

Liberty, Megan N. "Literary Paintings Foreshadow an Apocalyptic Future," *Hyperallergic*, 1 February 2020.

HYPERALLERGIC



Installation view, *Robyn O'Neil: WE, THE MASSES* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (all images courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth)

FORT WORTH, Texas – Robyn O'Neil's oversized, multi-panel graphite drawings, featured in *WE, THE MASSES* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, resemble a graphic novel told across multiple walls and rooms. This narrative storytelling makes sense, as O'Neil's cited influences are more literary than artistic. The exhibition catalogue, a small zine that mimics and reproduces pages from the artist's sketchbooks, is filled with notes and quotations from Homer and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Willa Cather, in addition to references to artists known for more narrative painting – Bosch, Rubens, Rembrandt. This literary bent is heightened by poetic titles such as, "Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace" and "Masses and masses rove a darkened pool; never is there laughter on this ship of fools." Her drawings – all rendered with a graphite mechanical pencil – are painstakingly detailed. The show includes her monumental triptych drawings, as well as small framed sketches, a vitrine of sketchbooks and process drawings, and some later work that integrates colored pencil and acrylic.

O'Neil's drawings recount a tale of the responsibility and future of mankind in the face of the climate apocalypse, a subject that has played a significant role in her life from a young age. The exhibition opens with a childhood drawing, "Ride in the Ni[gh]t" (1984), portraying a red boat in tumultuous blue waters against a black sky. It was inspired by Hurricane Alicia in Houston, which ripped the roof off her home, forcing her family to hide in the bathtub. "I've lost a lot of work and peace from a lot of drastic weather events in my life. Sometimes I wonder if I conjure it up; horrible things seem to follow me when it comes to Mother Nature. But I respect it," O'Neil admitted during the exhibition's press walkthrough.



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Pulling from her experiences of extreme weather, her monumental drawings are characterized by harsh, snowy landscapes, barren trees, and anthropomorphic bodies of water that curl and stretch out like hands – as, for instance, in "Hurricane," where the water has pointed claws, and "Some Things You Said" (both 2009), in which a wave rises up like an arm reaching out to grab and swallow its surroundings. Some of her renderings of water

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even take on the appearance of flowing hair, like the rippling waves in "Something Vanished Over Paradise" (2009), or the jagged edges in "Cut my ropes, let me fall" (2008), suggesting perhaps drowned bodies within the ocean.

The hero – or, more accurately, the villain – of O'Neil's story is the goofy, sweatsuit clad "everyman" multiplied by the hundreds, all of whom dress and act alike. When she started sketching these men in 2000, O'Neil was initially thinking of her father and his friend, "just regular old people who don't care about art, who love to wear sweatpants and watch football, and eat snacks on the weekends and all this stuff." O'Neil was also subconsciously influenced by the Heaven's Gate cult, whose mass suicide garnered a large amount of media attention when she was young. News images of the cult showed people, dressed almost identically, who had been convinced to end their lives together by a megalomaniacal leader who prophesied the coming apocalypse.



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In O'Neil's narrative the men's self-destructive behaviors seem to precipitate the catastrophe that befalls them. A direct response to Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1490-1500), "Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace" (2003), a triptych that stands roughly 7 and a half feet tall (full-body scale), is an aerial view of snowy mountains, populated by these tiny-yet-detailed men running around and getting into trouble. "I did these sort of goofy drawings where I was celebrating them, but also kind of making fun of them," she explained on the press tour. The men bop each other on the head, kill and poke animals, ice skate, fall down, and generally loll about an environment marked by decaying nature. They are oddly familiar, recalling Mike Judge's cartoon characters from the television shows *King of the Hill* and *Beavis and Butt-Head*, which resonate with O'Neil's experiences growing up in North Texas. But in today's sociopolitical climate, they recall a less innocuous "everyman": the working class white man whose grievances about America's shifting cultural values have gained more attention since the 2016 presidential election. These cultural changes instill in these works an eerie foreshadowing quality of what is to come from nature and men.

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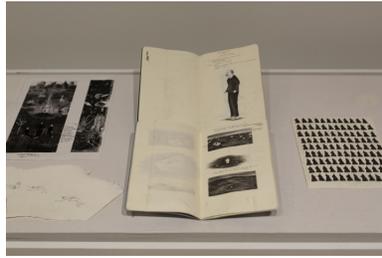
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O'Neil's graphic precision rendering animals and nature contrasts with the rougher style of the goofy characters who populate the landscapes and the terrifying content, resulting in a sense of visual tension. As she writes in her sketchbook, "Although horrifying, nothing gruesome. And it will be drawn so beautifully that the terror will be evened out in many ways." In several of the works, men's bodies hang lifelessly from trees, as in the bottom panel of the four-piece "Oh, how the heartless haunt us all." (2005). In one of the concluding images, titled "Masses and masses rove a darkened pool; never is there laughter on this ship of fools" (2007), a single sheet nearly 7 feet tall and over 13 feet long, the remaining men are killed off by a tsunami; a darkened sky that ripples like the thick, gray water looms over a sea littered with rafts strewn with desperate men. They huddle, cling, and drown below the crashing sky and waters. In the last drawing, "These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past." (2007), the final man hangs from a mysterious rope dangling in the clouds before falling to his death.

The narrative is brought to life in the film *WE, THE MASSES* (2011), from which the exhibition gets its title. O'Neil's animated drawings are set to poignant music, with no added dialogue. Working on the film years after completing the series forced the artist to return to these figures. ("It was the art-making version of getting back together with an old, bad ex," she tells curator Alison Hearst in an interview for the publication.) "HELL" (2011) illustrates her main characters as they continue to suffer in hell and includes over 3,500 pieces of drawings collaged into it, equal parts horrible and beautiful. The main focal point in the foreground is a large mass that from a distance resembles a huge mountain, but a closer look reveals it to be a large collaged mass of monk-like figures in robes. Disembodied heads float through a barren wasteland with branches and leafless tree. The men continue their

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shenanigans here, with no hope of escape. "The show, overall is > will be devastating," O'Neil writes in a sketchbook page reproduced in the catalogue.



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Devastating indeed, but also funny and moving. Its humor comes from a seamless blend of high and low, and a series of preposterous scenarios that allow us to see ourselves and our place in the cycles of nature, culture, and the world overall more clearly. As O'Neil notes, "I wanna zoom way way out and look at us humans as minorly important just like everything else. We are not the center of our world." The care paid to presenting detailed plant life, skies, goats, and bison, contrasted with the less precise hand used to draw men, is just one of many reminders to look beyond ourselves a bit more. One of the final works in the exhibition is a hyperrealist rendering of the artist's gravestone. Inscribed on it is the epitaph, "It could have been worse." No statement captures more the dark and sobering humor of this elegantly beautiful show.

Robyn O'Neil: WE, THE MASSES continues at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (3200 Darnell Street, Fort Worth, Texas) through February 9.