear here under the conditions of film, again not just under glass, but between glass, and, in the case of *Untitled (Torn Portrait)* (see page 00), open like film in the projector or the optical printer to both sides. Even those works that aren't so obviously or physical open and, in that sense, transparent, have no ground. Unlike collages built up on board or a rectilinear paper ground, there is no support, no overall field to contain them or to stop them from the back. They are amalgamations of two or three things that joint—a rococo church, a encyclopedia illustration or an oak leaf, and a image of the demolition of the old Los Angeles Children's Hospital in *Cathedral*; a Spam dinner and a sheet from a Chinese medical atlas in *China/Food*. Floated and

joined in the glass, they become overall sculptural shapes or exterior forms as well as juxtaposed images. Without the ground, the sandwiching and layering is even more obvious, more physical, as is the flatness of the material, once again: “everything that’s added is referring to the surface: it’s flat stuff.”

Writing in 1978 on the composition of O’Neill’s film space in the *Saugus Series*, Weinbren argued that “one cannot help reading the objects in [O’Neill’s] image to be situated in spatial relations to the plane of the image that is supposedly flat and non-illusionistic.”⁸ The rudimentary shape at the center of *Camera*, a 1983 collage, first appears in the *Saugus Series* and it acts, as Weinbren suggests, as an ambiguous marker of space in relation to the flattened, layered surface. The simple, graphic perspective drawing—one box set atop another larger one, and set obliquely to the implied surface—both designates space and in its hard black line, flattens it, registers it as a representation or designation. The torn edge of its paper surface both opens up a space, a kind of aperture in the feathered French endpaper, and asserts its material flatness. The stacked boxes might be what gives the collage its name; the shape might be taken as rudimentary camera lens or bellows and back. It isn’t one, of course; rather it is an assignment, an exercise from a mechanical drawing textbook. O’Neill speaks of seeing such typeforms through the lens of Robert Morris or Tony Smith: “Each of them was a proposal for an object and you could think of it as something very large. It seemed to be the archetype for a way of thinking that tends to have straight lines and they tend to be at right angles.” O’Neill has an affection for the didactic, particularly the didactic that is just past—see for example the instructional footage of *Let’s Make a Sandwich*—as well as for the drawn, the graphic line that is also situated outside and before current technology. *Camera* makes reference to a number of just such outmoded forms: the hardline drawing of architectural drafting and its teaching by typeforms have long been replaced by CAD; handmade feathered endpapers are now produced photographically, if at all; and (at least in the headlines) the books that such endpapers might enclose are threatened by the digital, as are the optics of the camera. The drawing on which the endpaper sits also has an oddly anachronistic feel, as if it has recorded too much time; such drawings are, for O’Neill, the record of time spent, even time wasted, and of waiting.

Done in meetings and waiting rooms, in the midst of long phone conversations or on airplanes, O’Neill refers to these drawings as “jailhouse” drawings: records of “a condition of captivity and passivity.” They are in some sense just doodles—8 x 10 sheets of paper and a pencil or a ballpoint pen—but they were a significant portion of his artistic output in the 1980s, after he had left Cal Arts and after the success of the *Star Wars* films for which his studio, Lookout Mountain, had done a good deal of special effects work. “I began to realize that each one of these was like a little specimen, like a medical test of some kind to show what was going on in my mind.” They are heir to Surrealist automatism and, in their “all-over” composition, they have a family resemblance to its history. They are slower, though, and more intricate and incidental; as O’Neill explains they do without “not only representation, but also gestural movement—they are the result of small wrist and finger movements, such as might be done in a small space.” O’Neill soon began to recognize the meeting room drawings as an art practice and to formalize and set rules for their making. “The mark-making process is carried on with the page being rotated 90-degrees from time to time. Marks are laid down without preconception, but once a mark has been made, it is never obscured by other marks.” Rotating the page is a way of keeping questions of gravity and orientation, depth, and resemblance open. In any given passage O’Neill’s drawing responds to its local position and its current orientation, but by regularly rotating the image, he is able to build a “surface that has no defined point of entry.” “The surface is made up of interlocking passages (lines, shapes, gradations, textures) which are usually tethered to representation and which seem to elicit an effort on the part of the viewer to interpret them as such. It’s to ‘see’ things that were not consciously depicted.” “Perhaps,” he continues, “the drawing is training us in a particular mode of experiencing. When we are in this mode we are momentarily removed from our usual on-the-ground state of mind.”

“On the ground” is probably the operative phrase. There is something about the drawings that suggests topography and an aerial view: we are not viewing a vertical image opposite us but something horizontal and spread out, which is the aspect O’Neill had on them to begin with. They were made horizontally, on the plane surface of graphics and writing, rather than vertically, like a painting on an easel or wall. They belong, in Walter Benjamin’s words, to the “cross-section” of graphic art, rather than the “longitudinal section of painting:” “The longitudinal section seems representational; it somehow contains the objects. The cross-section seems symbolic; it contains signs.” Benjamin’s “sign” is complex; it is not only linear but also inscribed or impressed into the surfaces that it takes up as background. It designates among other things, a relationship between line and the ground on which it sits. A painting, Benjamin insists, “has no background,” but “the graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to it as its background.” The graphic line

can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completed covered its background would cease to be a drawing.”⁹ The all-overness of O’Neill’s earliest drawings comes close to a fullness that for Benjamin might mean they were no longer drawings, but even these early works produce a surface that folds and ripples, grows denser or more open. It isn’t layered physically like the collages or optically like *Punch Me*. Rather, the surface is connective, rhizomatic, or metonymic in its construction; things are placed not within or beneath one another but against and adjacent.

The drawings from the 1980s are closely grained in their incident and more continuous and all-over in their effect. They seem to have been structured in quadrants that suggest or perhaps record O’Neill’s practice of turning them to keep them from having a top and bottom, from going vertical, one could say. The more recent drawings, most of which date from 1995–96, are more gestural and denser at the center, some proceeding from the center out rather than from the edges in. The overall space is tenser and more active, and there is a new vocabulary of larger marks—designed lines that act in relation to one another above the plane of the drawing, and the surface of something like landscape. The lines snake across that landscape like earthworks or inscriptions, or the tire tracks on the burned ground of the Central Valley’s Kettleman Junction, an image that appears in O’Neill’s *Anvil Point*. But in their energetic motion and their slight bulbousness—coils, springs—they point to sources not so much in the land as on the graphic page. Like O’Neill’s sculptural work of the 1960s, their surrealism is more popular, and more trippy, than orthodox or heroic. It is these lines that suggest the linear sound effects of animated cartoons or the metamorphosing figures of Moscoso’s *Zap* or the thorny, outlined, and chromed calligraphy of Robert Williams, or the Kelly/Mouse studios. O’Neill recalls working in the 1970s on sequences of Max Fleischer’s “Betty Boop” cartoons on a Moviola with the late artist and designer Martin Muller (who as Neon Park designed album covers for the Mothers of Invention and Little Feat). The process, he says, was one of “obliterating the characters and retaining the rhythms, shapes, and line quality,” which seems a very good description of how those images appear in the drawings as well.

Slow, intricate, and involved, the drawings point to O’Neill’s considerable facility and, in their automatism, to the hand itself as, in Henri Focillon’s words, “an organ of knowledge.”¹⁰ The drawings are, O’Neill points out somewhat sardonically, necessarily small scale and deliberately “green:” “they result in an absolute minimum of expense and almost no environmental harm. Twenty years work could be done for less than a dollar. This may eventually be necessary.” In all these ways, they seem nearly the opposite of the large digital images he began to produce in the late 1990s. O’Neill had used a digital scanner and printer from the late 1980s as a way to greatly enlarge the images he made on film stock in the optical printer. It was only later, around 1996 that he reluctantly came to use the computer to process images. The digitally manipulated image might seem an odd choice for O’Neill, since both his artistic output and his commercial work are known for their painstaking, hands-on craft, and for the optical and the analogue. One could think of the digital as a kind of de-skilling; certainly it made the kinds of effects O’Neill once produced commercially obsolete and his embrace of it as an artistic tool is, perhaps, somewhat ironic. Usually those arts that intensify the experience of the manual and of craft rely on outmoded forms of reproductive technology: the forms of fine art printmaking, for example—etching, engraving, and lithography—were once modes of mass reproduction.

O’Neill seems to work this ironic disjuncture between new media and the past quite deliberately. There is something not so much nostalgic—a term he would dismiss, in any event—as archaic in his digital images, a feeling that emerges in part because the digital has allowed him to focus his attention rather specifically on the graphic line that formed the basic vocabulary of an earlier, prephotographic mode of spatial representation and mechanical reproduction. What O’Neill scavenges now are images that date from the “period when books were illustrated with line cuts made by hand by illustrators, rather than with photographs which have been converted by use of the halftone screen.” In those illustrations, light-dark contrast and space are produced by a line that follows contour or parallels it and that in some sense belongs or adheres to the object represented. The half-tone, in contrast, screens the object; it belongs to a different kind of layering. Not Benjamin’s line, but a mark above the surface and continuous with it. O’Neill’s choice of line illustrations is, then, a conscious eschewal of another art history, one of reproduction that took the screened photograph and what O’Neill calls its “halftone buzz” as its image, an artistic lineage that would run from Warhol and Lichtenstein to Sigmar Polke.

In their use of line illustration and their juxtaposition of line art from a number of different sources and different narratives, the digital prints O’Neill has produced over the past three or four years (images like *Down Draft* [1998] or *Dr. Pierce* [2002] or *Rock Grant Windows* [2002]) bear a strong resemblance to Max Ernst’s *La Femme 100 Têtes*. Indeed, O’Neill’s sources and methods are situated quite closely to where German critic

and theorist Theodor Adorno found Max Ernst's: "These images derive, partly literally and partly in spirit, from illustrations of the later nineteenth century, with which the parents of Max Ernst's generation were familiar." The model of all Surrealism is not a symbol or a psychology, Adorno suggests, but an "artistic technique." It is "unquestionably the montage."

One must therefore trace the affinity of surrealistic technique for psychoanalysis not to a symbolism of the unconscious, but to the attempt to uncover childhood experiences by blasting them out. What surrealism adds to the pictorial rendering of the world of things is what we lost after childhood: when we were children those illustrations, already archaic, must have jumped out at us, just as the surrealistic pictures do now. [T]he archaic contributes to this effect. As to modernity, there is a paradox in that, although already under the spell of the uniformity of mass production, it still has a history. This paradox alienates it and becomes in the "Children's Pictures for Moderns" the expression of a subjectivity that grown strange to itself.¹¹

The scene Adorno describes repeats the story O'Neill tells of his encounter with Dal' in the pages of *Life*, a story marked, like montage, by the temporal and spatial displacement of the image. Dal's *Persistence* appears in the library as, at once, the image of an old popular culture, an already aging modernity, and a forgotten moment in the life of the subject.

Much of what O'Neill catalogues and combines in his recent digital images comes from found how-to books, manuals, and guides, sources that situate the viewer and the artist, as students or children in the regime of images, or, in most of his examples, of signs. These signs are usually opaque and the knowledge they represent is somehow lost, even if their didacticism is not: "I am," he says, "particularly fond of schematic demonstrations: graphs of all kinds, charts, blueprints, maps, engineering drawings." The mechanical drafting models that appeared early on in the *Saugus Series* and *Camera* are supplemented in digital composites like *Down Draft* or *Hatwire* by a extensive array of didactic figures: diagrams of automobile engines, guides to masonry patterns and architectural forms, and a sheaf of botanical, entomological, and biological illustrations. *Snake is on the Right* (2003) (see page 00) layers a number of borrowed representational vocabularies: on the left side, in a detail lifted from an 1880s textbook, folds of fabric and the roughened surface of tree bark are delineated with a line that follows fluidly along those intricate surfaces and differentiates their textures; on the right side, in an engraving taken whole from a German zoology text dated 1907, the snake named in the title is tightly rendered, drawn with a line that repeats its patterns, but situated in a far more open space drawn in a staccato, even mechanical line. Over them both is a field of black and gray symbols, like graphic semaphore; despite their seeming, or at least contextual, opacity and archaism, they are of quite recent vintage. Their source is a catalogue of "wipes," the set of mattes and movements commercial optical houses use to transit from one shot or scene to another—that is, to conceal and reveal an image, which is what they do here.

To the line art that he finds in thrift store books and old newspaper clippings, O'Neill has added his own jailhouse drawings. Digitized, the drawings can be sampled, reversed, multiplied, and solarized, and they have become an important part of the recycled material out of which composite images are made. Often O'Neill presents them—albeit greatly transformed—on their own or as the central image, using the digital technology to join and intertwine the surfaces of existing drawings, not just enlarging them but continuing their surfaces across other surfaces or burying them one beneath another. In *Sweet Pea* (2002) (see page 00), the surface is thick and crowded; O'Neill's own drawing shares the space with an electrical diagram and a botanical illustration—the sweet pea of the title from an 1887 manual—but it covers those images and pulls them up into its weaving. The most "abstract expressionist" of O'Neill's images, *Sweet Pea's* white writing surface clearly invokes Mark Tobey and Paul Klee, and, in its density, finally, Jackson Pollock. O'Neill writes of the piece in terms not unlike those of Pollock or his critics: "everything has to cancel out, to neutralize." He even speaks of being "in" the image, as Pollock famously did, though for O'Neill it means that he's there with us as we look: "I have left [intentional] markers along the trail in some parts and not in others." In *Carpet I* (2003) (see page 00) and *Bamboo Action Map* (2003) (see page 00) the drawn field and the sense of the page or ground on which it is inscribed extends laterally from denser to more open. *Strip Three, Flat* (2003) (see page 00) reads as a continuous explosion, a figure that expands vertically from bottom to top across the page, as though in time as well as in space. In a sense, the extension of *Strip Three, Flat* or *Carpet* works like a pan in film, a continuation or elongation of the frame elsewhere, and it follows the kind of lateral motion O'Neill introduced for the first time in his films in *Water and Power*.

O'Neill's digital prints fall into three categories: works whose primary surface is drawing, those whose primary material is line art or the prephotographic, and those that take the photograph as their space,

their *mise-en-scène*. The space of the first two categories remains modernist space; flat and layered, it is the space of cubism and montage. It tends to extend laterally, but even in a vertically layered work like *Sweet Pea* or *Bascom's Heart* (2003) (see page 00), depths tend to be tied to the surface; the latter picture seems to owe a debt to Polke in its fabric screens and the scale of its figure. The photographs build a deeper, more atmospheric space, though at times O'Neill has deliberately pulled even that space toward and parallel to the surface; that is the formal task of the rotoscoped figure in *Charley, Studio City* (2002), and the sketched-in stage space in *Earfalls* (2003) that both presents and schematizes its seascape depth. Most of the other photo-based works, particularly those O'Neill groups together as the Performance series, open a space more baroque than modern: a deeper, theatrical, and often diagonal space. A number of his images make clear their art historical debt; their spaces and pictures are quite literally borrowed from the art of the seventeenth century. The sweep of *Costume Figures, Amsterdam* (2002) (see page 00) runs alongside the image of Bartholomeus van der Helst's huge *Company of Captain Roelof Bicker and Lieutenant Jan Michielsz Blaeuw* of 1639, a grand Dutch group portrait of some eight feet high by twenty-four and a half feet wide. O'Neill's title describes both those members of the company of Captain Bicker that occupy the left side of the image and the enigmatic masked figures that O'Neill positions on the right. Captured in motion, just barely blurred or double exposed, O'Neill's figures are dressed in classical shifts—or maybe just sun dresses—and adorned in what seems like animal masks or beaked bird heads; they hover between the archetypal and the tawdry. The figure is O'Neill himself, and he reappears as a performer, costumed and abstracted, in a number of these photographic composites, in their choreographed processions down the streets of Cork or across the dramatic night expanse of the desert southwest.

The choreography in the Performance series puts the human figure in motion both physically and digitally; the diagonals that move across the desert hills or against the night sky are sometimes the photographic image of multiple performers, but more often the digital or photographic repetition of the same figure turned and moved to figure space. In either case and across all of the images, the figures are convulsed and blurred by motion and held in place by a stark white light against the dark ground. The reference again is to the baroque, and more specifically to Caravaggio or the trope of sharp light amidst deep black that came to be known early on as Caravagesque. The dramatized themes of ritual and performance and the dramatic space of the composite pictures are as tied to O'Neill's recent film practice as the flattened, montaged space of the earlier photographs was tied to his earlier ones. *Water and Power* began to open up a kind of lateral space; it offers in passages—in the interior space of the artist's studio, for example—a kind of diagetic extension that the earlier "still" films, centered on the single image and its disassembly, did not need. And it introduced, as well, the sort of stopped motion recorded in the digital images: the still body whose face becomes a blur of movement. The space and imagery of the Performance series is tied directly to *The Decay of Fiction*, most obviously through the performance figures themselves, who move ritually, if chaotically, through the halls of the Ambassador at the film's climax. O'Neill's use of the human figure as actor rather than incident and his evocation of narrative is new in the Performance prints and *The Decay of Fiction*. In the film, the space his actors seem to demand is opened up not only by pans or tracking shots, but by O'Neill's overall mapping out of the hotel as a stage, a continuous narrative place, and his extension of human movement across that space and in relation to it. O'Neill talks about the emptying out of human presence in his earliest photographs and films, or the generalizing of their presence as design as a way to flatten the space and its emotional charge. The visual materials of the first films and photomontages matter, one could say, only in juxtaposition, only in the sense of discomfort or delayed recognition, the sense that they are *made* strange. The images, monsters, and rituals that O'Neill produces in *The Decay of Fiction*, in contrast, work not by montage but by staging; the meaning belongs to them and their evocations—to the narrative and ritual they suggest. And that brings with it a different sort of space, the dramatized space of interiority and rhetorical action that for O'Neill, it seems, belongs as much to painting or its history as it does to film.

In their scale and space and their insistence on human action, the Performance series prints look quite different from most of O'Neill's previous works, whether in film or on the wall. But there is a way in which these works, too, participate in the dialogue he has posed "between me at 64 and me at 24." O'Neill taught a course at CalArts on filming dance in the early 1970s and the human body in choreographed motion, flattened and mechanized, was the subject early on of 7362. Beyond that there is an echo of the early sculptures in the thick, blurred human forms in works like *Swordfish I* and *Bastard I*. The foreground figure in *Swordfish I* is O'Neill: "This is my back, it turns into a sculptural object, a vegetable or a pepper." "Think of Edward Weston's curling pepper," he says, but in his own oeuvre one could think of the way in which *Virinia Red*

seems to rotate and blur in space, or the way it and *L'il Neverbetter* suggest both landscape and the reclining figure in it. Forms that blur the edge between the human and the vegetal or the sculptural set within a melodramatically lit and perspectively endless landscape space, the Performance prints recall, and perhaps make specific reference to, the Surrealism that O'Neill rediscovered in the UCLA library; his *Persistence of Memory* story has, after all, not just two moments in time but three: the artist at four, the artist at nineteen, and the artist who recounts the story in 1997, in the midst of shooting the choreographed monsters and narrative corridors of *The Decay of Fiction*. In this last moment, Surrealism comes not so much under the sign of sexuality as it does with questions of mortality.

Notes

1. From e-mail correspondence with the author, November 5, 2003. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Pat O'Neill are drawn from e-mail exchanges that date from November 2003 through January 2004, or from curator Julie Lazar's interview with O'Neill on March 1, 2003.
2. Jane Livingston, exhibition review of "Plastics: L.A.," Los Angeles State College, *Artforum* (May 1968), 65.
3. William Wilson, "In the Galleries: Sculptures of Pat O'Neill," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 October 1967, sec. 4.
4. David E. James, "An Interview with Pat O'Neill," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 30/31 (Fall 1997); available on-line at <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ30%2C31/DJamesInterview.html>.
5. Hubert Damisch, "Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 290.
6. J. Hoberman, "They Aim to Please," *Village Voice*, 9–15 October 2002.
7. Grahame Weinbren and Christine Noll Brinckmann, "Selective Transparencies: Pat O'Neill's Recent Films," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 6 (Spring 1980): 53–55.
8. Grahame Weinbren, "Six Filmmakers and an Ideal of Composition," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 3 (Winter/Spring 1979): 53.
9. Walter Benjamin, "Painting and Graphic Arts" and "Painting, or Signs and Marks," in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 82–86.
10. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 166.
11. Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), 222.