Pagel, David. “Traveling the art/film continuum,” The Los Angeles Times, October 3, 2004.

Twenty years ago, mainstream movies and avant-garde films had so little in common that their respective audiences seemed to live on different planets — in different galaxies. Commuting was out of the question.

That didn't stop Pat O'Neill, an artist, visual effects inventor and experimental filmmaker whose diverse works from the last 40 years are surveyed at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in "Pat O'Neill: Views From Lookout Mountain."

O'Neill has traveled between the commercial world of big-budget productions and the less financially lucrative world of experimental film without missing a step because he always treated the seemingly disparate realms as if each were just another part of a big, multilayered whole, one riddled with contradictions and filled with possibility.

Inhabiting both has been a practical matter. "I got into [the visual effects business] through the back door," O'Neill said. "I wanted the equipment. I wanted to have a way of rephotographing film. From the very first film I did with Bob Abel [a 10-minute, black-and-white silent movie from 1963 called "By the Sea"], he and I tried to find ways to shoot something and make a print of it and then change the tonal range of the print. We learned about optical printers. We tried to build our own."

They succeeded, more or less. The process was tedious. Their homemade image duplicator was limited to basic operations: superimposing images and assigning colors to different values.

In 1967, O'Neill made another film, "7362." "It got a certain amount of splash and a number of commercial people approached me with projects," he recalled. Eventually, he took out a loan and purchased his own optical printer, "for a lot of money at the time."

"I set up a little company and had various people working for me. We took on jobs, bid on jobs. It was everything from archival stuff to putting animated figures in live backgrounds to doing titles with colored letters and so forth."

Born in Los Angeles in 1939, O'Neill is a soft-spoken man whose matter-of-fact tone and humble demeanor suggest that he doesn't romanticize the past. His words are carefully chosen, and he's comfortable with long silences and the slowly unfolding thoughts they sometimes give rise to.

Finding time to use the printer for his own projects was a challenge. "Being a business, you had to put the customer first. So sometimes whole years would go by when we did nothing but work."

O'Neill founded Lookout Mountain Films in 1974. He and his crew worked on many commercials, independent films and Hollywood features, including the second and third episodes of the "Star Wars" trilogy. Among the visual effects they contributed were the lightning bolts that flashed from Darth Vader's fingertips in "The Empire Strikes Back" (1980) and "The Return of the Jedi" (1983).

Despite such high-profile jobs, O'Neill harbored no illusions about the relationship between his commercial and creative work. Even though he used the same technology for both, he never confused the two. "They always seemed completely separate to me. Unless you have the final word on whether it's done or not, you're working for somebody."

Nothing wrong with that, but working for yourself — or for no one — is what it's all about for O'Neill. "The conflict for me is that I really love the studio. I love working independently on a number of things at once. Filmmaking generally is very different in that if you're working with a lot of people everything has to be regularized."

Hollywood movies are also expensive and designed for mass appeal. "It's often the stuff that's un-digestible that you spend the time with and that ultimately teaches you something."

O'Neill earned a master's degree in art at UCLA in 1964, taught there from 1966 to 1967 and was a founding faculty member in film and video at CalArts in 1970, where he taught until 1975, when a cerebral hemorrhage necessitated a leave of absence. When he recovered, he didn't return because he felt the barrier between the film/video and art departments was too rigid to work around. Since 1965, he has been married to Beverly Morris, a classmate from UCLA who recently retired from a 15-year stint as the provost of CalArts.

The Santa Monica exhibition, organized by independent curator Julie Lazar, features 110 works, including sculptures, collages, drawings, photographs and digital prints as well as 20 films. Three of the films have been transferred to DVD and 17 are screened in their intended state: in a dark room via 16- and 35-mm projectors.

Regardless of medium or differences between abstraction and representation, O'Neill relishes whiplash shifts in scale. He also savors the sensuality of matter (especially light) and travels freely between past and present. The sensation of being in two — or more — places simultaneously predominates.

The four sculptures look both prehistoric and futuristic. Made of cast iron, wood, animal horn and polyester laminate, they are covered with many layers of lacquer, which O'Neill sanded down to reveal underlying colors in oddly concentric patterns.

His page-size drawings are dense yet delicate webs of lines and symbols that have the presence of imaginary weather maps or the scores for strange symphonies.

Some of his black-and-white photographs zoom in so close to the simple things they depict that it's difficult to know what you're looking at. His collages and superimposed photographs meld even more spaces. And computer technology allows him to overlay still more information onto single surfaces. In this, his art recalls the photography of Robert Heinecken, one of O'Neill's teachers at UCLA and "always a liberating influence."

At CalArts, O'Neill taught alongside John Baldessari, a conceptual artist who often uses film stills in his work. "He was in film and I was in art," Baldessari said. "The whole idea of the school was to encourage interaction, and of course that didn't work." But "Pat O'Neill was the most artist-friendly faculty in the film department. He was a kind of bridge between the two. He has kept his feet in both worlds. Of that class, which includes David Salle, Matt Mullican and Jack Goldstein, Pat always had the respect of other artists. I have nothing but respect for him."

Of the comparison to Baldessari O'Neill said: "In a way, our work has been sort of parallel. I mean, we've been in separate ghettoes. John's the guy who had the career, and I'm the guy who didn't."

After a chuckle, O'Neill turned serious. "I remember when the idea of having a career was just anathema. I mean, nobody wanted to think about that. It's maybe something you did. But the work might not lead to a career."

That was no reason not to pursue it. And that's what O'Neill did in his films, which are among his most influential works.

'A profoundly inspiring person'

David WILSON, the founder and director of the Museum of Jurassic Technology (and a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant), thinks of O'Neill as a kindred spirit. "Pat was the reason," Wilson said, "that Diana [his wife] and I came to L.A. in the first place."

In rural Colorado in the late 1960s and early '70s, it was hard for the young couple to see the experimental movies that interested them. They compensated by reading books. In Gene Youngblood's "Expanded Cinema," Wilson saw some O'Neill stills and was smitten. "I thought, 'This is what I want and need in life. I should go back to school and learn more.' "

Wilson learned that O'Neill was teaching at CalArts, enrolled and moved to Los Angeles. But within three months, O'Neill had the hemorrhage and Wilson never got to study with him. Instead, the two started the Oasis Film Collective, an ad hoc group of enthusiasts who met monthly and screened hard-to-find films for anyone interested. They've been friends ever since.

"Pat was a profoundly inspiring person to both Diana and me," Wilson said. Not only were his own works important, but "he was one of the best, the most creative people doing commercial work. His skills were so far beyond ordinary. That was an amazing and wonderful period, a very powerful time, and the ripples are still affecting lives today."

Diana Wilson, who was the bookkeeper at Lookout Mountain Films from 1982 to '83 and worked for O'Neill on the third "Star Wars" movie, agreed: "Pat is an extraordinary artist. I have infinite respect for his work. He is incredibly thoughtful about whatever he does.

"It's fascinating to be around him. Everything takes on a numinous quality, so it's fun. He's a plant lover, and his plants practically seem to be his personal friends. In the studio he kept a jar of black widows. He's so kind he seems to be living in a parallel reality, especially for someone who has done so much work in the film world. He's patient and wise and magical. He doesn't seem to age, and he's a very joyful person."

Unlike many experimental filmmakers, O'Neill isn't opposed to storytelling.

"I always dragged in other references," he said. "To me that's what's really interesting. You may start out thinking it's one thing, but then it turns out to be something else. And maybe the third or fourth time you see it you realize there's still other differences. And I like that. I like the fact that you can go back to it and it continues to feed you. You can't really explain it by one set of parameters. And you don't need to.

"To try to encapsulate things immediately is a shame. When I started doing film, it was a more hopeful time. It was before Nixon and Reagan. It seemed like consciousness might come to be defined a little differently."

'Things converge in him'

Today, the art world and the experimental film world are still segregated. For Lazar, the curator, that's a problem for institutions, not artists. "These media," she said, "have always talked to each other. It's not a large leap" to organize an exhibition that bridges the worlds.

But differences still exist. "I don't think every filmmaker is a visual artist," she said. "Pat has come out of the history of visual art, that's his career trajectory. And he moves back and forth. So why can't we look at it like that? The ideas walk back and forth, and it's important to see how they cross-penetrate and commingle.

"I feel he's a convergence artist. Things converge in him. You see the traces of everything he has seen: Minimalism, Conceptualism, collage. He incorporates them all. It becomes his own. He makes poetry out of it and leaves it up to the audience. It takes time, and there's a tremendous reward."

O'Neill's two most recent films are his most ambitious. "Water and Power" (1989) was shot in the Owens Valley, downtown Los Angeles and Marin County's Tomales Bay. The goal, he said, was to capture "geographic time" or to "exactly represent what's there. Like evidence. It's just physical."

"The Decay of Fiction" was shot at the Ambassador Hotel. O'Neill then spent 10 years in post-production. The 72-minute movie "treats the action as dance, as an abstract representation of the body. It was a huge bust financially," he said. "But I did get what I wanted out of it."

A strong strand of '60s individualism runs through all of O'Neill's works, which embrace chance occurrences yet are driven by rigorous formal logic. Do your own thing — to the point of virtuosity — is the rule his art lives by.

As a filmmaker, O'Neill tries to make "a sort of viable alternative to the business of influencing our minds. We're constantly being influenced by people who have an agenda to advance. Perhaps one of the things you can do with art is stand a little bit outside of that and produce another kind of record. In a sense, it's basically a desire to get outside the world and get some relief from it.

"I feel like art has saved my life on various occasions. And maybe some of that can be passed along."