

Harris, Susan, "Robyn O'Neil at Clementine", Art in America, November 2007.

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Robyn O'Neil at Clementine

A colossally scaled, intricately detailed graphite drawing was the tour de force in "This is a descending world," Robyn O'Neil's recent show in which she put forth an imposing, if bleak, postapocalyptic vision. *Masses and masses rove a darkened pool; never is there laughter on this ship of fools* (2007) is a vast seascape that, together with three large, square drawings in the first room and a group of eight small drawings in the back room, establish nature as the dominant protagonist of a drama in which the final act seems imminent. The

bottom two thirds of *Masses and masses* . . . —almost 7 feet high and 14 feet wide—is taken up by a huge expanse of water, depicted as a relatively calm surface with even cadences of light and waves. Soft, brushy pencil strokes combine with a masterful use of the white paper. Drifting aimlessly are innumerable rafts populated by clusters of tiny men dressed in black. With a quiet stillness and acceptance that, at once, belie and underscore the desperation of their situation, some of the figures cling to the rafts or float lifelessly in the water, even as others sit, lie, stand, talk, argue and/or simply wait. The biblical quality of their predicament is made more dramatic by the churning, spec-

tral clouds and stark contrasts of darks and lights in the Albert Pinkham Ryder-esque sky.

O'Neil abandoned the human presence in most of the other works. An owl, a stag, charred trees and birds replace what had become, over the last five years, her signature device for representing human events and interrelationships: swarms of middle-aged men in black sweat-suits. Where once wide-open, white and snowy landscapes with trees and wildlife were settings for the compelling and mysterious, meticulously depicted rituals of her central characters, now dark, barren and charred landscapes prevail. Her previous penchant for narrative, satire and teeming humanity à la Hieronymus Bosch appears to have shifted into a different kind of surreal vision—of empty, desolate and infertile places offering few glimmers of hope, save for the appearance of some tufts of new grass, an occasional wild animal, rainbows and—most promising—objects suffused in glowing light.

It is in O'Neil's very act of drawing, however, that one discerns the most positive signs for life and humanity. Soft, velvety passages of shading; painstaking and lovingly articulated rhythms of line; and the implication of the artist's own hand and arm in gestures both small and grand are palpable evocations of the will to make something out of nothing—and promise more work to come.

—Susan Harris



Robyn O'Neil: *The Ruin*, 2007, graphite on paper, 66 inches square; at Clementine.