frieze

Owen Land

Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium

American filmmaker Owen Land (formerly George Landow) has been known to enigmatically present himself as having 'studied drawing, painting and sculpture with teachers in a direct line from the French artist Jean Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), who is remembered for his historically accurate scenes of life in ancient Rome.' What Gérôme, *the* 19th-century academic painter *par excellence* – probably better remembered for his magnificently over-the-top orientalist schlock – has to do with Land, a self-styled experimental filmmaker with a thing for religion and a Duchampian weakness for puns, is anybody's guess. Perhaps it's an elaborate ruse? Or maybe Land sees himself as somehow analogous to the 19th-century breakaway progeny of an academic painter (e.g. Manet and Thomas Couture)? Or maybe it's just a question of plastic beauty? After all, no matter how over-the-top Gérôme's fantasies may be, one cannot deny them their shameless ability to seduce. In any event, a plastic, even fetishistic beauty predominates in this exhibition of four 16 mm films and one video – so the seductive link might not be so far off the mark.

'Logical Façades' is Land's first exhibition in a commercial gallery. Three works – which issue directly, if a little ironically, from the materialist practices of structuralist filmmaking – are simultaneously screened in the main space of this apartment-cum-gallery: *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1965-66), *Fleming Faloon* (1963-64), and *A Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour Commissioned by Christian World Liberation Front of Berkeley California* (1974). All three, in one way or another, disclose and insistently dwell upon their own 'malfunctioning' mechanism. *Fleming Faloon*, for instance, begins with skipping footage of a news anchor (think Omer Fast's 2002 *CNN Concatenated*, only 40 years ago), which then mutates into a serialized multiple-screened portrait of a man and other imagery, full of varying color saturations, as if the whole affair had gone gorgeously awry. *A Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour...* consists of rapidly alternating footage of seminars and urban scenery, in which the sound has been partially elided so that it hiccups steadily along. Initially

Owen Land (George Landow),
Fleming Faloon (1963-4)

laugh-out-loud funny due to its total, willful failure as a documentary, the film settles into a bewitching, cinematic beauty with sustained viewing.

The exhibition comprises two other pieces: *What's Wrong with This Picture? 2* (1972) and *Undesirables* (1999-ongoing). The first, a black-and-white 16 mm film projected in a back room, portrays a conversation between the artist and a random passerby while the transcript of the conversation is superimposed across the entirety of image. Supposedly privileging language over image, this piece nonetheless wields a fetishistic allure by virtue of its compact, painterly projection. *Undesirables* is a trailer for an unfinished, tongue-in-cheek film about the death of experimental cinema. The side-splittingly funny farce, whose synopsis reads like a Thomas Pynchon novel, is full of references to Land's structuralist contemporaries and exaggeratedly experimental camera work.

What makes this show special is its context: up until now, for various logistical and financial reasons, Land's films have only been shown in the context of the cinema, either individually or as part of a screening programme. Inserted into a white cube, they become both less and more themselves. Less in that, bereft of the big screen, they tend to shed some of their once radical, non-narrative recalcitrance. However, projected in easel-painting size proportions in close proximity to their projectors, they almost become objects, and their stunning celluloid presence and original concerns (illusionism, borders, materiality) are made all the more manifest through this intimacy.

Chris Sharp