Robyn O’Neil’s WE, THE MASSES

These final hours embrace at last; This is our ending, this is our past.

Born in Nebraska, the Los Angeles-based artist Robyn O’Neil calls herself a “maker of worlds.” Her wry, sincere humor infuses the artist’s well-known apocalyptic and anxiety-ridden drawings—ten years of which form the basis for her award-winning short film, WE, THE MASSES (2011). After attending Werner Herzog’s Rogue Film School where she met Irish director Eoghan Kidney, the two teamed up to bring O’Neil’s drawings to life in this thirteen-minute, stop motion animation.

Using her familiar archetype for humanity—sweatsuit-wearing men encountering opposition in nature or self-destructing in Bosch-like tableaus—the film explores futility, hope, and self-inflicted wounds as it swings from the foibles of humanity to the epic effects of weather and the natural world. Prescient yet eerily relevant, WE, THE MASSES tackles both public alienation and the unconscious anxiety of our social and political era.

The film begins with foreboding grey clouds. Wind roars and snow falls as a man drops out of the sky. A series of fruitless actions ensue as the vast landscape becomes a backdrop to the kicking of a dying horse, the lemming-like behavior of an encampment of similarly attired men, and a tsunami that engulfs the camp. The phrase “These final hours embrace at last; This is our ending, this is our past” appears followed by a rope descending from the sky—a reference to Winslow Homer’s 1884 painting The Lifeline.

While seemingly a linear narrative, a resolution never arrives because, as the artist states, “Endings can be inconclusive, but yet are still called ‘endings.’ They are also starting points; things must end so that something else will happen.”

Kitty McManus Zurko
CWAM Director/Curator

Supported by a grant from the Irish Film Board, WE, THE MASSES is presented at the CWAM courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York. O’Neil’s recently published book, Robyn O’Neil: 20 Years of Drawing (2017) is available through Archon Projects.