

# ARTFORUM

Hawley, Anthony. "Pat O'Neill, Mitchell-Innes & Nash," *Artforum*, January 3, 2022.



Pat O'Neill  
"The Decay of Fiction," 2001/2018  
Single-channel 35 mm and 35 mm transferred to digital, five channel digital edit, color, sound  
11 minutes 30 seconds

How does one capture a sense of time bedeviling itself? Experimental filmmaker and artist Pat O'Neill's show here, "The Decay of Fiction," interrogated this notion. The first time I visited, I felt as if I were witnessing a palimpsest of hauntings—decades of ghosts sealed inside a building's many surfaces roaming freely. Yet the second time around I experienced an additional sensation: a sustained feeling of displacement caused less by the spooks' presence than by an uncanny sense of their being both stuck inside a specific historical moment and forever pushed outside it. For *The Decay of Fiction*, 2002/2018, a five-channel video installation (as well as the exhibition's namesake), O'Neill shot footage on two occasions in and around Los Angeles's infamous Ambassador Hotel—a storied edifice that was home to the legendary Coconut Grove nightclub and where, on June 6, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. The artist used a time-lapse camera for his initial 1993 outing, with the result that everything he captured twitches: Light shifts dramatically, curtains inside guest rooms quiver frenetically, and night traffic zooms along streets outside windows. Once in a while, we see a slow steady pan down a hall, evincing an approach that toyed with the way architecture, place, and space intersect. Sobering frames of a dilapidated bathroom, parking garage, swimming pool, and sink speak to the lodging's ruin, calling to mind scenes in Chantal Ackerman's films *La chambre* and *Hotel Monterey* (both 1972).

As essayistic and meditative as the first filming is, its vistas also appear to be eagerly awaiting inhabitants. O'Neill devised scenes in such a way that characters could be added at a later stage, and in 2000 he returned to the Ambassador once more, accompanied by two separate casts of actors and a larger tech crew. He then overlaid the 1993 footage with the more recent material, entwining two sets of performers with the accommodations, creating a filmic texture that flutters with grafts, splices, and translucent layerings.

Like phantoms, these men and women are here and somewhere else, all at once. When we see the first set of players, they appear trapped inside a glamorous, bygone era of the silver screen—an age of quillazaires and melodramatic glances. Bejeweled and coiffured starlets stare longingly outside the frame while smoking, or meet their besuited male counterparts at the posh hotel bar. Everyone present seems simultaneously relegated to an old black-and-white movie while waiting for one to happen. The second troupe, a more carnivalesque company of ghouls, exists in another zone of reality. While their props and costumes are of the here and now, their grain feels older—perhaps pulled from the era of the magic lantern or that of the zoetrope. Among this motley crew are a group of naked witchy women who strut across the screen, and a heavy nude man who strolls purposefully into vacant rooms while wearing a hood with a rubber skull on it. Sometimes the two sets of characters cohabit in the same frame, but they don't interact—they move through each others' arenas but never fully into them.

In his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson writes about LA's Bonaventure Hotel and its shiny "glass skin": "It is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself, but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it." Sitting inside *The Decay of Fiction*, I thought about Jameson's words and what it must feel like to be wedged inside this play of reflections, between a looking-glass facade and the misshapen images it projects—a space O'Neill explored within his show. Experiencing the installation felt like inhabiting the porous skins of the Ambassador's surfaces while consummately flowing through an anamorphic history of everything that passed through it via aspirations, desires, assignations, and political traumas. The brilliance here is that amid all the redoubling, temporal alterations, and cinematic techniques, everything almost always matches up, but not quite—it's as if one is suspended in intersecting states of never-ending déjà vu.

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