

NEW DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN DRAWING

ROBYN O'NEIL

Robyn O'Neil's drawings can be viewed as the visual equivalent of a contemporary morality play exploring the complexities of the human condition. In them, the artist presents a snowbound world inhabited by clone-like middle-aged male figures, limited wildlife and wiry trees. Her sweet suit-clad men, originally conceived as lighthearted interpretations of her father and his friends, soon became her archetype for mankind, reflecting the full spectrum of human behavior. O'Neil envisioned her series of drawings as a "long-term apocalyptic storyline," deliberately devoid of women so that procreation, and its implications for regeneration and renewal, would be impossible.

The specter of death looms large in O'Neil's work. Her drawings, which range from very small works to large, multi-paneled pieces, explore the consequences of human actions within an unforgiving landscape. The human residents of this world behave, in many ways, like those of our own—engaging in enigmatic rituals, warfare and suicide, as well as acts of human compassion and spiritual reverence. Even in crowds, the inhabitants in O'Neil's drawings appear isolated; her work conveys a palpable sense of psychological angst and loss, born out by the random, seemingly senseless actions of her cast of characters.

Owls play a pivotal role in O'Neil's narratives. Traditionally associated with wisdom, the owl has also long been viewed as an omen of death. In O'Neil's invented world, the owl serves as the "wise leader," impassively surveying the human action below. The owls are often depicted in groups of five, representing five beloved members of the artist's own family. In the eerie and pivotal *Fading Away from a Sleep*, one of those owls lies dying, presaging the apocalypse that will eventually befall the inhabitants of O'Neil's world. The owl's strangely human face, the neat line of five tiny men approaching from a distance, and the oddly crooked tree framing the owl's rigid body, all contribute to an enigmatic narrative that raises more questions than it answers.

The artist produces thumbnail preliminary sketches for all her drawings, rendering the landscape first as if setting a stage, and choreographing the human and animal life thereafter. With the exception of her most recent work, O'Neil's drawings typically utilize the negative white space of the paper as a vital part of the composition, comprising the snowy mountain landscapes and looming clouds that often appear in her work. Scale also serves an important function in O'Neil's work, determining the scope of the narrative presented. The artist defines this scope in literary terms, considering her large drawings the visual equivalent of a full novel, her midsize works as a paragraph, and the smaller works as sentences or poems.

HKM