

TAMMI CAMPBELL: DOUBLE REMOVE

You never forget your first Tammi Campbell. I saw mine in the summer of 2013 at Mercer Union in Toronto. Not fully understanding what lay before me, I was attracted to the hard-edge, graphic qualities of a series of paintings laid out on two large tables. Collectively titled *Works in Progress* (2013), each painting depicted a geometric form or pattern rendered in a grey-scale of acrylic paint. The compositions ranged from perfectly measured pie-charts to interlocking triangular patterns. Some of them appeared unfinished, overlaid with strips of masking tape—a preparatory tool to help the artist deliver such flawless lines. The masking tape conveyed a sense of immediacy, as if the artist might return any minute to continue working. My moment of revelation came through a friend, a painter, who disclosed: “that’s not actually tape. It’s paint.”

The following year, with a group of MacLaren patrons, I came across Campbell’s *What You See is What You See (After Stella 3)* (2013) during a tour of the Royal Bank of Canada’s collection. When the curator divulged the truth that the masking tape was in fact paint, disbelief and a sense of delight filled the room and we clamoured forward for a closer look. Witnessing the awestruck crowd and the many questions that ensued inspired me to organize an exhibition of Campbell’s paintings. I envisioned audiences reacting with the same surprise and pleasure that I had initially experienced.

Double Remove at the MacLaren Art Centre surveys the past six years of Campbell’s painting practice, with a focus on the development of her signature *trompe l’oeil* technique. The earliest works are her “tape” paintings from 2013, juxtaposed here with her *Monochrome* works from 2016. Occupying the majority of the gallery, these large-scale canvasses are wrapped in paint that mimics packing materials such as bubble wrap, plastic sheathing and corrugated cardboard. In the same vein, acrylic paint in *Paper Series* (2016) simulates an everyday material: sheets of blank paper, delicately folded into various shapes. The most recent works in the exhibition reimagine abstract paintings typical of modernist artists either swathed in or constructed from mock-packing supplies. After taking in this array of deceptive and playful artworks, visitors may question whether this, in fact, is a *painting* exhibition.

When I visited Campbell’s studio in Saskatoon in 2016, I knew research and experimentation were central to her practice. My visit only reinforced this: her space was science-lab like, pristine and ordered, contrary to other artist workspaces I have seen that embrace mess and disorder as a fundamental by-product of the creative process. Campbell explained that when she studied art at the University of Saskatchewan, painting was unfashionable; however, she was determined to find her own narrative within the medium. Interested in the history of abstraction, she began painting still lifes of the tools of hard-edge painting, such as trowels and masking tape. Later, during residencies at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in Winnipeg and The Banff Centre, Campbell experimented with new approaches to paint, and at one point added marble dust into off-white acrylic, the result of which bore an uncanny resemblance to masking tape. It was this discovery that eventually led to her *Works in Progress* series.

In the studio, Campbell laid out test strips of acrylic mixtures, which were labelled and documented during months of experimentation leading up to her *Monochrome* series. I learned about her astute process for replicating packing materials (bubble wrap, plastic, tape, etc.) with concoctions and material manipulations of acrylic colours, gels, dust, graphite and other ingredients. Technical brilliance aside, the *Monochromes*—as paintings of paintings that are packaged and ready to ship—comment on the mechanics of the art market, the time artworks spend wrapped up, stowed away or in transit, and all of the labour involved with these processes.

After our studio visit, Campbell and I drove to Regina to see *Abstraction and Empathy*, her solo exhibition at the Mackenzie Art Gallery. As we travelled the 250 kilometres together from Saskatoon, Campbell told me about the Emma Lake Workshops that so profoundly influenced the art history of that province. Esteemed artists and critics, including Barnett Newman in 1959 and Clement Greenberg in 1962, attended summer residencies in northern Saskatchewan, organized by the College of Art (later University of Regina). As a result, abstract painting—and hard-edge minimalism in particular—occupied the mindset of painting in Saskatchewan during the mid-twentieth century. As we passed through prairies and the rolling Qu’appelle Valley, I considered how the land must also influence prairie painters: swaths of terrain fragmented by the geometry of gridded roads, uninterrupted horizons and endless skies, all of which lend themselves to the flat planes of colour of hard-edge and colour field painting.

Campbell spoke to me about her concerns as a feminist, and the question of how women artists fared during the Emma Lake years. In works such as *What You See Is What You See (After Stella) 02, For SPM* (2018) Campbell alludes to a time when women artists were underrepresented. In his *Black Paintings* of the 1960s, Frank Stella painted concentric bands or stripes in black enamel on raw canvas. Campbell takes his famous line, “what you see is what you see”, as her title and appropriates Stella’s composition but substitutes the enamel with velvety black strips of “tape” paint. The white lines that

separate her paint strips are, as always, pristine, rendering the hand of the woman artist invisible. On the contrary, Stella's lines were evidently hand-painted—he traced them in pencil first and filled them in without masking tape, revealing the hand of the male artist. As painter Kim Neudorf aptly remarks, “Intruding [...] upon the self-contained, male-privileged rhetoric of these works, Campbell attempts to strike at (or ignite) the presence of Modernist high drama while simultaneously deflating and ridiculing any embedded pretense at unity and wholeness.”¹ By restaging Stella's visionary canvases as optical tricks of expertly concocted and manipulated *trompe l'oeil* “tape,” Campbell satirizes the central tenets of Minimalism. Not only is the artist's hand completely erased from her works, but the paint itself is alchemically transfigured, invisible to the eye—a double remove that is at the crux of Campbell's practice.

We can analyze Campbell's work through a lens that stretches farther back in history, specifically with regard to the notion of *painting as illusion*. In Renaissance painting, artists employed techniques of *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato* to render subjects as life-like as possible. They celebrated the *trompe l'oeil* effect for its ability to rouse a sense of disbelief in viewers. Campbell expands on these traditions, and, in turn, challenges not only the viewer, but the foundations of painting as a medium and the art historical traditions that have defined it for centuries.

For some artists, painting is about gesture, narrative and personal expression—an opportunity to showcase the trace of their hand. For certain artists, it is about the materiality of the paint and the surface of the canvas. Others, like Campbell, are invested in painting as a site for critique and research, an inquiry into the subject of painting itself—its technical processes, its materials and supports, its values and its history. For viewers who look closely, with sharpened awareness, the benefits are doubled: Campbell's paintings offer both a timely feminist re-reading of iconic artworks and a surprising reward in the beautiful complexity of their process and concept.

—Guest Curator Renée van der Avoird

¹ Neudorf, Kim. Press Release for *Tammi Campbell: Strike*, Division Gallery, Toronto, 2018.

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