

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

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**“Pat O’Neill plays fast and loose at Cherry and Martin”**

By David Pagel

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Installation view of Pat O’Neill’s exhibition.

If computers could dream, Pat O’Neill might be their Sigmund Freud. His multilayered films, sculptures, collages and drawings — in a mesmerizing mini-survey at Cherry and Martin — seem to be made from the deleted files, trashed photos and lost messages that are beyond the reach of our phones and notebooks but still out there in the ether, with the capacity to come back to haunt us, sometimes savagely.

Think of O’Neill’s exhibition as the digital unconscious in action. That puts you well on your way to understanding what he’s up to as an artist and why his work is so important.

As a whole, the show is a stimulating stew of stuff, a hodgepodge of snippets and fragments and unresolved relationships. Its mess of non sequiturs has a vividness and intensity that charge every element with a potent jolt of energy while never settling into a story line that lets you think you’re over and done with it.

If you like your art cut and dried and easily summarized, you’ll find nothing but frustration in O’Neill’s, which is all about loose ends, rough edges and patterns bigger than any of us.

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In the first gallery, an old-fashioned slideshow that O'Neill made this year introduces visitors to his way of working. Its three projectors are all aimed at the same spot on the wall so that the pictures and texts they project produce a single image that changes, sometimes abruptly, with the clunk of the 35-millimeter slide dropping into place, and sometimes subtly, with a fader mechanism softening the transition.

The story that unfolds has the intangibility of daydreams, the resonance of memories and the atmosphere of homemade documentaries. Its rhythm and structure are integral to its effect. Like the weather, it can't be compartmentalized or taken out of context.

Two small drawings, titled "Surfing the Mohave" and "A Drawing With Oxycodone, Coffee, and Autocritique," similarly slam disparate realities into cramped quarters. The porous borders between fact and fiction — as well as the disruptiveness of inconvenient truths — take potent form.

In the main gallery, two sculptures from the 1960s, two films from the '70s and six framed works on paper from the '70s, '80s and '90s show O'Neill at his best, piling up pictures, superimposing scenes and interrupting images (and objects) by playing fast and loose with the frames of reference we bring to things.

Even his sculptures, whose solidity should be reassuring, seem to be on the move. "Black Sweep" appears to be spinning swiftly, like a reincarnated piece of Italian Futurism. "White Double Sweep" looks as if it's sinking into the pedestal it rests on, like a magic trick gone wrong.

O'Neill's films form the show's heart and soul. "Saugus Series" and "Two Sweeps" throw so many monkey wrenches into a visitor's perceptual machinery that some kind of repair seems to be needed.

That's not a bad situation in which to find yourself, especially when O'Neill is on hand. His sensitivity and insight make room for viewers to have our own.