

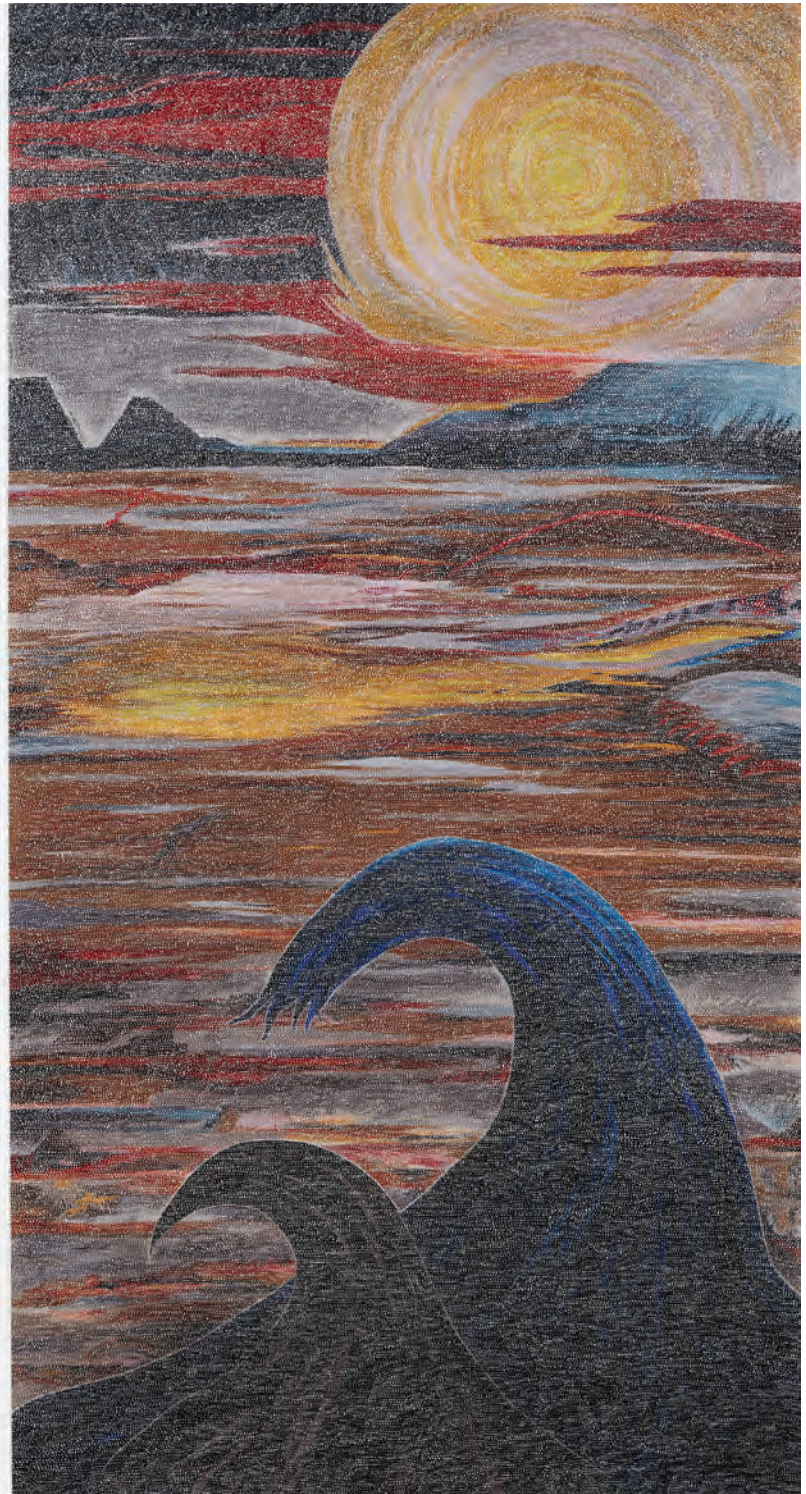


PENCILING IN ROBYN O'NEIL

WE THE MASSES at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth highlights 20 years of the artist's ambitious explorations in graphite.

BY STEVE CARTER

Robyn O'Neil, *An Unkindness*, 2019, graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic on paper. Left and right panels, 75.375 x 41.50 in.; center panel, 75.375 x 75.375 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. Photographs by Heather Rasmussen, Los Angeles



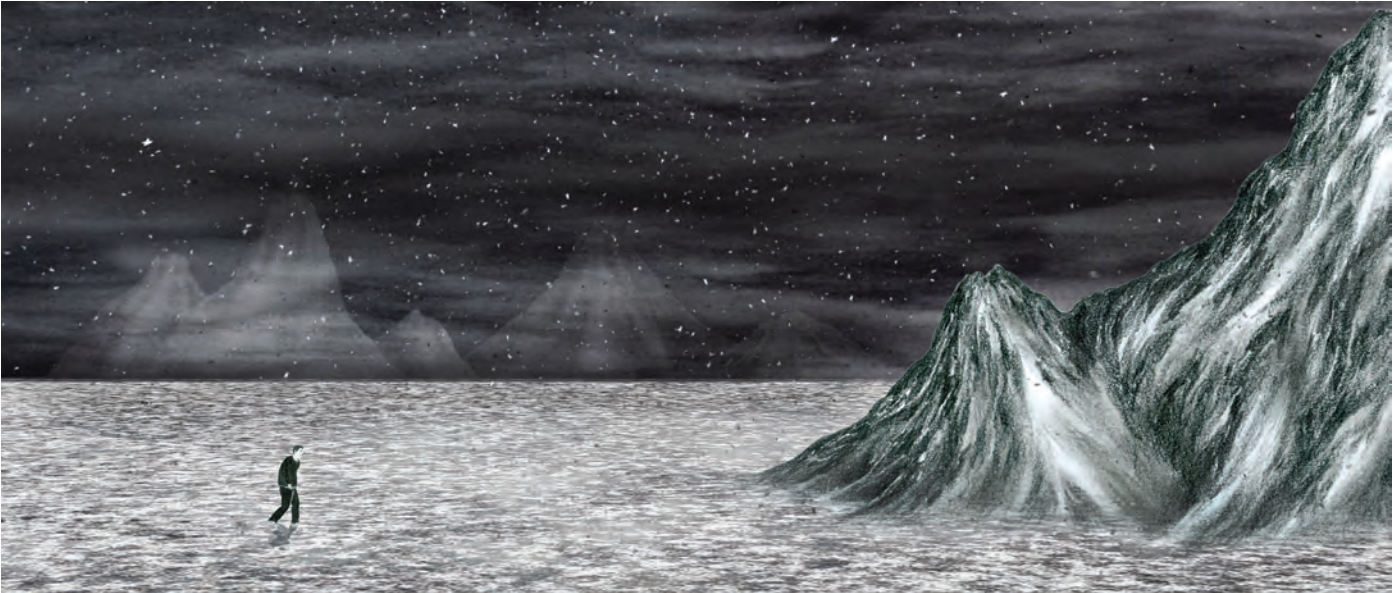
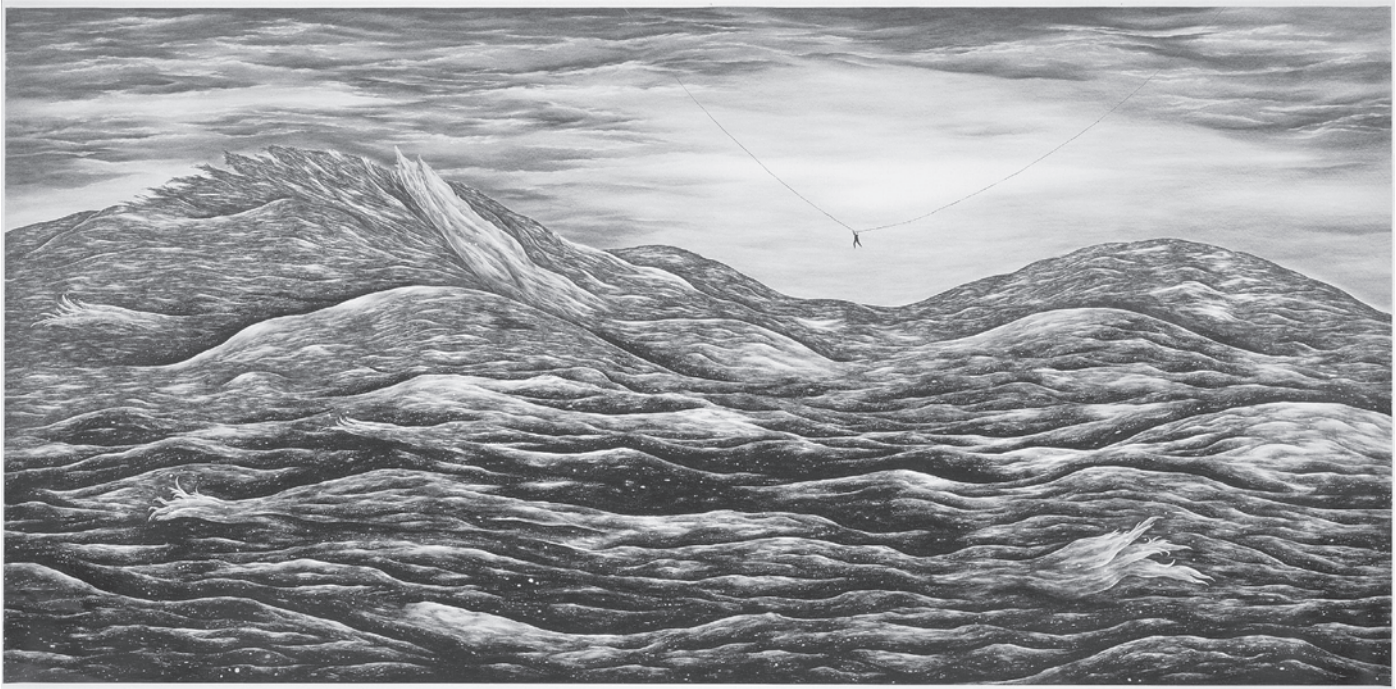
Robyn O'Neil may as well have been born with a pencil in her hand. Her Grandma Ginny was her first art teacher, and young Robyn's precociousness was obvious from the start. "I just had a very natural impulse not only to make art, but to make art that really spoke of melancholy, even when I was in kindergarten," O'Neil says. "It's been true from day one."

Now the work of the Los Angeles-based graphite Goliath is being celebrated at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth with *Robyn O'Neil: WE, THE MASSES*, running from October 18 through February 9, 2020. The show is a 20-year survey exploring the breadth of the artist's oeuvre, from small-scale to monumental, banal to heroic, bleak to hopeful, black- and-white to color. Organized by the museum's associate curator Alison Hearst, it's the first-ever overview of O'Neil's career, and a don't-

miss-it coup for the Modern.

WE, THE MASSES is comprised of nearly 60 works—graphite on paper, multipaneled epics, collage, animated film—dating back to 2000, when the artist was moving away from painting and embracing drawing. The Omaha-born, North Texas-raised O'Neil was in grad school at the University of Illinois at Chicago then, working toward a never-completed MFA, and remembers the epiphany when a professor perused some of her small study drawings. "She very bluntly told me, 'Robyn, these are a million times better than your paintings, and I dare you to not pick up a paintbrush for the next six months and see what happens,'" O'Neil recalls with a laugh. "I loved the idea, went with what she said, and it's been that way ever since."

Along the way to the present, O'Neil's been a resident artist at Artpace San Antonio, was included in the 2004 Whitney



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—Robyn O’Neil remembering a conversation with a college professor

Biennial, won a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant, the Hunting Art Prize, and more—in addition to having national solo exhibitions and works in public collections nationwide. But accolades aside, O’Neil is recognized for her large-scale drawings featuring small male figures uniformly clad in black sweat suits and Nike sneakers, variously involved in her fantastical, dystopian landscapes. She began the 200-plus drawings that comprise the so-called *end of the world* series with 2003’s *Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace*, a massive triptych measuring 91.75 x 150.375 inches. The final work in the series is 2007’s *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past*, a three-panel work that’s in the Modern’s collection.

“When I started to draw these men, they were all based on my dad and his best friend, Marty,” O’Neil reveals. “Just regular dudes who like sports and going outside and fixing things; they wore sweatpants and sweatshirts all the time. I felt that with those characters I could act out any possible scenario, any emotions, anything under the sun; they became my archetypes for humanity.” O’Neil’s teeming flocks of everymen are engaged—exercising, debating, killing, dying, flying, plummeting, dangling in the void—enacting an existential playbook of futile pursuits set against an indifferent, triumphant natural world. A macabre

resonance of her little men is their costumed resemblance to the mass suicides of California’s Heaven’s Gate cult back in 1997. “The day that news story broke it just really struck me,” she says. “Their outfits, those weird suits... it took me many years to understand that that was the connection to why my men all have Nike tennis shoes and sweatpants. I’ve always been fascinated by people who all do the same things, because it’s so *not* me...”

Although she believed she could utilize the uniformed men for the rest of her creative life, O’Neil decommissioned the masses in 2007 and began exploring a series of “psychological landscapes” devoid of humans. Skies, empty fields, calmer vistas, and meticulously drawn animals began to populate her work. “I was so sick of humanity, really,” she admits. “That’s kinda where that came from. And I’m very drawn to quiet.” One example is something of a visual koan: 2008’s *His Disharmony*, a wondrously rendered drawing of a horse, albeit with a smudgily obscured head. While it may appear that a furious fit of erasing has obliterated the horse’s features, nothing could be further from the truth. O’Neil thrives on the bafflement of the unexpected, and *His Disharmony* is one of her personal favorites. It’s a riddling head-scratcher that she herself has no answer for.

By 2011, however, her little men had returned from their



This page: Robyn O’Neil, *HELL*, 2011, graphite on paper. 83.625 x 172.50 in. Courtesy of the artist. Opposite, top to bottom: Robyn O’Neil, *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past*, 2007, graphite on paper, 83 x 166.75 in. Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, gift of Marshall R. Young Oil Co. in honor of George Marshall Young, Sr., Chairman; Robyn O’Neil, *We the Masses*, 2011, video (stills). Duration: 13 minutes. Collection of the artist; Robyn O’Neil, *Low American Grace*, 2018. Graphite, watercolor and colored pencil on paper. Overall: 50 x 76 in. Collection of Robert Moyer and Anita Nagler, Los Angeles.



Robyn O'Neil, *A death, a fall, a march: toward a better world*, 2008, graphite on paper. Overall: 32 x 40 in. Collection of Karol Howard and George Morton.



Robyn O'Neil, *As Ye the sinister creep and feign, those once held become those now slain*, 2004, graphite on paper. Overall: 92.50 x 166 in. Elyse and Lawrence B. Benenson Collection.

hiatus, and O’Neil’s worlds were again populated with men—dead ones. *HELL* is an apocalyptic three-panel nightmare that involves 35,000 collage elements and 65,000 figures. Measuring fourteen feet across, the work took O’Neil three years to complete. The influences of both Hieronymus Bosch and self-taught artist Henry Darger are felt here, and the seldom-shown work is an exhibition highlight. Working obsessively to draw the figures, cut them out, and collage them, O’Neil acknowledges that it wasn’t a logical approach, “but it seemed like the only thing to do at the time.” *HELL* was preceded by O’Neil’s 13-minute animated film, *WE, THE MASSES*, which lends its title to the exhibition. That project called for training animators to draw her men, and to cut out thousands of them. “I kind of fell back in love with the men, accidentally,” she muses.

Recently color has begun to appear in O’Neil’s work, as in 2019’s enormous triptych, *An Unkindness*. What? Color? “It feels like complete freedom,” she enthuses. “A relief, a release, and more than anything it feels necessary. Graphite on white paper just wasn’t portraying the mood I wanted in this new work. I fought it for a while—I like the simplicity of just mechanical pencil and paper.”

An intriguing bookend moment is the very first work in the show, *Ride in the Nit*, in color, dating back to 1985, when she was in kindergarten. It won O’Neil her first art prize. “It’s a really beautiful piece, and it’s so weird because it looks like I could’ve made it last year,” she says with a laugh. “I’m not kidding—it’s very bizarre.” **P**



Top to bottom: Robyn O’Neil, *His Disharmony*, 2008, graphite on paper, 60 x 60 in. Courtesy of Deasil, Inc.; Robyn O’Neil, *A Dismantling*, 2011, graphite on paper, Sheet: 41.125 x 65.25 in. Collection of the artist.

