

White, Michelle, "Drawing After the End of the World: Robyn O'Neil's New Adventure", ART PAPERS, March/April 2008.



# ART PAPERS

TEXT / MICHELLE WHITE

Last fall, Robyn O'Neil concluded a seven-year saga begun with a pencil drawing made in graduate school. Awkwardly drawn, it featured two happy, middle-aged, anti-hipsters comfortably sporting sneakers and saggy sweatsuits with elastic bands at the ankles. Fascinated by these funny but pathetic characters—which she describes as “archetypal normal” guys—she let them design their own adventures. She eventually began incorporating them into a drawn population of similarly rendered men also engaged in leisurely pursuits. Scattered in landscapes of vast snowy forests and mountain peaks, these tiny men jogged, cross-country skied, and sat around campfires roasting marshmallows.

While these scenarios may have initially seemed innocent and whimsical, details eventually revealed the hopelessness of the situation. Most prophetic of the ill fate of O'Neil's community was the lack of women, which precluded procreation. What's more, the men were always vulnerable in a cold and exposed world. As the narrative progressed, environmental unease grew more apparent. While storm clouds took shape to eventually loom, the unconcerned community's activities revealed their obliviousness to the direness of the situation. O'Neil explains that she wanted it to seem preposterous and frustrating that the guys were doing calisthenics when their world looked as if it were about to end. So, as her blank, white, exposed paper sky grew into denser smooth and feathery clouds of smudged graphite, the growing hostility of the artist's compulsive mark-making reflected the anxiety produced by the clueless men.

At this point in her developing saga, O'Neil realized that her work was more than an elaborate and bizarre fairytale. It was a full-blown narrative investigation of man's proverbial battle against nature. Linear in its unfolding and cinematic in pace, the drawn-out struggle enlisted bi- and tripartite compositions inspired by Renaissance altarpieces and featured moralizing figural details that recall Hieronymus Bosch's paintings. She also endowed her works with titles of biblical profundity. Engaged in ambiguous gesticulations and ritualistic performances, her protagonists descended into behavioral entropy reminiscent of the communal demise in *Lord of the Flies*. Their nonsensical activities ranged from tender moments of embrace to soberness, as they fell to their knees in the snow or hunched over fallen birds. They were now players in an apocalyptic tale of mortality.

O'Neil's timely willingness to embrace such an epic theme garnered her considerable attention. Shamim Momin, one of the curators of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, characterized her mythmaking as a tendency towards escape into fantastic realms that, shared by a number of artists, reflects our current unease and obsession with futility. Embracing the “absurd chaos of our existence,” she argued, was a means to understand the world.<sup>1</sup> O'Neil's playful figure rendition can also be discussed in terms of the “M.F.A. Outsider Art” phenomenon, as it was taking shape in 2005,<sup>1</sup> when many artists drew wooded backdrops as a nostalgic and earthy pre-technological metaphor. The site of magic and fairytale romance, the forest became a signifier of the

integrity and immediacy of drawing—an antidote to a slick media-saturated contemporary art world. Amy Cutler's drawings, for example, come to mind. Tapping syrup in maple forests, her armies of women with braids, quilted aprons, and practical footwear imply a longing for genuine connection to the natural world, which begins with the homespun integrity of art making.

Much has been written on O'Neil's work. So far, the discussion has focused on her unique narrative. To be sure, this aspect is critical and she often gets together to talk about invented stories with her friend Trenton Doyle Hancock, an artist who has developed an extraordinary cast of characters of his own. As undergraduates at East Texas State University, they both studied with Lee Baxter Davis who taught them “the labyrinth” approach to narrative drawing—starting with an idea and letting each new work dictate the path of the twisting plot. Davis' unorthodox idea has been very influential, taken on by generations of students. In the 1970s, a term was coined to describe this meticulous attention to detail and religious conviction in the ingenuity of these drawn universes: “The Lizard Cult.” Like creased reptilian skin, the intricacy of elaborate tales is woven deep into the work, by way of intricate mark-making.

Yet, O'Neil's formal interest sets her work apart from the productions of this circle. Her very labor-intensive process conceptually aligns the act of drawing with her melancholy mythology. This tight convergence of process, image, and narrative is performed by way of her incredible play with scale and materials:

## DRAWING AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD: ROBYN O'NEIL'S NEW ADVENTURE

OPPOSITE: Robyn O'Neil, *A Disharmony*, 2007, graphite on paper, 72 x 72 inches [courtesy of the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas]

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she uses both the thinnest lead mechanical pencil—.3 cm—and the largest commercially available sheet of paper—at a height of six and a half feet. The articulation of grass, for example, tediously requires going over smudged lines of thin graphite with subtle vertical marks for whiffs of blades. Likewise, the details of the men's features are microscopic. Her sleight of hand is as nuanced as an Old Master etching. All of this invites close examination. The incongruity between the vastness of the support and the drawing's meticulousness begs many to wonder how long it took to make.

This question used to annoy O'Neil. Yet, as her narrative grew more dramatic—left as individuals contemplating rainbows or pondering gaping holes in the earth, her men began to struggle on

their knees in the snow and even die out—she embraced the idea that the labor inherent in her drawing process was an important part of the story. The primordial, if not primal, quality of the drawn mark is a unique attribute. For the artist, a reductive visual language of graphite lines conveys an immediacy that paradoxically gives full weight to the artistic subjectivity of the narrative structure.

O'Neil's seven-year story ended with the presentation of a new body of work in the fall of 2007. Most striking here was the increased drama of natural decline. On the forest floor of this bucolic land, the snow was melting. Still tragically unaware of the fragility of their world, the men faced new environmental hardships in an age of global warming. This climate change allowed

O'Neil to increase the saturation of her graphite surface, and to introduce seascapes and mounds of dark earth. She wanted to draw the space in a bold intensity that would match the intensified narrative.

The show culminated with *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past.*, 2007, which marks the "end of everything" she has made. Here, the lone survivor of the soon-to-be extinct community literally hung on a thread. Suspended over ocean swells of speckled graphite ribbons, his fate was sealed. While the end had always been inevitable, she did not know how it would unfold. Still, the end's relative calm and absence of an explosive crescendo surprised her. For instance, the waves neither crested in white, nor were they rendered in agitated



lines. Deep and forcefully rhythmic, the lines simply covered the entire expanse of the support.

I went to Robyn O'Neil's studio to see what might happen next. This is an important moment for her. My visit came only one week into her first drawing—since the end. We talked about freak meteorological phenomena when birds or frogs mysteriously fall from the sky, and the place where "ships navigate the clouds." In her new drawing, ashes are beginning to rain over a Magritte-inspired island hovering above a horizon line. I think I saw some new signs of life, just as her language of mark-making has become entirely her own, with minute articulations and smudged mechanical lead whips spreading horizontally across the vastness of a new, smooth and white, mural-sized sheet of paper.

I can't help but mention that O'Neil lives and works in a home at the end of a cul-de-sac in a leafy subdivision north of Houston. It's a planned community based on the nineteenth-century garden city model of suburban retreat. There are footbridges and whimsical road names like "Wild Blueberry" and "King's Mountain." Joggers in tracksuits navigate tree-lined footpaths. A welcome sign off the highway proclaims entrée into "a livable forest"—a striking indication that I was entering O'Neil's world. At peace with living in the in-between, where Texas-sized SUVs roam the land and newly posted hurricane evacuation route signposts remind us of nature's dominance, O'Neil, like her work, may be finding some new hope at the end of the world.

#### NOTES

1. Unless noted, all quotes taken from artist's conversation with the author, January 12, 2008.
2. Shamim M. Momin, "Beneath the Remains: What Magic in Myth?," *Whitney Biennial 2004*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004, 39.
3. The term seems to have been used first in reviews of various art fairs in 2005-2006. See, for example, Holland Cotter, "ART REVIEW: The World Tour Rolls Into Town, Sprawling but Tidy," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2006.

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *The End*, 2007, graphite on paper, 72 x 72 inches; *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past.*, 2007, graphite on paper, 83 x 166.75 inches [courtesy of the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas]