



*Shine a Light
Surgir de l'ombre*

CDN BIENNIAL - LA BIENNALE CND
2014



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2014

National Gallery of Canada
Musée des beaux-arts du Canada

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2014**

SHINE A LIGHT

CAST A

SHADOW

In *The Allegory of the Cave* Greek philosopher Plato warns about relying uniquely on the senses, especially that of sight, to perceive reality. Published in *The Republic*, the tale is written

as a dialogue between philosopher Socrates and Plato's brother Glaucon. The purpose of the story is to explain how society could be transformed in order for humans to be emancipated, to realize their hidden potential and ultimately become better versions of themselves. Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine an underground cave where men have been held prisoner since childhood. Not having any access to the outside world or even to the light of the sun, the detainees experience reality through shadows that are projected onto a cave wall in front of them. Socrates' evocative description paints a portrait of the prisoners' situation and affirms that their perception of reality is greatly skewed, as they have only ever been exposed to cast shadows of real objects. He then proposes a scenario in which a prisoner is released and wanders into the light. In his own words: "Suppose one of them [was] set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light; all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to see[ing]. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhat nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was getting a truer view?"¹

With *The Allegory of the Cave* Plato seeks to illustrate how the mind can progress from a state wherein the world of appearance, in this case a world made up of shadows, is perceived as truth, to a state of enlightenment where humans are exposed to fundamental facts that enable and empower them to start understanding moral issues. Written in ancient times, this allegory still rings true today. Artists can be seen as modern-day philosophers and visionaries who shine light on events, places and people that have been obscured, forgotten

"To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images." Plato, *The Republic*

or marginalized by history and societies. At times they work as archaeologists and dig up stories and artifacts for reconsideration, and to question understandings of the past, the present and even the

future. They challenge perceptions of what is real, imagined and accepted as true.

The exhibition *Shine a Light* highlights an exemplary selection of recent acquisitions to the National Gallery of Canada's Canadian Contemporary, Indigenous and Photographs collections. Although the works in this biennial exhibition are diverse, there are common themes and approaches that link them. All of the artists represented in the show are united in their ability to probe various issues to elucidate and attempt to uncover the truth behind the shadows.

The work of Shary Boyle is a case in point. In the artist's elaborate installation *The Cave Painter* light plays a principal role, illuminating the symbolic boundary between the visible and invisible realms, what we see and acknowledge as real and what stems from the imaginary and unconscious. Boyle explores mythologies and alternate ways of communicating using a visual language that speaks to both the personal and universal. She strives to confound expectations of beauty and acceptability by giving centre stage to what is deemed unconventional – for instance taboo subjects related to aging, maternity and hybridity – and spotlights key figures: the silenced, the unknown and those who have expressed themselves in their own manner.

Relationships can be drawn between Boyle's wondrous *Cave Painter* and Geoffrey Farmer's monumental installation *Leaves of Grass*, which serves as a representation of a shared North American history as portrayed in the pages of *Life* magazine as well as an alternative narrative of a changing consumer culture. Both Boyle and Farmer look to photographic archives and images of significant figures to present different and even marginalized points of view in an effort to reconsider how we understand history and interpret world events. Other artists, such as David Hartt, Jeremy Shaw and

¹ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 239.

Althea Thauberger also shine a light on people, places and movements, giving voice to communities that have been, at one time or another, disregarded by society. Nicolas Baier and Vanessa Paschakarnis, on the other hand, attempt to give form to something intangible – for instance, in Baier's sculpture *Engrams (the world of ideas)* he aims to represent the vastness of human knowledge throughout history.

This reflection on and re-presentation of the past threads itself through the works in the exhibition. The visual history of the twentieth century in particular presents itself in a myriad of generative ways for art-making today. A synthesis of around one hundred years of art is the thrust of what connects the paintings of Tammi Campbell, Stéphane La Rue and Damian Moppett, as well as the sculptural explorations of David Armstrong Six and An Te Liu. While each of these artists varies in terms of their respective aesthetics and motivations, they are connected by a mutual desire to acknowledge the past. Paint, clay, graphite, metal, wood and ready-made objects of all sorts abound in sculptures, paintings and drawings that invoke movement, assemblage and abstraction as guiding motifs. The varied approaches of these artists offer something different and enriching within the repetition of a saturated digital era. Whether in dialogue with an early cubist assemblage or a monochrome abstraction, these works are reminders that within the long road of humanity, a century is barely a second.

Time recurs as a theme and is an animated presence in the selection of photographs in the exhibition. Creating images descriptive of environmental concerns, Edward Burtynsky, Isabelle Hayeur, David McMillan and Kelly Richardson address future hopes and anxieties, presenting nature as both enduring and mortal. In their works, temporality is expressed through aesthetic traditions and qualities inherent to the mediums of photography and film, and ideas of the sublime are realized through image grandeur, high detail, formal composition and saturated colour. In some works, humanity's engagement with the natural world is seen to have detrimental, sometimes catastrophic effects, raising questions as to nature and humankind's longevity. In others, nature appears self-sustaining, eternal and indifferent to human folly.

This focus on the natural world and surroundings continues in the work of some of the Indigenous artists represented in the Biennial, a selection that demonstrates the diversity of contemporary Aboriginal art production in Canada today. The approach to the installation of works by Indigenous artists in the show has been one of integration and focus, displaying this art alongside that of non-Indigenous artists as a thematic examination of the practice of drawing, for instance. Shuvini Ashoona, Rita Letendre, Luke Parnell, Tim Pitsiulak and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun have contributed their unique perspectives on their relationships to the natural, supernatural and social environments in which they live. Their works provide examples of many general themes:

the menace and beauty of nature; the harsh reality of daily life experienced in remote and isolated communities; the tension between supernatural and human effects on nature and the environment; and, finally, the consequences of government legislation and assimilative policy directed at Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, provoking the performative ire of Yuxweluptun and the considered critique of Parnell. The visual language employed by many of these artists is one that can be generally understood within a contemporary context. The specificity – the local inflection – of each artist's vocabulary adds depth and richness to the exhibition.

Many of the drawings in the show also contain a personal component. Influenced by intense emotion or the subconscious, they record shifts between the interior and exterior world while visualizing the ways in which the two can unite. Mario Doucette, Philippa Jones, Ed Pien, Jutai Toonoo and Howie Tsui employ pencil and ink, watercolour and oil as vehicles to express physical or incorporeal experiences and document the world in both its vastness and minutia. They use humour and narrative, personal symbols and extensive research to present varying interpretations of landscape and history – many in fact alluding to islands, as either tangible places or mental states. Their thought processes can be traced in the unique way each artist has constructed their compositions. Implicit in the rich patterning and meticulous detail of the drawings is the trace of the artist's hand at work, an effort viewers may witness and perhaps even experience viscerally in the energy of lines and strokes.

Often looking to past events, literature, films, places, cultural movements and traditions, all of the artists in *Shine a Light* are very much ingrained in issues of the present day. Their works encourage us to reconsider time and the writing of history, our relationship to the natural world, the powerful role of images in how information is communicated, and how we perceive and interpret accepted facts. By bringing these issues to light these artists can make us increasingly aware of how stories are transmitted through time, of who is left out or marginalized, and the way narratives can affect our understanding of the world we live in. As Plato warned, we must not rely exclusively on our senses to perceive reality and make meaning, as shadows and illusions are always lurking. Rather, we must develop our minds to seek for higher, informed and alternative truths, and never be afraid to look into the light.

Josée Drouin-Brisebois *Curator, Contemporary Art*

Greg Hill *Andain Curator of Indigenous Art*

Andrea Kunard *Associate Curator, Photographs Collection*

Jonathan Shaughnessy *Associate Curator, Contemporary Art*

Rhiannon Vogl *Associate Curator, Contemporary Art*

Tammi
CAMPBELL

*Works in Progress (series) (©April 2013 'B') /
Travaux en cours (la série) (avril 2013 'B') 2013*
acrylic on matboard /
acrylique sur carton musée

*Works in Progress (series) (©April 2013 'C') /
Travaux en cours (la série) (avril 2013 'C') 2013*
acrylic on matboard /
acrylique sur carton musée

*Dear Agnes (©November 2012) /
Chère Agnes (novembre 2012) 2012*
graphite on 25 sheets of cream laid japan paper /
mine de plomb sur 25 feuilles de papier japon vergé crème

TAMMI CAMPBELL

BORN IN CALGARY,
1974

Lives and works in Saskatoon

- 1 Tammi Campbell, email to Rhiannon Vogl, 6 January 2014.
- 2 M.-E.B. *The Painting Project*, www.leprojetpeinture.squam.ca/tammi_campbell_description-tammi_campbell_description-eng (accessed 23 May 2014).
- 3 To date Campbell has completed over 1,000 drawings in the series.

Tammi Campbell engages with the legacies and myths of modern art, specifically those associated with the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in Saskatchewan, taking its formal and conceptual qualities as jumping-off points for her own compositions. Operating in a serial fashion, she creates geometric compositions of grids, squares and circles that adhere to very specific parameters and reference artists such as Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt and Barnett Newman. While paying homage to these predecessors, her works are astute, if not playful, undoings of their hard-edge austerity and epic qualities, a fact that speaks to the artist's contemporary sensibilities and artistic wit.

Campbell's *Works in Progress* series addresses "painting" as both a verb and a noun – the act of mark making and the material in and of itself. The works appear to be unfinished canvases displayed too early, with areas still masked off in preparation for, or in the process of, being filled in by the artist's brush. Upon closer inspection, however, the fastidious nature of Campbell's talents and her impish sense of humour are revealed. Initially, one may notice the small imperfections in the paintings – drips, pencil marks or tears in the surface that the artist has included on purpose; these flaws are our first clue as to where the myth of modernism begins to unravel in her work. As we spend more time looking, her game becomes all the more apparent. Rather than masking off areas in anticipation of the addition of pigment, Campbell has meticulously crafted the "tape" itself out of thin layers of acrylic paint. As she explains, "I first create a stencil with actual masking tape... then apply the paint mixture with a trowel – this

is done with one consistent movement – one layer only – the thickness of the paint is in direct correlation to the thickness of the masking tape that is used to create the stencil. Once the paint has dried, I use a small Xacto blade to cut a fine layer of the paper museum board underneath the paint. The paper support is what is lifting."¹

These are not works in progress by any means but instead are completed paintings that uncannily represent unfinished pieces. Like double entendres, these works are at once finished and unfinished, referential and self-referential, abstract and hyper-realist, earnest and cheeky. "Masking tape is generally associated with the hard-edge technique, where it is used as a tool to execute perfectly straight lines and geometric shapes. In representing it here, the artist highlights the production process and challenges the viewer's power of observation."² Campbell confronts the maker's technique, as well as the gravity normally associated with minimalism and abstract expressionism, but refrains from passing harsh judgement on them. In fact, her insistence on impeccable exactitude and the strictness in her working method is very much in keeping with modernist processes, the difference here being her ability to see through her own aestheticism and encourage the viewer to do the same.

As a further extension of her interest in minimalism, lines and the grid, Campbell maintains a daily drawing practice that directly references the work of Agnes Martin, a progenitor of abstraction in Canada. Campbell's *Dear Agnes* series of linear graphite drawings on cream paper derives its form from Martin's *On A Clear Day*, a suite of 30 serigraph prints from 1973. Martin's restrained vocabulary of horizontal and vertical lines suggests endless permutations, where subtle variations in the intensity of the lines or the configuration of the grid yield surprisingly diverse results.

Campbell's drawings, which she began in 2010,³ continue this legacy in an ongoing silent dialogue with Martin, and have been drafted skilfully and meticulously with the same adept hand as her paintings. The younger artist creates one *Dear Agnes* drawing each day that she is in the studio. The selection of twenty-five works presented here comprises one month of drawings from November 2012. Like Martin, Campbell uses Japanese Kozo paper, and after framing off the margins of the paper fills the interior of the page with a differing combination of vertical and horizontal pencil lines – describing and in a way continuing Martin's project of rendering the ▶

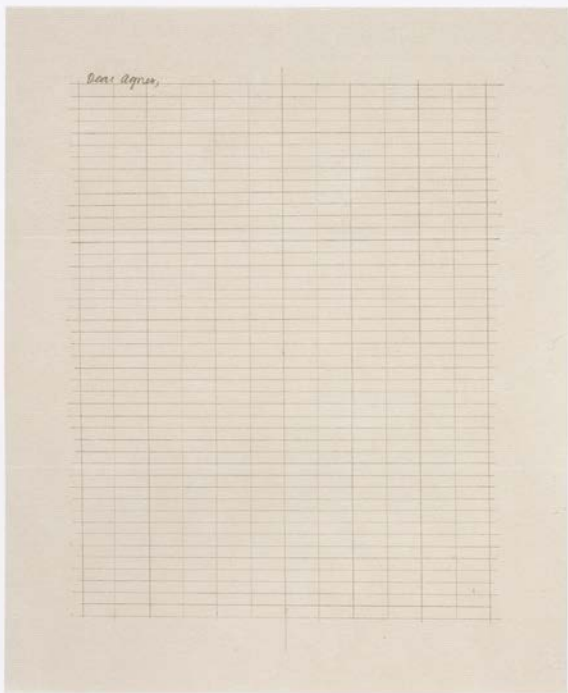


infinitesimal permutations possible within a gridded form. Once each drawing has been completed, Campbell folds it twice using a bone folder, as though preparing to place it in an envelope, and files it away for a later date.

Concerned more with the act of drawing than the result itself, this daily ritual sets the tone for Campbell's working day, and could be seen as a way of channeling the artistic legacy that she enters into dialogue with in her other creative processes. Her practice speaks to the

type of work being made by a particular group of younger Canadian artists who engage with the history of modernism from a very contemporary perspective, one that insists on continuing a discourse with artists that have come before them, while offering a fresh take on concerns of the 1950s and 1960s.

Rhiannon Vogl



(détail/détail)

