

art on paper

Robyn O'Neil

at Inman Gallery, Houston

"They Walk, Fall, Continue, and Die," the title of this exhibition of pencil drawings, would be ponderous if Robyn O'Neil's representational images and intriguing vignettes were not so compelling. In five medium-scale and eighteen small drawings (2003), nature (landforms, weather, animals), space, and pictorial quietude are often the primary elements. O'Neil values the meaning of place, or what critic Mary Leclère describes as an austere, Samuel Beckett-like "whereness," which she conjures up with snowy mountain valleys and trees denuded by winter. The quotidian is mystified by suggestions of ritual, mystery, and theater and by its subtexts of art history and literature. The protagonists of these works are middle-aged men in sweatsuits, jogging, doing sit-ups or 'Tai' Chi, prostrate with grief or lassitude. O'Neil's drawing is subtle, strong, and clear, such that all the elements they contain (i.e. men, dogs, deer, and mountains) are equally real and equally enigmatic.

The gestalt of all of her drawings is deceptively simple. But O'Neil uses understatement to great effect, and she has the ability to toggle the viewer back and forth at will, spatially and intellectually, to probe the micro and macro of stillness and time.



Robyn O'Neil, *They Walk, Fall, Continue, and Die 6*, pencil on paper (7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.), 2003.



Robyn O'Neil, *They Walk, Fall, Continue, and Die 10*, pencil on paper (7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.), 2003. Both pieces pictured from private collections; photos by Rick Wells, courtesy Inman Gallery.

She crops some images to establish a dizzying vantage point, or works the picture plane to thrust us into deep, if slightly illogical, spaces. Some figures are set at the margins to imply their precariousness, even irrelevance. And despite the leitmotif of her drawings (meditations on mortality and banality), each is its own non-story about anthropomorphism, framing as linguistic agent, and death as a continuous process that rolls—in the words of the old folk song—from the cradle to the grave.

In the discontinuous episodes of *The Encounters and Two of the Deaths* (53 x 42 in.), openness and emptiness are active agents, and the deaths, which are stated matter of factly, are no more dramatic than the presence, high in the mountains, of an abandoned motorboat. Here as elsewhere, light and dark are mutually engaged, not in a Manichean struggle but as conditions of the other. In another medium-size drawing, vintage planes and the pathetic fallacy of birds in fighting formation evoke scenes from World War II movies, prompting us to read the planes as atavistic birds of prey. Her pictures propose silviculture as a disinterested

deity's own Zen koan. Alternately, her drawings might be illustrations for a Dada version of the poet Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (1702).

The small drawings (7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. each) were deftly installed to underscore the filmic quality of O'Neil's vision. If we look beyond the shadowy clouds that suggest Albert Pynkham Ryder and apocalypse, we see the dark comedy at the heart of her enterprise. A dead owl, laid out as if arranged by an undertaker, is contemplated by a man searching for meaning in death. But what if, paraphrasing the novelist Kingsley Amis, meaning is overrated? Dread is one thing, but these fine drawings articulate a dreadfully black humor. So, too, there is an echo of Nietzsche in her explanation of the dilemma of her pictures as "the anxiety of not really seeing the point of anything and yet feeling an unfillable need to be a productive human." O'Neil, who will be featured in the upcoming Whitney Biennial, is clearly an artist to watch closely.

—W. Jackson Rushing III