

ANAT EBGI



Tammi Campbell at Arsenal Contemporary NY

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Installation view, Tammi Campbell, Arsenal Contemporary NY

Tammi Campbell lives and works in Saskatoon Canada, Her show at Arsenal Contemporary NY on the Lower East Side borrowed from major modernists and contemporary artists--Joseph Albers and Frank Stella among them--and then adds quite literally a contemporary cover, in the form of seemingly real package materials--bubble wrap, masking tape, etc. But these materials are actually an illusion; they have been painted in highly realistic detail. In doing this, Campbell underscores the fact that we are no longer living in the age of modernism, but actually in a time very different from the time when the works she has copied were made. By covering the artworks with packing materials, she also reduces outstanding works of art to a blurred state, made so by the plastic wrap she has painted as a kind of contemporary disguise (not to mention the difficulty of seeing the artwork clearly). Because the images she re-creates are so powerfully iconic, our incomplete vision gets in the way of appreciating history--this is a description that works very well as a comment, generally speaking, on contemporary perceptions of the art that preceded what we are now making. Good current art almost always trades on the immediate past, but the latter must be seen clearly, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, in a way that does justice to the work the artist is making use of. Campbell does this very well, although it must be conceded that the results are is an endgame, a highly intelligent footnote.

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Campbell's exquisite sense of recent art history mimics the high awareness of the immediate past taken up by many artists working today. We are still awash in the wake of modernism, and much art I see today reiterates those principles and forms that we have inherited in advance, first made a century ago. The insight of the modernists were so remarkably effective, in terms of making art, that the field today is still trading on their brilliance of report. But it is also true that the danger of doing so means that artists are walking into a cul-de-sac, a very late one, in which artistic perception is dominated by the past. As we know, ever since the American poet Ezra Pound conveyed to his readers the rallying cry "Make it new," the emphasis has been on carving out new ideas from highly established tenets of modernist form. This is more than difficult; it is close to impossible. So Campbell's wayward, irreverent modernism makes good sense, even as we look at the quotations slightly askance--many, not all, but many viewers remain hopeful that we can finally move on from modernism into an idiom marked by genuine innovation and creativity. The problems lies in the fact that modernism, beginning with the cubist insight found in Picasso and Braque, is so powerful, and remains so exciting many, many years after its origins, a lot of today's artists don't know what to do next. Campbell doesn't belong to this group; her art is beautifully made, and her quotations possess an added sharpness because she is playing, formally and intellectually, with the past. That means, though, that the insight is cerebral, being an analytical view that is based on seeing through the prism of a highly conceptualized legacy. The work is also, by implication, sharply feminist--in the sense that she is copying great works of male art in an attempt to own them as examples of her own creativity.

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The knock-offs of the Joseph Albers' square paintings reiterate a major artist's most powerful art efforts. Albers was rational, even close to scientific in his presentation of the squares set on top of each other, with a different color scheme for each group of forms. Campbell copies this arrangement of forms and hues with high skill; a small bright green backed by a darker green backed by a jade green square; called *Homage to Joseph Albers (6)* (2018), the painting appears to be covered with a protective plastic wrapping, but in fact this is an illusion--the plastic covering is in fact a painted facsimile of the real thing. Why would Campbell go to such lengths to come up with something seemingly real, but actually inauthentic? It is difficult to see the homage through the opaque covering of the plastic, which isn't even plastic but is made of the same material as the painting it covers. Beyond being a remarkable tour de force, it is clear that Campbell is deliberately obscuring the artistic past closest to her. This means that she is attempting to push the image out of historical awareness even as she pays homage to it! This is Campbell's method, surely a way of acknowledging and tearing down the awareness of the great modernist movement people continue to practice, even if only in a greatly diminished mode.

In her copy of one the paintings Frank Stella did for the "Black Series" paintings, a sequence begun in 1967, Campbell simply imitates what she sees, or so it would seem. But is it truly a version of Stella's comment that what you see is what you get? There is an important difference: the black masking tape apparently used in the reproduction is actually paint! So a hoax is once again being perpetrated. It is tempting to speculate whether either Stella's work or Campbell's copy will stand up to the test of time, but that doesn't really matter--what counts is the brilliant re-visiting of an iconic painting of the 1960s, which established a flat, transparent idiom that asked for nothing more from its audience than the acknowledgement that it exists as itself, for itself. Stella's concerted attempt to free the image of cultural content has been, ironically, made here a cultural sanctuary, whose image serves as an exact template for Campbell's skilled, intellectually suggestive appropriation. The layers of meaning generated by our knowledge that the tape is ersatz in Campbell's copy--ias noted above, the black tape has been created using paint--demand a new notion of creativity in a materials sense, not to mention as a conceptual reworking of the past.

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Why would anyone want to copy so exactly a major painting made several decades ago? Campbell lives within a work whose historical force was great at the time, but which has been diminished a bit by the time that has passed since Stella's moment of distinction (we do have to maintain some distance from the manic certainty that this is a time of major art). Campbell's reproduction, with the important exception of the ersatz tape, re-establishes the painting as an icon for our time, so that the work is experienced as something new and innovative. We can--and should--question the effectiveness of appropriation as art; it is a dangerous path to take. Copying is an intellectualized activity, and this work of art is schematic to begin with, being made of squares drawn in white outline alone, against a black ground. So the only reason why a contemporary artist would re-introduce it would be to re-assert its value to a new audience. This is, I think, what Campbell is attempting to do.

The astonishingly realistic dark-blue tarp lying in the middle of the gallery floor is actually created with paint--it is a remarkable technical achievement. But as offhand as it may seem as an object, Campbell is once again paying homage to an iconic modernist work of art: the black-and-white photo of Yves Klein jumping from a roof with seeming no means of keeping him from injury. In truth, Campbell's tarp is a copy of the one used to catch the artist--it is out of view in the picture taken of him in mid-jump. It has been indicated by the gallery that the appropriation carries with it a feminist stance: Campbell, a woman is copying the tarpaulin as an indication of support outside the actual action and its image. We can ask what this means. Is it a reference to female support of male artists? Is it a visual revelation that Klein's jump was not as dangerous as it looks? It is difficult to say because Campbell doesn't indicate her motivation at all in this beautifully made, but enigmatic work. As a result, her audience is faced with a conundrum: we can appreciate the extraordinary ability that went into the making of the tarp and accept it as a work in its own right, or we can follow the art historical reading, knowing the background of the tarp's origins and working in as well the notion of a feminist reading of the work, in accordance with Campbell's (unspoken) intentions.

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All in all, this is a very good show, marked by more than considerable skill and a complex relationship with art history. Campbell lives and works on the outskirts of culture--in western Canada. But her distance from Chelsea or the Lower East Side becomes a point of honor, in the sense that her art is about exactly that: the possibility of maintaining high awareness and creativity on the periphery. Physical distance counts for little now, given our access to the Internet, magazines, and books. Indeed, Campbell's own slightly wayward intelligence accounts for the complexity in this show. But, even so, there is the question of imitation as a window for innovation. Copies are copies; they can be seen as something else only by conceptual argument, which exists outside the work of art. Given the intellectualization in art we are prone to, we are required to admire Campbell's use of duplication as a way of keeping the recent past alive. But I sense that Campbell wants more than that; it feels like she is trying to capture the visual and intellectual euphoria that modernism brought about--from the vantage point of a woman. So the copies are not so much a matter of theft as they concern an act of resurrection in a historical sense--by means of a conscious rebellion. Thus, the artist brings late modernism and early contemporary art up to date--in a nearly scholarly fashion, one marked by skill and intelligence.