Bluhm, Erik. “Pat O’Neill,” Art US, July-September 2005, issue 9; p. 7

Stealthily tailing last year’s retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum, Pat O’Neill’s recent show at Rosamund Felsen provided a more secluded, pensive view of an artist entering his fifth decade of activity. Though comprised mainly of recent work – slickly rendered collages pressed under Plexiglas – the show also featured short films, examples of his finish-conscious three-fimensional work, and most interestingly, an early series of black-and-white photographs.

The silver gelatin prints, executed primarily in the mid-1960s, show O’Neill favoring readymade abstract landscapes involving automobiles, water, and derelict buildings. Such imagery was in no short supply near his Westside studio situated near the seedy beachside community of Venice, stabbed through by fetid canals. It was a locale possibility. “Its polarity – the sunshine sea lapping at suburban slums – inspired the visual laminate O’Neill carried with him from his single-frame observations and short film to his complex “features.”

Through the viewfinder O’Neill tends to identify settings that represent pre-composed compositions. He describes beginning with a “starting point that was somehow socially defined” and then transforming it into “an image that could not be pre-conceived.” As in Heidegger’s “world picture,” the world becomes itself a picture; the artist’s representation rather than creation beyond his control. Though he would go on to more complicated means of superimposing visual strata, layering is effected in 1958 *Cadillac*, *Santa Monica Pier* (1966), not through a composite, but from a reflection in a storefront window. The scene is everyday – a figure, a car, some plants – yet the depth of field is tricky. Similarly in *Louisiana Lions* (1962/66), billboard signs, parade floats, and auditorium marquees vie for attention as they are taken in successively. The same sort of dialogue appears in O’Neill’s films, represented here by an interactive DVD featuring 19 segmented loops that were essentially building blocks of completed projects.

In Trouble in the Image (clip 4/1994) a diagonal wiping motion clears away a fast-moving duotone shot of a desert rock formation, replacing it with a dancing array of white outlined cowboys, flickering above a threshold image of two men in conversation. The reality of the landscape, contrasted with the exhilaration of a quick pan, gives the scene a sense of impending drama (an earthquake? *Zabriskie Point’s* explosive climax?). Likewise in the photograph *Cadillac on 405* (1965), a car juts ominously off a freeway embankment into space. It is a familiar locale, yet an unnerving setup. Bogdonavich trod similar territory (and the same freeway) in the sniper scene of *Targets* (1966).

Pink, orange, cerulean blue, and beige amorphous blobs flip and flutter throughout *Sidewinders Delta* (clip 1/1976). Some are thinly outlined, others blur off into each other and into a deep black – perhaps the shadow of a hand – tht threatens to blot them out completely. These organic forms echo the undulating arcs of the wetlands captured in one of the early photographs, Untitled (*Sun Reflection, Tomales Bay*) (1962/66).

O’Neill’s non-verbal observation of the western landscape would be fully realized in the hour-long *Water and Power* (1989), shot in California’s Owens Valley throughout the 1980s. By employing techniques such as following the trajectory of the sun’s shadow from the valley to the Sierra ridge, O’Neill’s vision of the arid countryside becomes almost anthropomorphic, much as did Erich von Stroheim’s during *Greed* (1925), which was adapted from Frank Norris’s decidedly geo-psychological novel *McTeague* and filmed in this very valley. Judging by the type of imagery captured in these preparatory photographs and the layered undixedness of the segmented film elements, it becomes evident that O’Neill’s path, like McTeague’s, was chosen early on.