

ARTFORUM

“Pat O’Neil, Cherry and Martin”

By Travis Diehl

Summer 2015

While Pat O’Neill is primarily known as an experimental filmmaker, this small retrospective, which filled two moodily lit galleries with five decades’ worth of sculptures, drawings, photographs, slides, and films, made a case for another, adjacent view of his practice—one concerned with fixed visual forms. In *Untitled (Dingo 4)*, 1980, four identical gelatin silver prints of a dog appeared side by side, each overlain with a small photocopy that was partially obscured, in turn, by a different-colored paint chip—a frame-by-frame dissolve from color to color that recalled O’Neill’s movies. Two glossy fiberglass sculptures, *White Double Sweep*, 1966, and *Black Sweep (1012 Pico Series)*, 1967, the oldest works on view, aligned O’Neill’s interests at the time with those of his Finish Fetish contemporaries; they are unremarkable except in their evident concern with motion, an Étienne-Jules Marey-like freezing of time, here into solid arcs. The sculptures’ titles, moreover, reference not shapes but a particular movement—an allusion they share with O’Neill’s later film *Two Sweeps*, 1979, designed as a 16-mm loop (later transferred to video) in which two “spots” imply a similar arc, oscillating back and forth against a crackling background as if connected to two points of a swinging pendulum.

In the first gallery, the viewer encountered a trio of linked slide projectors, whose ratcheting carousels projected a line of text together with alternating, seamlessly bleeding photographic slides: *In Betweens*, 2015. Landscapes fade into junkyards and brown scree into old tires as fragmentary captions—*IN HIS BRAIN HE GRUNTED OR RATTLE AGAINST THE METAL WALL*—run along the projections’ bottom edges. O’Neill’s 35-mm positives are richly luminous in a way that digital just ain’t, and though *In Betweens* was listed as the newest work in the show, the setup exudes a particular filmic nostalgia. The artist often links together short thoughts into longer works that are more montage than narrative. This slide show is no exception: Rather, it offers yet another means by which to formalize time’s passage—a “retrospective” sequence of photos and text, presenting a continuously blended, romantically derelict image.

This kind of layered opticality would seem to be the crux of O’Neill’s project—to create sites of filmic purity, psychedelically detached from the medium’s indexical substrate. Undiluted color burns through a diaristic sequence of short films in a new three-channel edit of O’Neill’s 1974 *Saugus Series*, a compilation of mini vignettes compositing found and original footage, filters, and analog effects reminiscent of the pilly static of coming down. In one scene, a porkpie hat floats surreally across a pond of optical noise; in another, juking, windblown film of Joshua trees is filled with two pitches of fuzz. Such vibrating intensity is perhaps the polemic of this otherwise apolitical work—an accelerated, pushy vision attempting to supplant the status quo of visual perception. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the black tar skeining into several of the *Saugus* shots: at one point appearing midframe, vanishing before the bottom; at another, a pour

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tripled in each frame of the triptych, blasted into saturated primary hues via lens filters. At this moment, with nine glistening spills at slightly different stages, the woodwind sound track breaks down and deepens into a dissonant loop. Pure opticality? Enmeshed within visions of branches, tar, old movies—the hallucinations of film grain or altered states—O’Neill’s work has plenty of filmic substance, and yet is still light-thin.