

## The Dallas Morning News

# Robyn O'Neil's first major museum show exudes a sense of dread and wonder

The Modern in Fort Worth is examining two decades of the artist's career with more than 50 drawings, many of them mural-sized.



In Robyn O'Neil's "The Sky in Kerala," the stark world somehow suggests a slight glimmer of hope, if not in society, then in the grace of the land and in the unadorned inevitability of tempestuous weather. (Talley Dunn Gallery)

By Matthew Bourbon  
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Over 50 apocalyptic and magisterial drawings by artist Robyn O'Neil are on display at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Documenting 20 years of production, the artist's first major museum show is brooding, with waggish interludes occasionally interjected.

To say that O'Neil's large drawings are impressive is an understatement; they are crafted with an almost perfect and unbending clarity. While O'Neil's maniacal work ethic is often discussed (her drawings are made over the course of thousands of hours of labor), the heroically scaled graphite drawings are more than mere feats of monastic determination.

They also provide psychologically charged images that exude a sense of dread and wonder. Because many of the drawings are mural-sized, the viewer is enveloped by the cinematic enormity of the dramatic world depicted.

In poetically titled works such as *As darkness falls on this heartless land, my brother holds tight my feeble hand*, O'Neil renders the world such that one can almost taste the briskness of the air and feel the chill upon one's skin.

Slowly drawing her images with a pencil, O'Neil builds her drawings moment to moment across the large expanse of her paper. Her process is akin to a fresco painter puzzling together an entire image, section by section, over the space of a large wall.

### **A shock of color**

In later works, she adds a shock of color, or collages smaller drawings on top of larger creations. In all cases, and at every stage of her career, she deliberately constructs a deep, almost luxurious patina to the surfaces of her drawings.

Vast undulating oceans or snowy vales set the stage, and by contrast emphasize the awkwardly comical renderings of tiny men in 1980s sweat suits. These men are busy. Their activity in early works like *Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace* feels relatively benign and slightly absurd. They hug and pal around.

But in later drawings, things quickly take a turn for the worse — humans are humans, after all. In these darker works, the little actors representing humanity begin to show their true and often violent motives. From this point forward in the chronology of her art, O'Neil's work exists as an acerbic satire for human immorality and degradation.

The sweat-suited men traipse around their domain, filling their lives with unseemly and suspect activities. Despite the beautiful, delicate and bravura quality of her drawings, O'Neil's art ultimately feels anarchic and unnerving.

The disposition of her work is not dissimilar to the social viciousness found in the short novel *Lord of the Flies*, or the nightmare paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. Like Bosch, O'Neil favors portraying a large world with small incidents occurring throughout.



Artist Robyn O'Neil, a native Texan is shown in her studio in Thousand Oaks, Calif., in 2014. (NAN COULTER/Contributor / Special Contributor)



In the colossal work titled "Hell" Robyn O'Neil unleashes her id as she enacts cruelty upon the cruel. (Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth)

Within her imagined landscapes, middle-aged men seem to pointlessly build fires, or fly into rages as they run around the landscape enacting strange male rites or angrily bludgeoning each other to death. Occasionally, small pockets of familial or brotherly civility are to be found, but mostly they behave badly.

In the colossal work titled *Hell*, O'Neil unleashes her id as she enacts cruelty upon the cruel. Note the men being expelled from a fiery volcano.

Yet a pathos is underneath all of her creatively torturous efforts. Despite the bleakness of the world depicted and a distrust of all things human, there is something Shakespearean about her art.

O'Neil tackles the big subjects of violence, tenderness and death. Hers is an introvert's art, at home and sympathetic with animals and the natural world, yet deeply skeptical and critical about human nature. In her reckoning, humans negatively affect their environment, but the land, the sky and the roiling ocean always have the proverbial last word, destroying the hubris of human ambition.

In work starting in 2013, O'Neil shifts gears and makes a series of colorful drawings that prove something of a respite from her portrayal of the ills of humanity. These smaller drawings of land and sky appear plaintive and distinctive. In colorful images like *The Sky in Kerala*, the stark world somehow suggests a slight glimmer of hope, if not in society, then in the grace of the land and in the unadorned inevitability of tempestuous weather.