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## At the End of the World with Robyn O'Neil

Posted by [Molly Finnegan](#) , July 16, 2009

It's a beautiful, hot day in early summer in the Houston suburb where the artist **Robyn O'Neil** lives and works; only a couple of flinty clouds are in the sky over Texas. Growing up in Tornado Alley (Nebraska and later in North Texas), and now living in hurricane country, O'Neil has often seen nature asserting its power over people. But even on mild days, like this one, the weather plays a role in her life; she's taking note of it, writing down the temperature and conditions to submit it as an official weather watcher.

For eight years, O'Neil worked on a narrative series of large pencil drawings that followed the final days of the human race, through war and a losing battle against dominant natural forces. Earlier this spring she won the **Hunting Art Prize** (the largest monetary award in the U.S. given out for a single two-dimensional work of art) for one of the images in the series. In her drawing "A death, a fall, a march: toward a better world," little men (all women have died off, making human extinction inevitable) march toward the horizon past a pile of bodies and a large grave pit. But in the sky, a glimmer of hope: mountains springing up like heads of lettuce growing in the garden.

In grad school she mostly studied painting until a professor told her that the drawings she had put up on the edge of her studio were a lot more interesting. The observation made sense to her, she says, as someone who had always been drawn more to small, intricate, unimposing drawings than the flashier grand masterworks that attract most of the attention. But her drawings are nothing to squint at -- several of her large-scale works are certainly grand, her giant triptychs like modern Hieronymus Bosch altar-pieces.

The series began when she started drawing little portraits of her father and his friends from memory, dressed in black jumpsuits and white tennis shoes. In their simple outfits and simplified features, they came to symbolize humanity at large, players in an apocalyptic allegory that took shape from drawing to drawing.

More expressive than didactic, she allows each chapter of her story to be influenced by ephemeral experience, photo clippings, classic novels (Nabokov) and visual language from films (Herzog). Even tiny details can become a significant anchor from which she can distort or interpret the meaning of an element in her work. She shows me a clipping from an underwear advertisement she's had for over two decades, and points out photos of her grandmother who got her started in painting when she was young. Her grandmother has been a major influence, making posthumous appearances in her drawings as an owl --one of Robyn's personal, iconic motifs.

When she plans a new drawing, she maps out her large-scale drawings first in her black and white composition notebook as tiny sketches. Robyn shows me where she's drawn a thumbnail of the drawing she just completed for a show of a fir tree and a stump. She shows me how she's worked out the title for this piece. Starting with the most simple

descriptive language possible, she had written down the words "dead and alive" (a variant, she noted, on Bon Jovi's hit from the '80s, "Dead or Alive"). She began to play with alternatives, tweaking each word, allowing new thoughts, new influences, new thought patterns to change the course of the final title.

When she works, she shuts out the big Texas sky, cooping up in the studio in her house, curtains shutting out the natural light pouring in, and she pops in episodes of old television series on DVD to keep her focused on the hours and hours of drawing. Since she's already planned out exactly what she's going to do in a notebook, she approaches the actual execution more like tedious labor than a process of discovery.

The final work in the series is a man holding onto a cable above a violent sea. There's no indication of what the cord is attached to, if it is attached to anything at all (is it a rescue line from a helicopter, the last vestige of an old power line or a cord dropping down from heaven?) Who knows if he's seconds away from being rescued? According to O'Neil, the cliffhanger is really just the final moment before the last human dies, lost to the ocean. She answers unequivocally perhaps because she was ready to move on to new material.

In May, a show of her new work opened at **a gallery in Berlin**. The human figures in her new pieces are rendered more realistically (she's now working from source materials, not just from memory), and she leaves a lot of white space around each element (a head, a ship, the tree trunk), almost like breathing room.

What does going back to the drawing board mean for O'Neil? She's a little bit like the man dangling over the sea -- she's not totally sure what's going to happen next, not eager to project her next move or define new work in quite the same definitive terms. But her fate is much rosier, knowing that she's got a bag of tricks to keep her afloat.