



The Decay of Fiction
September 8 - October 27, 2018

Pat O'Neill

Press Release

Philip Martin Gallery is proud to present Pat O'Neill's "The Decay of Fiction." The exhibition features a five-channel installation of Pat O'Neill's landmark film of the same title, his sculptures and framed transparency pieces. There will be a reception for the artist, Saturday, September 8, from 6-8pm.

America's sense of itself is changing, O'Neill's meditation on our country, our representations and ourselves seems prescient. First released to tremendous acclaim as a single channel 35mm film in 2002, "The Decay of Fiction" stands as one of the most mysterious works in Pat O'Neill's five-plus decades of artist practice. "The Decay of Fiction" is an investigation of the dilapidated Ambassador Hotel, a place intertwined with the history of Los Angeles, Hollywood, and the making of modern America. Demolished in 2006, the Ambassador Hotel was the site of the Academy Awards, the famous nightclub Cocoanut Grove, and in 1968, the assassination of Robert Kennedy by Pasadena-resident Sirhan Sirhan. In the 1980's the Ambassador Hotel was purchased by Donald Trump, who entered into a protracted legal battle with the Los Angeles Unified School District over the property, and lost. The Ambassador Hotel was ultimately bulldozed.

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“People spend [time] trying to figure out how to get an image on the screen that will tell the story they need, instead of getting an image and then seeing if it tells a story.” (Pat O’Neill, interview November 2017.)

Anyone who has ever seen a Hollywood movie is unwittingly familiar with the interior of the Ambassador Hotel, which served as a film location in movies ranging from “The Graduate” (1967) to “The Wedding Singer” (1998). Film crews were in fact still working on location as the hotel was being torn to the ground. Through back-channels, Pat O’Neill was granted 9 months of access in 1999. “The Decay of Fiction” reveals the Ambassador Hotel as the “intersection of fact and hallucination” — a place of both boredom and transformative beauty. “I go down there sometimes and I think, Oh God, it’s just this dreary old stucco building. But every so often, it will show me something that will just send a shiver up my spine.”

“I’ll look in a room and there will be this reflection from a building across the street of the sun coming through a rippled window making this astonishing picture.” (Excerpt from interview with David E. James, Millennium Film Journal, No. 30/31, Fall 1997.) O’Neill’s time-lapse photography lends the film an ethereal effect that serves an intentionally distancing purpose. For O’Neill, the Ambassador Hotel, like Los Angeles itself, is an uncertain subject, a displaced location in space and time.

In O’Neill’s study of historic Hollywood edifice both literal and filmic, there is no discernible plot and there no recurring characters. O’Neill’s film superimposes reenactments of classic Hollywood films — the stars of which came to see and be seen at the Cocoanut Grove — onto shots of the dilapidated establishment, with ghostly gangsters and their gun molls interacting with icy blondes and wisecracking bartenders in carefully deconstructed snatches of dialogue. The film construction has the appearance of snippets taken from lost films of the 1940s; it uses surreal vignettes of nude men and women, stop-motion animated mannequin torsos, flickering film projections and dim light bulbs to create what devolves in a sense of nightmares, giving a result that feels more like an art installation than the expected film.

The Ambassador Hotel, “comes with all this cultural baggage,” O’Neill says, “in the film business, everybody who ever passed through L. A. went there and has memories of the place...My uncle played trombone in the Jan Garber band, who were regulars there for years...I’ve just occupied myself with filming the container, finding ways to move through it, finding ways to approximate the way people might have existed in the space.” (Excerpt from interview with David E. James, Millennium Film Journal, No. 30/31, Fall 1997.)

As a five-channel work, the film “The Decay of Fiction,” which has haunted O’Neill for years, reappears as an active immersive environment in which viewer and image interact in the physical space of the gallery. No two screens can be viewed at the same time, meaning that there is always slippage and memory in uniting the parts of the final work. This parallels the nearly twenty-year existence in one form or another of “The Decay of Fiction” itself, as not only the film, but also the city that it depicts, and the industry that gave it birth, age and change in their meanings before our very eyes.

FIRST THOUGHTS
INTERVIEW WITH PAT O'NEILL
on the original film THE DECAY OF FICTION

Excerpt from interview with David E. James, Millennium Film Journal, No. 30/31, Fall 1997

David James: Can you describe the Ambassador project briefly?

Pat O'Neill: Basically, on one level it's a documentary of an existing site. The Ambassador Hotel is a curious place. It was called L.A.'s Garden Hotel. It was built in 1920, before any other buildings in the neighborhood, before Hancock Park, as a society hotel, a big deal place for the elite to come for vacations. It's an interesting piece of architecture in that the way it's shaped--an "H" in the plan view--it looks back on itself. It has a massive Spanish tile roof, but in a lot of ways it's a crummy stucco building that's fallen apart and been redecorated time and again. It has the Coconut Grove nightclub that looks what Las Vegas looked like in 1970. So it has all of these contradictions.

When you're in it, you look out to buildings from the 60s and 70s on Wilshire Boulevard, and beyond that just a sea of low apartment houses and a startling view of the high-rise banks downtown. The sun rises behind the banks, symbolically, and sets over the ocean. Up in the tower, you find a clear perspective on the cultural politics of this part of the city. On the eastern horizon, you have Bunker Hill, the center of corporate LA, and down in the streets you have a poor and immigrant community of overcrowded apartment houses. You are in this place like an island. There is a fence around it and no-one inside. The city swirls around it. When I went there, I assumed there would be squatters and gang activity, but that's pretty much absent.

The ball will hit it within five years, but in the mean-time it will take at least two more years of legal battles before they know what they are going to do with the site. The neighborhood is changing so much that development on Wilshire may no longer be seen as a viable alternative. Originally, Donald Trump and his partners were going to put up a 128-story tower of residential units and offices, the biggest building in L.A. He bought it in 1988, then the recession hit and then the earthquake and the value of the property dropped by half. Nobody seriously thought the Ambassador could be saved as a historic architectural site although I know there were efforts early on, but they backed off because the building was pretty badly damaged by the earthquake.

The Ambassador is the Robert Kennedy assassination site. It's perhaps best known for that—the shooting and all the controversy surrounding the investigation of it. It was where Marilyn Monroe stayed and apparently met Jack Kennedy and where J. Edgar Hoover lived and Walter Winchell lived when he was in L. A.--a lot of history that I'm just gradually becoming aware of. So it comes with all this cultural baggage; in the film business, everybody who ever passed through L. A. went there and has memories of the place. The first eight years of the Academy Awards were held there in the Coconut Grove. My uncle played trombone in the Jan Garber band, who were regulars there for years. I tried to get him to tell stories about those days, but he's forgotten them all. But anyway, it's like an architectural container in which dramatic

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episodes can be set and so far I've just occupied myself with filming the container, finding ways to move through it, finding ways to approximate the way people might have existed in the space.

I'm going to composite it so that even the walls are going to be transparent, with sometimes people occupying not only the room that you are in but maybe the next one and maybe even upstairs, and other times it will be completely vacant, just the birds and the cats and the wind blowing. But it's completely unarticulated at this point. All I've been able to do is to make the shots, edit the shots, and think about the transition between the shots and try to deal with all the things that the light does. In about a month I know the sunset will shoot a shaft of light right up the entry hall and all the way up the main corridor to the main lobby. I didn't get it on film because I only saw it for one day, and when I came back, it was cloudy for a week and then it was gone. So I treat it sort of like exploring a valley in New Mexico that has a big rocky thing that looks a certain way in the summer. I wish it would snow or something to really change it. The problem is that it's really monotonous. I go down there sometimes and I think, Oh God, it's just this dreary old stucco building. But every so often, it will show me something that will just send a shiver up my spine. All of a sudden, I'll look in a room and there will be this reflection from a building across the street of the sun coming through a rippled window making this astonishing picture that's just there for maybe five minutes. I've managed to get a couple of those events down, but the equipment is heavy and it takes a couple of us, and by the time you get set up it's gone.

A lot of the footage is designed with the idea that its spaces would be occupied by a cast of characters who would move through it. All of our camera moves are under the control of a computer, so that they can be recreated exactly later on. The camera is mounted on a dolly, which rolls on a track: this, together with pan, tilt, and zoom make up its vocabulary of movement.

Filming with actors can be done later in any large room, and then combined with the hotel footage in post-production. So using this two-stage procedure, I am able to capture the architecture and then later invent the activity that is to go on within it. This is where I am now: writing a script for a film that already exists. We will use performers to tell stories in a naturalistic way and then be able to locate these stories within the constraints of the space. And, of course, the way a character is constructed and revealed is totally variable, as is the overlap of stories.

Curiously, the problem now is writing--conceiving characters, dialog, action. The complexity of this unfamiliar craft (unfamiliar to me: completely familiar to narrative filmmakers) has become a total involvement. I began by seeing the characters in about as much detail as George Segal's mute white plaster mannequins: soon I realized that their actions would become the heart of the film. So I seem to have backed into storytelling. It's all very speculative because I'm not sure what the story is going to be. And then there's the whole thing about the service side and the guest side. There's this whole world that is kitchens and corridors and service elevators and store rooms and huge laundry rooms in the sub-basement, and the tunnels that go out from the kitchen to some of the bungalows. The workers have their stories to tell and the

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guests have theirs, and you don't know much about what the workers' stories might be; you just have to sort of make them up from what you know about life

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