

ROBYN O'NEIL

BODYBUILDER AND SPORTSMAN

In fifteen works on paper, Robyn O'Neil depicts a snowy, isolated, mountainous spot seemingly hospitable only to fir trees and robust bearded men. In this alpinelike setting, O'Neil finds a rich backdrop for life's starker passages, a place curiously conducive to allegory and ritual, where the passions and fantasies of humankind are enacted against a frigid and impassive Mother Nature. Existence seems sharper in her highlands, which are peopled only by men, often alone, confronting some crossroads from which they may or may not emerge. *Allegory of Virtue and Vice* (all works 2004) makes direct reference to a 1505 painting of the same name by the Venetian master Lorenzo Lotto. But where Lotto's work offers up a clear choice between industry and debauchery (it centers on a craggy trunk out of which sprouts a single new branch; on the ground at left an infant plays with what appear to be drafting tools, while on the right a satyr gazes into an amphora), O'Neil's figures are involved in something more ambiguous. In her version, a smallish dog seems to monitor an area to the left of the tree while, on the right, an outdoorsman struggles to plant a branch into the earth. Instead of iconic clarity, the artist seems to be aiming for a sense of personal drama or to mark the moment of the path not taken.

There are numerous scenes of death and despair in O'Neil's frigid northland. The quintet of dead birds of *Five More Fallen* is surprisingly moving, regardless of whether this is a picture of hunting victims or a kind of *et in Arcadia ego*. The artist's economical hand is everywhere present; she uses the white of the paper to stand in for snow or sky, and no more than a fraction of any given sheet is covered with her feathery graphite touch. *And Then They Were upon Him* (the work's title alters the gender of the last line of Shirley Jackson's



Robyn O'Neil, *Allegory of Virtue and Vice*, 2004, graphite on paper, 10 x 7 1/2".

famous short story "The Lottery" and also lends the show its name) is far larger than the other works; behind yet another version of Lotto's tree—its one living branch a harbinger of life—a casual assault takes place. A few dozen men perfunctorily throw stones (snowballs?) at a fallen figure to the right, with a sense more of offhand target practice than of ritualistic murder. In the end it doesn't matter which—O'Neil's project is to evoke a place where the normal rules of behavior don't apply, where stark nature is accompanied by stark humankind. But in the absence of the laws and ideas that make up civilization, O'Neil sees a potential release of savagery, a kind of disorientation of place that reveals mankind's often horrific tendencies. While the allegorical tradition that intrigues her usually held out the promise of improvement and challenge, O'Neil herself hints that there are darker forces at work, a kind of core human insensitivity that cannot be wished away. With imagination and disarming straightforwardness, she takes us to the brink of that world.

—JY