

Sharp, Sarah Rose. "Three Artists Illustrate the Expressive Potential of Drawing," *Hyperallergic*, 28 January 2021.

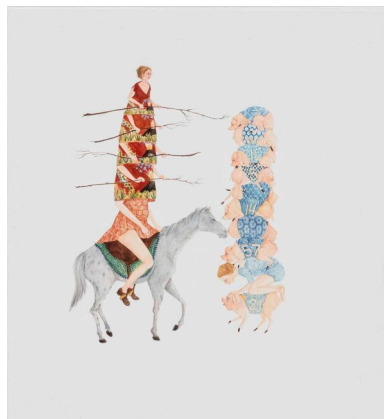
## HYPERALLERGIC



Robyn O'Neil, "An Unkindness" (2019), graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic on paper, triptych, 75 3/8 x 160 inches (all images courtesy the Toledo Museum of Art, unless otherwise noted)

With roots as old as the concept of art itself, it is difficult to imagine the medium of drawing as having much to offer in the way of innovation. But *Telling Stories: Resilience and Struggle in Contemporary Narrative Drawing*, a three-woman show at the Toledo Museum of Art, showcases the utility of drawing as an expressive medium, as well as the power of these practitioners to find new impact in the form – to stunning effect.

Visitors are ushered into the exhibition through Robyn O'Neil's harrowing and surreal landscapes, populated by little men in track suits, squaring off against roiling oceans and barren plains. The precariousness of O'Neil's human subjects is palpable – in an adjacent gallery, a short animation of one of her drawings shows them dropping from broken cables into dark waves. The tension is excruciating and only amplified by works featuring animals in dense repetition, including fields of snarling dogs and skies dark with ravens.



Amy Cutler, "Pike" (2017), gouache on paper, 25 x 23 inches

Amy Cutler's narratives are perhaps less ominous, but present imagery evocative of folklore; stories which impart communal values and caution against uncertain terrors. Mostly female figures are stacked in totems or bound together by long braids, as they navigate tree houses or wrangle fantastical creatures. The brighter palettes and more intimate focus bring a kind of lightness, compared with O'Neil's Boschian landscapes, but they still hold the kind of uneasiness that attends the darkness beyond the campfire.

By contrast, then, Annie Pootoogook's colored pencil tableaux are the most cheerful and also the most quotidian. They are often funny, but also poignant, and reveal a perspective rooted

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in daily reality. For such ostensibly simple and straightforward drawings, they straddle many worlds. Pootoogook's largest work on display, "Cape Dorset Freezer" (2005) features a scene of Inuit families at the grocery store. This relatable activity carries a unique poignance, capturing the aftermath of involuntary resettlement of Inuits that took place in the 1940s and 50s, which forced them from their traditional lands into permanent settlements in the Canadian Arctic. Central to the scene, a girl looks out at the viewer, hanging from a freezer door that casts back the reflection of a woman teaching a young child to pick something from a case. It is a calm, normal, and even playful tableau, but there is a sting to reckoning with the completely different reality and environs of the post-resettlement generation (which includes Pootoogook, born in 1969).



Annie Pootoogook, "Cape Dorset Freezer" (2005), colored pencil crayon, black metallic ballpoint pen and graphite on wove paper, 43.9 x 91.8 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Taken together, the works in *Telling Stories* make a compelling case for drawing as a fundamental expressive form, which is not to say in the least bit outdated.

*Telling Stories: Resilience and Struggle in Contemporary Narrative Drawing continues through February 14 at the Toledo Museum of Art (2445 Monroe St, Toledo, OH). The exhibition is curated by Robin Reisenfeld.*