

I started to write that Tammi Campbell's work demands a certain kind of attention, but that's not quite right. While her practice is certainly demanding, her new *Monochrome* series is actually rather unassuming. Returning to view her recent exhibition for a quiet second look, I observed an exasperated gallery visitor who, trailing after a child who wandered into the gallery, implored the little one to return: "there's nothing there."

Campbell's most recent body of work is comprised of stretched linen canvas wrapped in simulated packing materials. Working exclusively with acrylic paint, she creates bubble wrap, cardboard, packing tape, and plastic sheeting which she then applies to a stretched support. The work is mimetic—a direct copy of a real thing—but also a representation of painting, that is, a painting of a painting. As writer Nancy Tousey observes in her recent feature in *Canadian Art*, Campbell's work "turns on improbable dualities." By the artists' own admission, "the finished works are at once complete and incomplete, abstract and real, referential and self-referential."¹ The replicated materials are so convincing and the premise so conceptually plausible that her paintings have been dismissed as merely 'the real thing.' This productive confusion is the source of material interest and conceptual intrigue. Here, illusion and allusion operate in equal measure to point to possibilities outside of strictly formal and material concerns.

Campbell's *Monochrome* series has emerged from her sustained exploration of the tropes and conceits of modern painting. She is perhaps best known for her works comprised of simulated masking tape laid down in geometric compositions. Developed over a number of series—*What You See is What You See (After Stella)*, *Work in Progress*, and *Pre-Post Painterly*—these wry, delightfully simple paintings are representative of her material and conceptual approach to painting and the set of key art historical references that activate her work.

Establishing her practice in Saskatchewan, Campbell was acutely aware of the international formalist impulse that shaped much of the province's art production since the 1960s. She participated in the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops, still resonating decades later with the phantom effects of guest faculty Clement Greenberg, Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, and other revenants of high modernism. Taking playful liberty with the theories espoused in Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting," Campbell used the methods of painting to criticize the discipline itself.² In doing so, she sought to undermine modern painting's enduring male archetypes—the genius, the brat, the hero—while testing the myths that sustained them. Her work has emerged from this context, giving shape to her own personal, idiosyncratic engagement with painting of the modern period.

If her earlier work was more pointed in its criticism, the *Monochrome* series is more poetic in tone. The exhibition is an eloquent array of works hung according to scale, drawing attention to their simple geometries and discrete variations in colour and surface. This is an artist who is clearly invested in painting. The work seems to delight in the sensual pleasure of material. The format and scale of her work, elements of composition, and decisions around presentation reinforce their status as paintings. The artist seems intent on playing both ends against the middle and it is in this incongruity I find humour and charm.

Tammi Campbell's work demands a certain kind of attention. Or rather, it calls for a certain quality of attentiveness. When I first encounter her *Monochromes*, I immediately recognize bubble wrap, cardboard, and tape, yet I don't understand these materials to be replicas as such. As I attempt to resolve their status as objects, certainty is delightfully suspended. This creates a sort of double defamiliarization—an estrangement of art from itself—as the objects slip back and forth between the real thing and a representation of a real thing.

Art undoes familiar things. The self-reflexive looking that is activated by Campbell's work is very much a philosophical kind of looking: a seeking, a probing, and a not knowing. Her work calls to mind the ideas of American philosopher Graham Harman, who has been thinking publicly about the relationship between philosophy and art. Connected to the philosophical movement speculative realism, he has been developing his own variant which he calls object-oriented philosophy. In his essay "The Third Table," Harman sketches out a framework for his philosophy, grappling with fundamental questions about reality. His theory rests on the notion that humans do not have direct access to an absolute reality—an argument he supports with the ideas of Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger. The question is: how does one grasp an ungraspable being?

Harman suggests that one can only approach this problem indirectly, through an oblique or sideways approach such as allusion or metaphor. According to Harman, this is the special relationship between philosophy and art: both seek to "establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced."³ Campbell's replicas in acrylic paint demonstrate how objects are irreducible to their physical properties and point to the tenuousness of perception and the marvelous complexity of objects.

By complicating the viewing experience through highly rendered artifice and frustrating the appearance of the canvas through wrapping, Campbell's work prompts a kind of philosophical wondering. The wrapped canvases in her *Monochrome* series also allude to the practical, workaday aspects of an art practice. The packing materials

imply a recent journey—arriving from some unknown and perhaps circuitous route. As a painting circulates through the artworld it is subjected to external forces and interests beyond the artist's control: the machinations of the art market, the gallerist, the curator, the collector, the museum, the patron, the critic (or in this case, the essay writer). In the market it seems all too easy to conflate insurable value with cultural value. With paintings fetching astronomical prices at auction, it makes the aspirations of modern painters seem almost laughable.⁴ This irony is not lost on Campbell. She has a complicated relationship to painting as a special class of luxury goods—she certainly sells her work—but she seems to deny any obligation painting may have to be decorative or even desirable. Through the act of wrapping, Campbell enacts a deliberate, perhaps even coy, gesture of withholding.

With a critical wit and dedication in the studio, Tammi Campbell is developing her own extended meditation on painting. She is exploring the medium's material properties, historical narratives, aesthetic, and formal concerns while reflecting on painting's conditions of production and reception. Importantly, her work also stimulates a looking that goes beyond the surface of appearances pointing to the potential of art to access a deeper reality in its withdrawn and otherwise unknowable otherness.

Troy Gronsdahl, 2016

Notes

1. Tousey, Nancy. "Is What You See Really What You See? Tammi Campbell's Dialogue with Modernism." *Canadian Art*, Spring 2014: pp. 96-102.

2. In his 1960 essay, "Modernist Painting," Greenberg states: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." As he elaborates, "The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure,' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence." Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Edited by John O'Brian, The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

3. Harman, Graham. "The Third Table." *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, commissioned by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, documenta (13), 2012.

4. In the Barnett Newman chronology compiled by Melissa Ho, the artist recounts a story from an early stage in his career: "Some twenty-two years ago in a gathering, I was asked what my painting really means in terms of society, in terms of the world... And my answer then was that if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism. Because to the extent that my painting was not an arrangement of objects, not an arrangement of spaces, not an arrangement of graphic elements, was [instead] an open painting . . . to that extent I thought, and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society." Ho, Melissa. "Chronology." *The Barnett Newman Foundation*, barnettnewman.org/artist/chronology. Accessed 9 Sep. 2016.