

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

PAT O'NEILL: *The Decay of Fiction*
September 9 – October 23, 2021
534 West 26th Street, New York



Mitchell-Innes & Nash is pleased to present *The Decay of Fiction* by Pat O’Neill, the Los Angeles-based artist and experimental filmmaker, whose work has been represented by the gallery since 2015. O’Neill has transformed his 2002 film of the same title into a five-channel installation, digitally scanning and recombining individual sections into a distinct, new work. Premiering in 2018, this will be the first showing in New York.

A pioneer within the Californian avant-garde film scene in the 1960s, O’Neill was part of the first generation of artists to graduate from UCLA’s Moving Image Art program in 1964. Working with a broad variety of media, including optical printers, fiberglass, steel, collage and found objects, his films, sculptural assemblages and works on paper explore concepts of time and memory, as well as technology’s changing role in image making.

Based on footage recorded on two separate occasions in the early 1990s and 2000s, respectively, the five-channel presentation of *The Decay of Fiction* weaves together almost three decades of production. The setting is the famed Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, built in 1921 and host to early Academy Award ceremonies, Hollywood stars and every United States president from Herbert Hoover to Richard Nixon. Its fortune dwindled following the 1968 assassination of presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy on the premises minutes after a speech claiming victory in the California primary election. Donald Trump bought the property in the late 1980s with ambitions to build a record-high skyscraper, but his plan was opposed by the city. The hotel was ultimately demolished in 2006 and a community school erected on the grounds.

O’Neill first gained access to the six story building in 1993, four years after it closed to guests. By then an occasional film set and police training site, the artist proceeded to shoot its empty rooms, banquet halls, rusty bathrooms and rundown corridors. While there was no fixed script, the technical planning was elaborate, ensuring that actors could be added at a later stage and look consistent with the environment. The artist returned in 2000 with a larger crew, but still without a script—character styling, lighting and plot were arranged spontaneously. Some of the analogue equipment used in the former process was transplanted by emerging digital tools, adding technical challenges and unforeseen opportunities. The new scenes were eventually combined with the older footage in post-production to create the original version of *The Decay of Fiction*.

Debuting in 2002 at the New York Film Festival, this single-channel version is, in O’Neill’s words, “essentially two films which take place simultaneously, one of them an essay on a specific urban location at a particular time; the other a body of storytelling and fantasy which are woven around this location and through its spaces.”¹ The early footage—quiet rooms recorded with a static, time-lapse camera where the only movement is that of the earth itself, seen through moving shadows—forms an ethereal backdrop to the actors, filmed in real time years later. Their translucent

¹ Pat O’Neill, 11/3/2012

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appearance, a byproduct of the layering process, bestows them a ghost-like presence as they populate the banquet halls and gardens, clean the beds, prep the kitchen and exchange muted dialogues. Frequent views of narrow kitchen passages subtly reference the Kennedy assassination, which happened after he took a back exit following his ballroom speech—O’Neill has noted that the specter of the tragic event “unsolved in the opinion of many...clung to the site [with] an almost overwhelming aura of sadness.”

For the five-channel presentation, O’Neill has rearranged the film into distinct components across which settings and actors recur alongside special effects such as animations and split screens. Set to an unremitting soundscape of moving traffic and birds, they offer an almost hallucinogenic amalgamation of now and then, and real and imagined. Their simultaneous unfolding offers further permutations of the composite imagery, eliminating for good any possibility of a linear narrative.

A portrait of an architectural site facing imminent demolition, the multichannel installation embodies a hybrid genre where history and artifice coexist. Through its layered approach to documentation and collective memory, *The Decay of Fiction* honors the Ambassador Hotel as its own purveyor of fictions: a site for the production of illusions that, as O’Neill notes, “sometimes provided [people] with respite from their real lives, allowed fantasies to be developed and nurtured, and taught lessons about how to be human.”²

About Pat O’Neill

Pat O’Neill is an American independent experimental filmmaker and artist. He is perhaps best known for his groundbreaking films which blend iconography, surrealism, humor and sound design to reveal his interest in the connections and divisions between humans and nature. His films illustrate the materiality of sound, images, and pacing as well as his avant-garde use of the optical printer. In addition to filmmaking, O’Neill began working with sculpture in the early 1960s. Initially, he worked with surrealistic and erotic assemblages of wood and metal. His vision then shifted and he began to create highly polished forms made out of fiberglass and plexiglass of whimsical and sometimes suggestive forms such as wooden horns, wavy forms wrapped in fur, and pickles. The artist’s gestures and mark-making seem obscure, but there is plasticity to his images, and sophistication to his techniques.

Pat O’Neill lives and works in Los Angeles. He graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1962 and continued at UCLA to be the first American to receive a Master’s degree in Moving Image Art in 1964. O’Neill was active in the West Coast film scene and was a founding member of Oasis, a collaboratively run experimental film exhibitor in Los Angeles. His film *Water and Power* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival and his complete collection resides at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive. O’Neill’s work has been featured in prominent exhibitions such as *Electric Art* at The University of California, Los Angeles (1969); *The Whitney Biennial*, New York (1991); and *Los Angeles 1955-1985: The Birth of an Art Capital* at The Centre Pompidou, Paris (2006). His works are included in the collections of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

² Ibid.

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About Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Founded by Lucy Mitchell-Innes and David Nash, who previously headed the worldwide Contemporary and Impressionist & Modern Art divisions of Sotheby's, Mitchell-Innes & Nash places exemplary contemporary artists within a historical context, revealing a continuity of ideas and aesthetic virtuosity from the Modern era through the present day. Lucy Mitchell-Innes is also a member of the selection committee of Art Basel and a former president of the Art Dealers Association of America. Mitchell-Innes & Nash's renowned exhibition program fosters excellence within artistic practice, while forging an informed dialogue between emerging and established internationally recognized artists. From acclaimed surveys of 20th century masters, such as Jean Arp, Anthony Caro, Jay DeFeo, Willem de Kooning, Leon Kossoff, Kenneth Noland, Roy Lichtenstein, and Nicolas de Stael, to solo exhibitions of Sarah Braman, Keltie Ferris, Daniel Lefcourt, Eddie Martinez, Pope.L, Martha Rosler, and Jessica Stockholder, Mitchell-Innes & Nash has proven expertise in both advancing the careers of emerging artists and maintaining the superior standard set by established artists.

Caption: PAT O'NEILL, *The Decay of Fiction*, 2002/18, single-channel 35mm and 35mm transferred to digital; 5-channel digital edit 2018, sound design: George Lockwood, RT: 11:30 min.

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