

Heinrich, Will. "Editor's Picks : Robyn O'Neil," *The New York Times*, 12 May 2022.

The New York Times

Robyn O'Neil **Editors' Picks**



Robyn O'Neil's "American Animals," 2020-2022, graphite on canvas, at Susan Inglett Gallery. Credit...Robyn O'Neil and Susan Inglett Gallery

I spent a long time looking at "American Animals," the title piece of a new show of work by Robyn O'Neil, a Nebraska-born artist who lives in the Pacific Northwest. A graphite-on-canvas drawing nearly 12 feet wide, the piece shows white male heads — 162 of them, according to the gallery — with various hairstyles and a sprinkling of mustaches, emerging from or face-planting into a series of low ridges. These ridges, striated like muscle but with the dull sheen of much-corrected homework, could pass for billowing waves or the buckling of agrassy field, but what they most look like is hair.

A much smaller drawing shows another man and a pit bull labeled "the 2 most deadly animals in America"; others feature a bison, a whale and a bald eagle covered in marauding, ant-size humans. The mood overall is retro-apocalyptic, and at first I couldn't help taking the heads of "American Animals," which look like so many escapees from a 1950s barbershop poster, as the unexorcised ghosts of America's sexist and racist demons. After all, few of them are upright, and even those seem unable to look farther than the next ridge. There's something discouraging, too, about the contrast between the drawing's grand scale and the impermanence of its medium.

But after noticing how the ridges drop, like a descending brook, in the lower right corner, I realized that fully half of the faces were skipping upstream like salmon. Maybe there's hope after all. *WILL HEINRICH*