

Through the Looking Glass

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“Time goes, you say? Ah, no! Alas, Time stays, we go.”

—Henry Austin Dobsonⁱ

At face value, Jimmy O’Neal’s art explores transparency, opacity, reflectance and gesture. Yet of course these characteristics are its means, not ends. No observer should mistake O’Neal’s media for his messages, hypnotic though the former’s effects may be. The paintings seem to say “I’ll be your mirror” – with a nod more to The Velvet Underground’s song lyrics (1967) than to their record producer Andy Warhol’s deadpan, passive-aggressive persona – even as their membranes entice and elude the enquiring gaze. Anyway, the essential point is that mirrors, from at least the ancient Greek times of the Narcissus myth onward, have conveyed extremely mixed messages. As a historian of the subject remarks, “Mirrors are meaningless unless someone looks into them. Thus, a history of the mirror is really the history of looking, and what we perceive in these magical surfaces can tell us a great deal about ourselves – whence we have come, what we imagine, how we think, and what we yearn for. The mirror appears throughout the human drama as a means of self-knowledge or self-delusion. We have used the reflective surface both to reveal and to hide reality”.ⁱⁱ These words might as well apply to O’Neal. A veritable mirror-meister, he refreshes a trope almost as old and as laden with fertile contradictions as humankind itself, not least because mirroring involves the human body and its neurological system.ⁱⁱⁱ

To be sure, O’Neal ensures that his technical bag of tricks is up-to-the-minute. Early on, in the mid-1990s, he employed electronic “pouncers” – modern devices descended from the Renaissance method to translate drawings to much larger surfaces such as murals. Typically, though, O’Neal connected a wire to his toe that placed him within the electric current between the stiletto and the steel easel. Whenever the pouncer’s stiletto made a mark he got a shock. This was only one among the instances when O’Neal initiated an ongoing paradigm. Namely, setups where the self interacts with technology and/or the forces underlying far broader natural energies, especially electricity. From then until now, virtual ghosts or comparable simulacra inhabit O’Neal’s proverbial machines. (In a 1967 book about philosophical psychology, *The Ghost in the Machine*, novelist Arthur Koestler coined the titular phrase to describe and unify the material agency of the mind in the body^{iv}). Mind and matter remain the two axes of O’Neal’s theory and practice as he melds space and the psyche. Quite often, electricity is the literal and metaphorical conductor joining the two. Remember. electricity coursing through the neural circuitry is the first thing to stop when we die.

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Subsequently, O’Neal gravitated to more nuanced developments of what he calls “situational time machines”.^v Such installations – mostly quite sprawling and thus beyond the scope of the current selection – extended the artist-subject’s love affair with electricity via cameras mounted on electric toy trains, video, a “completion nib” (an electronic drawing utensil), as well as Photoshop, thermal paper and air-conditioning units. Nevertheless, at heart O’Neal remained a painter and perhaps a humanist one at that (“I wanted to keep a brush in my hand”^{vi}). On this score, his fundamental invention has pivoted on reflectivity and refraction. In short, O’Neal sands the surface of an acrylic mirror, concocts a super-clear, chemically-bonding acrylic paint and applies it with a conventional brush. Viscous though translucent, the maker regards the gestural pictorial layers as “lenses”. And well might he do so.

The mirrored paintings at the crux of this show present a painterly cornucopia. Excess is the name of the game. How? The answer lies in not just the sheer exuberance of O’Neal’s mark-making, but also in its immersive potential. Lens allow vision to come into and out of focus. Hence they presuppose a human subject that incorporates transition and, ergo, temporality. However, it is precisely the latter that has become “ephemeralized” – a favorite term in O’Neal’s vocabulary – in our age prone to virtual vibes and the metaverse. Accordingly, the artist theorizes his strategies with an impressive roster of philosophers, scientists, and their ilk, ranging from Jean Baudrillard to Jacques Derrida and Rizwan Virk. (In this respect, his 2016 M.A. thesis is something of a conceptual tour-de-force^{vii}). All, albeit from disparate standpoints, postulate the evanescence of a narcissistic subjectivity into nothing less than cyberspace’s immaterial aether – as it were, a universal solvent. Upholding this premise, O’Neal delves post-modernism’s warped spaces and startling temporalities.^{viii} No wonder Virk’s *The Simulation Hypothesis* counts among his favorite books. Its two epigraphs encapsulate the author’s thesis. Firstly in Albert Einstein’s words, “Reality is merely an illusion”. Secondly, Buddha:

“Know that all phenomena
Are like reflections appearing
In a very clear mirror;
Devoid of inherent existence.”^{ix}

To support this idea, Virk (whose ideology is by no means unique) draws upon a nexus laden with quantum theory, AI, Parallel Worlds, video games, and even more esoterica from physics, and so forth.^x As the epigraphs suggest, contemporary Western science meets venerable Eastern wisdom. Truth to tell, much of this and similar texts are beyond my ken, being by instinct almost a semi-Luddite

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technophobe.^{xi} Nevertheless, it is not my purpose to question their veracity since truth can be famously stranger than fiction. What fascinates me is their role in O’Neal’s creative scheme. How? In the positive, not derogatory, sense that many artists need what I call “creation myths”, catalysts and grist to the mill of their mind’s eye and hands.^{xii} Think, almost at random, of Marcel Duchamp and pataphysics (not to mention the precedent that *The Large Glass* [1915-] set for future avant-gardes with respect to transparency, reflections, and time); Alfred Jensen’s obsessive numerologies^{xiii}; Francis Bacon’s fixation with photography (and, in the current context, we might also remember his preference for having his canvases framed and glaze); and Dorothea Rockburne’s recourse to complex set theory. The issue is not whether these are creative fictions or fact. Rather, they are muses. Likewise, O’Neal’s blending tradition and technology.

Speaking of tradition, Jackson Pollock is a notable touchstone. In particular, one of his last poured paintings executed, unusually, on glass – *Number 29, 1950*. There, Pollock laid bare process so that the viewer looks simultaneously *at, into* and *through* the image. It culminates what an earlier composition, *The Magic Mirror* (1941), had invoked with its title and pallid, swirling layers. Overall, duration is at once frozen and prolonged. To cite the storied, terse notes that Pollock penned in the same year as this work, we behold:



“States of order—
organic intensity—
energy and motion
made visible—
memories arrested in space.”^{xiv}

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In a nutshell, the foregoing could be O'Neal's credo, albeit updated for the twenty-first century's technological know-how and gizmos. Surely Pollock would have approved, given his remark in the same note:

“Technic is the result of a need—
new needs demand new technics—”

O'Neal's dynamic is nothing if not about “making it new” (to recall the poet Ezra Pound's slogan) so that – as this show's title has it – whatever he does is “about now” and, to cite another painting's title, “optimizing the moment”.

The equation with Pollock can go further. For example, Pollock had incorporated heterodox materials into his pigment skeins, including nails, string, a key and sand. O'Neal goes one step further, adding flies, bees, snake skin, goat fur, a butterfly, leaves and, in *Fetch*, peacock feathers. “Organic intensity” indeed. Furthermore, this heterotopia – to borrow a notion from the French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault^{xv} – plays upon memory, even melancholia. To quote O'Neal, “I have a fantasy of mixing peoples' ashes, the ashes of a loved one in the clear pigment and doing the person's portrait so all can see themselves within the rendering of the person.”^{xvi} In a similar vein, he explains that “of course all of the elements that are mixed in the paint are just for remembrance of a fading natural/physical world. They float amongst the reflections.” If one world fades, another brightens. To wit, our finale: O'Neal's recent output. In my reckoning it often trumps or crowns his earlier work. Let us consider this heterotopia.

Fragments or ruins populate the mirror paintings. Before them, during the 1990s the motifs were sometimes near-identifiable: an eye, a clock or watch face (*nota bene* the coupling of human identity, the “face”, with supra-human time), chimeras, light bulbs, a shoe – shades of the late Philip Guston.^{xvii} Now, metamorphosis is everything. Like water that eddies, quivers, reflects and engulfs, the fields flow with the pulsing flux of consciousness, whether human or morphed into simulacra. The Irish poet W. B. Yeats foretold the latter while addressing the former:

Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea^{xviii}

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The “sea” is self-explanatory in its fluidity. As for the “dolphin”, it reflects Yeats’s studies in Neo-Platonism, according to which the aquatic mammal was thought to accompany the souls of the dead into the after-life.^{xix} I am tempted to also suggest that the “gong” unknowingly anticipates O’Neal’s synesthetic involvement with cymatics, the study of sound and vibration made visible (as in the radiating circular geometries that inform *7lbs of Light in a 5lb Render*.) From sound waves to light waves is but a short step. Whatever, intriguingly, not only do Yeats’ sentiments chime with O’Neal’s aforementioned allusions to transience or mortality, they also connect the poet with the artist by an alternative route.

In a nutshell, this show is an “introspective”. Notwithstanding its spectacular array, the core impulse still looks within rather than merely backward. Aptly, O’Neal has on occasions used EEG headgear to transform his electrical brain activity into traces.^{xx} Interiority rendered optical. In any event, Yeats knew Gnostic philosophy,^{xxi} which has much in common with Neo-Platonism.^{xxii} “Gnosis” denotes inner knowledge. Doubtless, O’Neal prizes this quality. As he explained about the passing insect that serendipitously intersected with his graphic delineation of brain waves during an earlier project: “So, in essence, my moth-in-the-brain-waves breakthrough – *to look inside for a suggested transcendental center* [my italics] – came... like a rock through a sacred rosary.”^{xxiii} The mirrored paintings may play tricks with the eyes and, consequently, the mind. However, they never come across as tricky. Instead, they amount to a theater of the mind, a latter-day reinvention of the Renaissance’s *theatrum mundi* or “theater of the world”. That omniscient perspective sees little and large, past, present and future, from an encompassing perspective. William Shakespeare voiced it in a passage too well-known to need quoting when he wrote that “All the world’s a stage...”^{xxiv} O’Neal has transformed this ancient stage into a contemporary memory theater.^{xxv} Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, he transports the viewer through the looking glass: “Let’s pretend there’s a way of getting through into it, somehow... Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, its turning into a sort of mist now, I declare!... And certainly, the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright, silvery mist”.^{xxvi} Subtract the child’s play-acting from this fantastical realm, make it visual and you have... O’Neal’s vivid, if fleeting, mindscapes. Their marks-cum-lenses twist, turn, intertwine, disperse, wane cloudy, or wax transparent, reflect our presence and dissolve their own. Always they dance to the music of time,^{xxvii} appearing to our vision and imaginations as through a glass, brightly.^{xxviii}

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I dedicate this essay to my dear and prematurely departed friend, Joseph D. Ketner III, former Director of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. Without Joe, I would never have met Jimmy.

ⁱ Dobson, "Paradox of Time", in *Proverbs in Porcelain* (1877)

ⁱⁱ Mark Prendergrast, *Mirror / Mirror. A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. ix. Relevant though Jacques Lacan's psychological writings on "the mirror stage" may be, this is not the place to address them.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leonardo da Vinci's mirror-writing belongs to that entity's more enigmatic aspect in an art context. On the second, neurological side, see *Spiegelbilder in Kunst und Medizin* (Thun: Kunstmuseum Thun, 2017).

^{iv} In essence, a retort to Cartesian dualism that regarded mind as a metaphysical entity altogether separate from the physiological body.

^v James Luther O'Neal III, "What Essence Was It That Time Was Of: The Ephemeralization of Painting Lens", M.A. thesis (Savannah: Susannah College of Art and Design, 2016), p. 8.

^{vi} O'Neal 2016, p. 16.

^{vii} Full disclosure: I was one of the three Committee Members for the degree.

^{viii} Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space. Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2000).

^{ix} Rizwan Virk, *The Simulation Hypothesis. An MIT Computer Scientist Shows Why AI, Quantum Physics and Eastern Mystics Agree We Are in a Video Game* (<http://www.bayviewlabs.com/bayviewbooks/>: Bayview Books, 2021), p. 1.

^x Such tracts remind me of contemporary, more scientific equivalents to a book I devoured in my youth, Thomas M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974).

^{xi} I live in daily trepidation, if not wonderment, at even my iMac and android smartphone, constantly worrying if either or both will exceed my capabilities or, woe, simply go wrong.

^{xii} The literary scholar Harold Bloom would describe this phenomenon as the "anxiety of influence".

^{xiii} See David Anfam, "Alfred Jensen: A Cosmos in Context", in *Alfred Jensen: Concordance* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 2001), pp. 62–75.

^{xiv} Pollock (late 1950), in Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 24.

^{xv} Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), viii.

^{xvi} Unless otherwise noted, all further citations are from conversations with O'Neal.

^{xvii} To my eye, Sigmar Polke looks to have been another influence.

^{xviii} "Byzantium" (1930), in W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 211.

^{xix} The correct Greek noun for such a guiding/guardian figure is "psychopompós".

^{xx} Notably, in the installation *Karreza Noemata* at The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University (2003).

^{xxi} Yun Wook Chung, "W. B. Yeats: A Comparative Study of His Gnostic Knowledge and His Poetics of Knowing in His Poetry", *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 40 (December 2012), pp. 209–29.

^{xxii} For example, Alexander J. Mazur, "The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Interpretation of Plato's Sophist", in A. D. DeConick, G. Shaw, and J. D. Turner, eds., *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy, and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 469–93.

^{xxiii} O'Neal 2016, p. 46.

^{xxiv} Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7, line 139. O'Neal has given the title *As You Like It* to a piece done last year. Go figure.

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^{xxv} On their historical mnemonic precursors, see Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London and New York: Penguin, 1966).

^{xxvi} Lewis Carroll, ed., Hugh Haughton, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London and New York: Penguin Books [1865, 1872], 1998). p. 127.

^{xxvii} For a recent take on the shapes that time may assume, see Carlo Rovelli, trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell, *The Order of Time* (Penguin Books: London and New York, 2018). My thanks to Jimmy for introducing me to this fascinating text.

^{xxviii} Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

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ABOUT NOW: AN INTROSPECTIVE | JIMMY O'NEAL

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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