

Material Deceit | The work artist of Tammi Campbell is not what it seems

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Each element of Tammi Campbell's recent series of work is sculpted entirely from mixtures of acrylic paint. Pictured: Tammi Campbell, *Monochrome with Corrugated Cardboard and Tan Packing Tape (detail)*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas.

“THE LESS THERE is to look at, the more you have to look,” wrote Kirk Varnedoe in his landmark book on abstract art, *Pictures of Nothing*. He might have been writing about artist Tammi Campbell, whose work appears, at first glance, like the curator forgot to uncrate it.

Campbell pokes at the weighty seriousness of Modernism, yet still manages to prod the viewer with its important questions: what exactly am I looking at and why? She adds to these the conundrum of how: how did she do it, we ask, as if Campbell is some slick, sleight-of-hand magician.

In her recent series entitled *Monochrome*, the mundane materials used to pack up artwork for shipping—corrugated cardboard, bubble wrap, packing tape, plastic sheeting, tarps—come together to become the work itself, but with an unexpected twist. Each element is meticulously sculpted by Campbell entirely from mixtures of acrylic paint.

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Such careful planning to make something that looks prefabricated, as if no effort went into it at all—why not just use the real thing?

“I am doing it because I am trying to have a conversation with painting. It’s pushing what a painting can be or will be. I could just use the actual cardboard or the tape, but I still think that it needs to be paint for me,” says Campbell.

By forcing paint to do things it was not designed to do, Campbell is pushing the medium into unexpected forms that challenge its very nature and meaning. Her paintings confront not only the process and materiality of painting, but also its lifespan as an object—how it is made, how it is packaged and shipped and what happens as it moves beyond the studio.

“You are making all this work,” she explains, “and it goes away only to be stored for indefinite periods of time. It doesn’t [make it onto a wall] unless it is in a show or on tour, but most of its life is in cardboard or wrapped up somewhere.”

Breakthrough

Campbell’s pared down, monochromatic objects both tweak and pay homage to the legacies of Minimalist artists who rose to prominence in the 1960s: artists such as Frank Stella, Barnett Newman and Sol Lewitt, whose pairing of simple geometric forms with off-the-wall industrial materials also challenged the boundaries between sculpture and painting. However, a closer look at a Campbell reveals that things are not at all what they seem.

“Everything looks deceptively quick,” she says. “I like things to be funny at first, then questioning and curious, to get people thinking about what it means that it is a painting.”

After earning her BFA at the U of S in 1999, Campbell attended several Emma Lake Artists’ Workshops at the U of S Kenderdine Campus, which gained an international reputation through the prominent artists and critics invited to teach in the 1960s and 70s. It was there that she began to study essays on formalist painting by the Modernist critic and art historian Clement Greenberg. She began to make paintings that addressed Greenberg’s language and critical theories, the earliest of which featured tape being peeled off hard-edged paintings.

In 2009, a residency at the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in Winnipeg, Man. took Campbell in an unexpected direction that ultimately led to a breakthrough in her work. Because the space prohibited the use of oil paint—her medium of choice—Campbell began to experiment with acrylic paint, adding marble dust and chalk to dull its sheen and make it feel and look less plastic. Sometimes limitations are gifts. Almost by accident, she says, she figured out how to make “tape” with the paint and new ideas began to coalesce.

“Something clicked and I just started mucking around with paint.... It was very liberating. It changed my practice,” Campbell says.

She soon asked herself what else she could fabricate with paint. She began researching various acrylic mediums and additives, contacting manufacturers, scouring artist handbooks, watching YouTube videos of artists making their own paint and reading traditional recipes.

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Tammi Campbell, *Monochrome with Bubble Wrap and Tan Packing Tape*, 2017. Acrylic on linen.

Defying reason

Campbell's dedication has paid off. For the past seven years, she has supported herself largely from the sale of her work, which is represented by the Toronto- and Montreal-based Division Gallery. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions across Canada and the U.S. and has been featured in publications such as *Canadian Art* and *Border Crossings*. She has been the recipient of many awards, grants and artist residencies. This spring, she is one of two Canadian artists spending three months at the International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York. A monograph about her work is forthcoming.

Even though Campbell's success has introduced her work to savvy gallery patrons, her creations still possess the power to defy reason. She has grown accustomed to viewers who continue to doubt what is right in front of them.

"If you really look, you know it's off, but something about the human brain is quick to accept what it sees. It won't allow you to think it might be an imitation," she says. "Some people can't process it even if you tell them, 'This is made of acrylic paint. This is fake.' I will have studio visits and people will say, 'Uh huh, uh huh, but are you worried about the archival quality of the tape?' No, it's all paint!"

Magician's secrets

A visit to Tammi Campbell's Saskatoon studio is a bit like raising the curtain on the Wizard of Oz. It looks like any shipping warehouse with packing materials strewn across a series of work tables, until she points out that the tape and the sheets of bubble wrap are actually paint.

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Her meticulous process for fabricating the bubble wrap begins with a silicone-based mould cast from sheets of real bubble wrap. In a specially constructed booth, she sprays very fine layers of acrylic paint onto the mold. To get the uncanny appearance of plastic filled with air, everything must be done at exactly the right time and temperature.

“It’s a very labor-intensive process to make it look like something that already exists,” she says.



Detail of Tarpaulin (Poly-Tarp Blue).