

Robyn O'Neil: My brother holds tight my feeble hand

Clementine Gallery

John Ewing

A "feeble hand" is the least of Robyn O'Neil's rewards for a steady flow of graphite-on-paper works that have garnered the Houston-based artist numerous awards, solo and group shows—including the 2004 Whitney Biennial—since her Artpace residency in 2003. This, her second solo outing in New York, continues O'Neil's virtuosic reclamation of drawing as a serious vehicle for highly personal visions.

The show's five works feature O'Neil's snowscape allegories—content that is perfectly suited to the contrasts of pencil on white paper—but earlier fantastical elements have been toned down or sublimated by a distinctive atmosphere of chilly mystery. The largest employ a multi-panel format as a formal reference to polyptych altar pieces of Gothic and Renaissance painting. This reference is further heightened by the aerial, Brueghel-like sweep of O'Neil's compositions, as well as anachronistic-sounding titles.

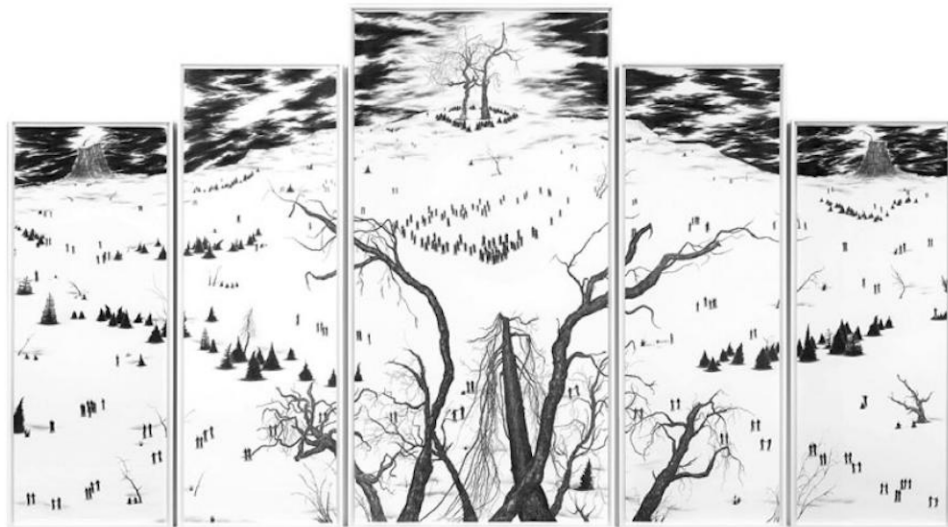
The show's centerpiece—*As darkness falls on this heartless land, my brother holds tight my feeble hand*—is a massive drawing composed over five framed panels, which uniformly increase in size from the outer margins to a seven-foot-tall center panel. This zigguratlike shape and attention to symmetry recur throughout the composition. Looking down on a snowy landscape from the implied vantage point of a mountain peak, O'Neil has constructed an epic image that builds—scenically, and in terms of narrative—toward a distant second peak.



Robyn O'Neil, *Sweet companions remain ignored, and now it is known—a nether sky*, 2005

Graphite on paper
11 x 26 inches

The center foreground is dominated by a partial view of tree branches, bare and gnarled but exquisitely modeled in O'Neil's fine line. Beyond the tree, the white, unfolding landscape is a mounting series of near-symmetrical, diamond-shaped formations of spruce trees and similarly sized men in sweat suits standing in pairs, holding hands or embracing (such figures are also a recurring motif in O'Neil's work). The background peak is topped



Robyn O'Neil, *As darkness falls on this heartless land, my brother holds tight my feeble hand*, 2005

Graphite on paper
92 1/2 x 166 inches

by a pair of trees whose bare, entwined branches appear to embrace each other, and which are enclosed within another diamond formation of spruces.

Symmetry is further accentuated in the work's two outer panels, where the upper portion of the image, roiling under a dark, cloud-streaked sky, is crowned by two ambiguous forms. These suggest bald, stone plateaus but could just as easily be gargantuan tree stumps. Still nowhere close to naturalism, this ambiguity is a subtler, and thus more disturbing, alternative to O'Neil's former penchant for spaceships, dinosaurs and overt surreality.

Tight groups of men, trees and symmetrical elements create an overall sensation of order: these men are hyper aware of each other; spruces rendered in a distinctive, wispy-fine line, seem to bend and yield as attentive witnesses. The landscape itself seems choreographed into a sensitive call and response, or even a dance. This sensation of attentiveness is intensified by O'Neil's careful handling of graphite, which subtly varies from crisp lines to powdery-fine shading, accentuating the perception of depth, the delineation of forms and the "fineness" of the surface.

The remaining works serve as a reality check on the above utopian harmony. These dispense with the symmetry of formal elements and depict men behaving badly, a far less shocking phenomenon than the artist perhaps intends or that we as viewers might care to acknowledge. *Oh, how the*

heartless haunt us all is also a multi-panel work, but here the split image owes more to modernist attitudes about fragmented viewpoint and multiple narratives. In the upper panels, sweat-suited men gather, facing the viewer, under a white sky in an empty plain, with a crater and mountains in the distance and an uprooted tree in the foreground. In the bottom panel, men hang from trees and gallows under a fire-licked sky.

Sweet companions remain ignored, and now it is known—a nether sky, a single-panel work, contains a split image. In the upper half are a leisurely pair of men and two dogs in an outdoor setting; below, groups of men wage war and other types of martial and ritual violence. *We are not okay, we cannot live like this anymore* synthesizes these elements in a single outdoor image, with gallows trees on the left, a group of men in various stages of conflict and connection in the center and reconciled pairs of men on the right among a copse of bare trees.

Lastly, *These moving bodies, these numb processions* presents the most naturalistic scene in the exhibition: men and animals moving through a wooded landscape without combat, murder or reconciliation, merely moving across the image. In the foreground—rising up through the center of the image, bottom to top—is a bare, limbless tree trunk. In light of the other works, it's a visual reminder of our split impulses to both care for and destroy. Through her visual allegories, O'Neil seems to suggest that these impulses are provisional and coexistent.