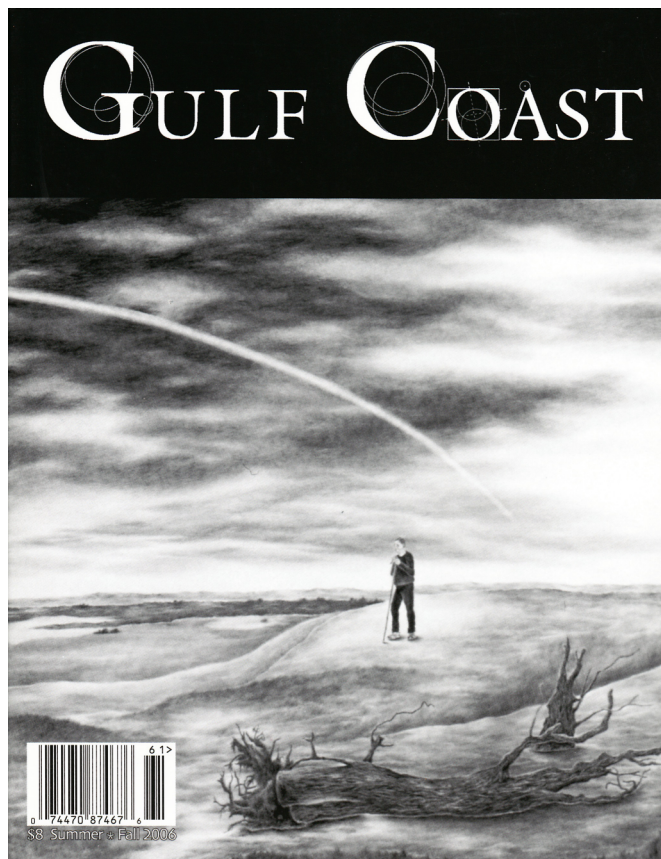
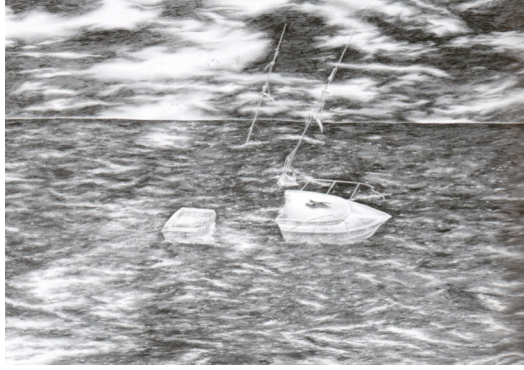


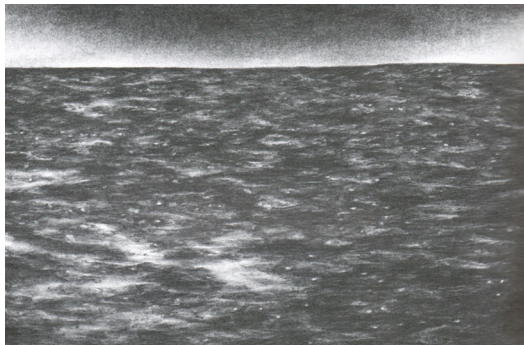
De Lima Greene, Alison, "Robyn O'Neil: Leaving", GULF COAST: A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS, Volume 18, Number 2, Summer / Fall 2006, pg. 145-157.



522 West 24th Street New York NY 10011 / tel 212 647 9111 / fax 212 647 9333  
info@inglettgallery.com / www.inglettgallery.com

**SUSAN INGLETT**







Cover:

*The Lost Landscape With Rainbow (Based on Caspar David Friedrich)*, 2005  
graphite on paper 20 5/8 x 48 1/2 inches  
Collection of Paul Rickert, Greenbrae, California

Page 143, *Low Cloud Landscape, No. 2*, 2003  
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Collection of Jerry and Helen Davis Houston, Texas

Page 144, *This Man Fell Silent*, 2005  
graphite on paper, 32 x 40 inches  
Collection of Nash Flores, Dallas, Texas

Page 145, *Falling*, 2005  
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection Carlisle Vandervoot, Houston, Texas

Page 146, *Forgetting*, 2005  
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection of Jane Scott, New York, New York

Page 147, *They Walk, Fall, Continue, and Die, No. 6*, 2003  
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Collection of Kerry Inman and Denby Auble, Houston, Texas

Page 148, *Five More Fallen*, 2004  
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection of John Robertson, Toronto

Page 149, *Leaving*, 2005  
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection of Susanne Joyner, Reston, Virginia

Page 150, *Darkening*, 2005  
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection of Bill and Charlotte Ford, New York, New York



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Alison de Lima Greene

## Robyn O'Neil: Leaving

*I've been here so long I can't really recall what, or how, or who I was before. Okay, that's not exactly true. I was a son, a brother, a husband, a father, and a garage door salesman.<sup>1</sup>*

Robyn O'Neil leads us into a landscape at once familiar and alienating. Far-reaching vistas, snow-bound vignettes, and unlimited oceans summon up travel journals, half-remembered news items, or perhaps dimly recalled children's books. At the same time we recognize that this is nature at its least welcoming, a limbo without mercy through which we pass on the way to oblivion.

The eight drawings gathered together in these pages were selected and organized by O'Neil. Although they were sketched over a two-year period, and were not originally conceived as a folio, they suggest a narrative thread consistent with her larger production. Using a standard .5 mechanical pencil, HB lead, and a well-worn smudge stump, O'Neil constructs these intimate compositions with the economic precision of a Renaissance predella. And much as Fra Angelico or Giovanni di Paolo chose scenes from the lives of the saints to illuminate moral choice and sacred belief, O'Neil addresses the human condition. She has observed: "I work without denying the seemingly mundane traditions of artmaking at its most basic. I make graphite landscapes and I populate them with images ranging from humans throwing up to birds of prey mating in free fall... What is the prime focus? Death."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. Tyler Lindvall, "As My Heart Quiets and My Body Dies, Take Me Gently Through Your Troubled Sky," 2005. This text was written in response to O'Neil's drawings and is quoted courtesy of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn O'Neil, unpublished statement, November 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

O'Neil has arranged these drawings with a cinematic cadence of set pieces, long shots, and close-ups. She opens this sequence with one of her most pared-down and silent landscapes, essentially an establishing shot. A dramatic shift is introduced over the next two pages with the catastrophic scenarios of *This Man Fell Silent* and *Falling*. The next sequence of four drawings moves from meditation to the concrete fact of death, while the closing image of a darkening sea offers a *tabula rasa* and a return to elemental purity. Man is cast in the role of the intruder—impotent, aimless, adrift, or out of control—a fact O'Neil underscores with deliberately awkward draftsmanship. Like Robert Altman's McCabe, these protagonists lose their way, ultimately to vanish into the landscape.

We know nothing of the past which shaped these men's lives, nor do we really know what happens to them, despite the inevitability of such images as *Falling*. That they are of our time and place is attested to by the fact that they are wearing track suits and Nikes, but the landscapes into which they have been cast seem unchanging and eternal. In their isolation they are most akin to such navigators as Joshua Slocum (1844–1909) and Donald Crowhurst (1932–1969), both of whom disappeared at sea. Crowhurst's logbook, which chronicled his ill-fated effort to establish a world record for solo circumnavigation, offers a particularly telling analogue to the liminal mood O'Neil evokes in her drawings: "God's clock is not the same as our clock. He has an infinite amount of 'our' time." Crowhurst added as his final entry, "It is finished, it is finished, it is the mercy."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> British artist Tacita Dean has explored Donald Crowhurst's saga in a number of works. See Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron*. London: National Maritime Museum, 1999. Both quotations from Crowhurst's logbook are taken from this unpaginated publication.



A different stage of passage is suggested by *The Lost Landscape With Rainbow (Based on Caspar David Friedrich)*, a large detail of which appears on the cover of this publication. Here we see a man, holding a pilgrim's staff, poised at the beginning of his journey. A withered tree in the foreground and a flourishing oak in the distance are easily recognized tropes, as is the rainbow which arches across the page. As the title readily discloses, the composition is based on Caspar David Friedrich's *Landscape with Rainbow, 1808-10*, a recently recovered painting that was lost for over fifty years following World War II. O'Neil pulls the composition into a more horizontal format and eliminates the herd of goats which defined Friedrich's protagonist as a shepherd. In other respects, however, she remains true to the original's Romantic spirit of aspiration and transcendent humility.

O'Neil is not alone in making drawing her exclusive idiom; such contemporaries as Amy Cutler and Marcel Dzama have also explored popular graphic conventions as a means to reinvigorate the Modernist project. However, O'Neil alone makes the quest for the absolute—one of the central myths of Modernism—the subject of her work. Kasimir Malevich's 1927 essay on Suprematism could serve as a map to O'Neil's territory:

The ascent to the heights of Non-Objective art is arduous and painful, but is rewarding nonetheless. The familiar begins to recede into the background. The contours of the objective world fade more and more, step by step, until finally the world, everything on which we have lived, becomes lost to sight. No more likeness or reality, no idealistic images, nothing but a desert. I was fearful of leaving the ordinary world of will and idea, but the



promise of liberation drew me onward, onto a desert filled with the spirit of Non-Objective sensation, where nothing is real except the feeling.<sup>4</sup>

For O'Neil the absolute does not lie in pure abstraction; she freely alludes to the history of art, popular culture, and, perhaps more indirectly, current events throughout her compositions. However, like Malevich, she is willing to cut to the bone and venture into the desert.

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<sup>4</sup>Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism," 1927; as quoted by Dave Hickey, "Dialectical Utopias," Harvard Design Magazine 4 (Winter/Spring 1998), 2.