

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Robyn O'Neil *HELL and the Paradisal*

INMAN GALLERY
3901 Main Street
Houston, TX 77002

September 17–
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Robyn O'Neil, *The Paradise Fields (River)*, 2022, graphite on canvas, 37 7/8 x 26 1/4".
From the series "The Paradise Fields," 2021–.

Prompted by our collective experience of pandemic-induced fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, Robyn O'Neil decided to revisit the most torturous period of her life—the three years she spent making the fourteen-foot-long drawing *HELL*, 2011. More than a decade after its completion, the artist looks back at this seminal and incredibly dark piece from a place of lightness and repose in "HELL and the Paradisal," her solo exhibition here, which also features her new ongoing series, "The Paradise Fields" 2021–, and other related works.

O'Neil's monstrous triptych anchors an entire gallery and functions as the apex of her early multipart landscapes, littered with the artist's signature everymen, from the 2000s. In *HELL*, sixty-five thousand of her troublesome figures, clothed in black sweat suits and white trainers, battle each other across an array of violent, apocalyptic vignettes. Many of her subjects are piled

into heaps, or fused together like suspended strands of metal filings. Making this work was punishing: After rendering thirty-five thousand graphite forms that suggest fir trees or the backs of robed men, she individually cut out and collaged them into a towering monolith, a structure that recalls the crowded, spiraling edifice of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Tower of Babel*, 1563. Indeed, *HELL* is sinister, torturous, unflinching.

The newer works, however—calm, intimate, even redemptive—strike a markedly different note. The grounds in these pieces are no longer bright white as they are created on unprimed canvas and papers with warmer tones, giving the images a more textured, ochreous quality. In these pictures, humans are absent and nature reigns supreme. Three canvases from “The Paradise Fields” feature a dominant vertical element that structures each composition—a treelike spine, a winding river, and a network of arteries. Interspersed between these forms are invented bits of flora and fauna, unmoored symbols and objects floating freely in space. Quiet but electric, O’Neil’s serene landscapes suggest growth and promise.

— Elliott Zooey Martin

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<https://www.artforum.com/picks/robyn-o-neil-89382>