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"WE, THE MASSES" offers introspective look on humanity

BY Claire Wineman: *Contributing Writer*

I've come to find that the ideal place to seek shelter from the dreary Ohio winter, especially as a college student, must meet a handful of requirements: a significant light source, a comfy place to sit (with room for friends) and some sort of thought-provoking piece at its center that may or may not cause you to have an existential crisis. Robyn O'Neil's short film, "WE, THE MASSES," installed at the College of Wooster Art Museum (CWAM) from Jan. 23 to March 8, not only meets these guidelines beautifully, but also provides a meditation that remains with you well beyond its 13-minute run time.



The film, which screens four times an hour on the quarter hour, is a black-and-white stop motion piece in the artist's characteristic "apocalyptic" style that you view from bean bag and yard chairs set up before the projection screen. Small flashlights are provided in case you get scared sitting in the dark. We follow O'Neil's representation of humanity — tiny sweatsuit-wearing men — through a menacing, barren world where they reckon with one another and the natural environment surrounding them. It follows no particular plot, and instead excellently portrays O'Neil's themes of "futility, hope and self-inflicted wounds" as we watch the men interact and perform pointless tasks over an unspecified period of time. Their behavior depicts some of the most frustrating human tendencies: our transformation of something useful into something violent, like the rocks one man uses to make a pair of ice skates while another turns them into a weapon; our habit of standing by instead of making a difference, as one man does when he passes a dying horse but doesn't aid it. As the viewer, you become frustrated over the course of the film, watching as the men engage in increasingly futile tasks that seem to bring only more misfortune while the natural world gradually takes over in the form of storms and floods.

Yet this building sense of anxiety clearly has a purpose, which culminates in the only words O'Neil includes in the piece: "These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past." The idea of the past seems to be a direct message to the audience; the scenes depicted in the film may very well be a display of humanity's own history, and the ways we've behaved up to this point, wreaking havoc on one another only to be ultimately quelled by the planet rearing against our destruction.

The film concludes with an open ending and no real resolution, leaving us to wonder if anyone survives. O'Neil justifies this by saying, "Endings can be inconclusive, but yet are still called 'endings.' They are also starting points; things must end so that something else will happen." I left "WE, THE MASSES" wondering how we should pick up where the characters left off: if their chaotic story is the prologue, how will we use this starting point to improve the future?