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TAMMI CAMPBELL's dialogue with Modernism

Is what you see really what you see?

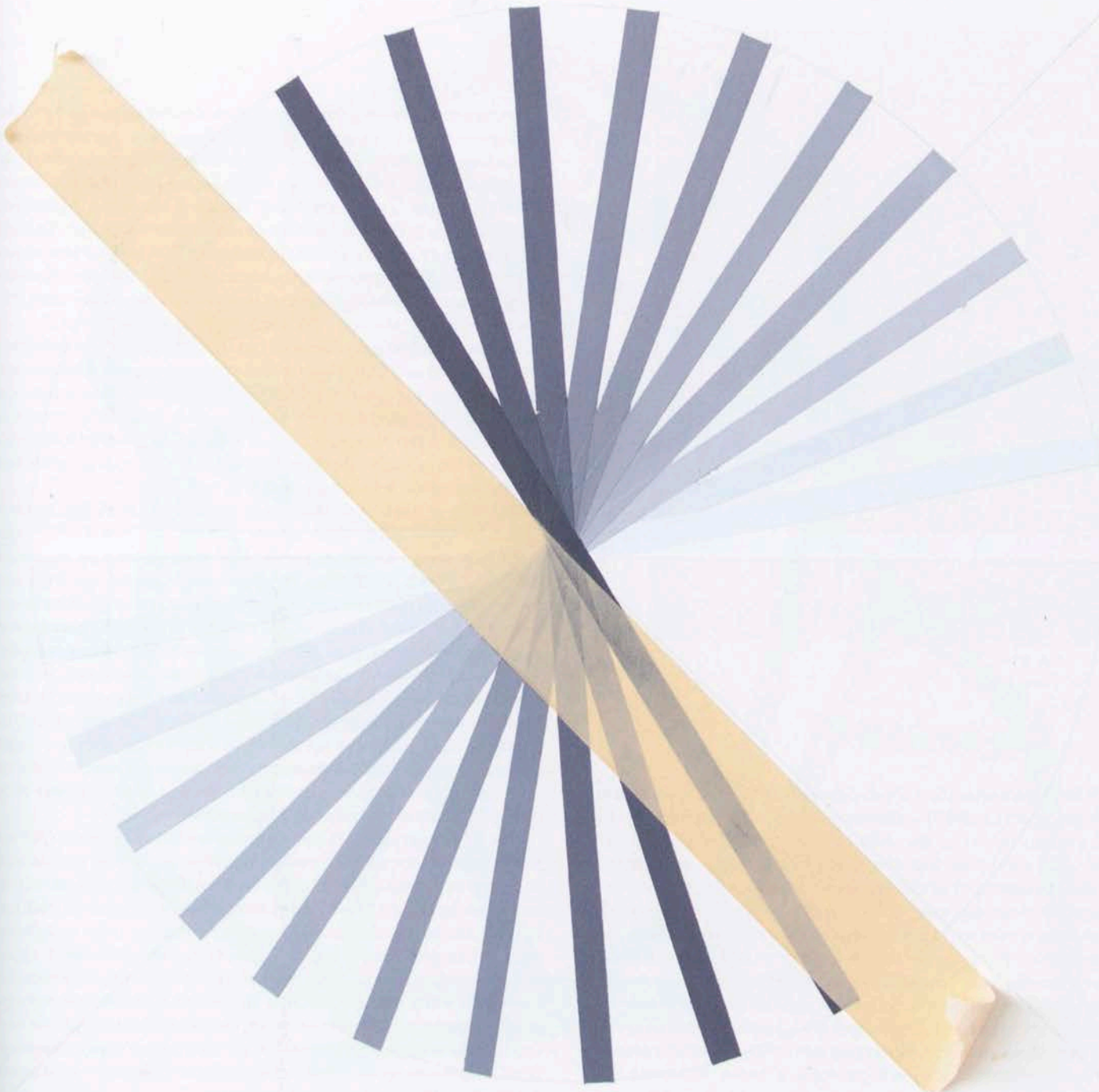
BY **NANCY TOUSLEY**

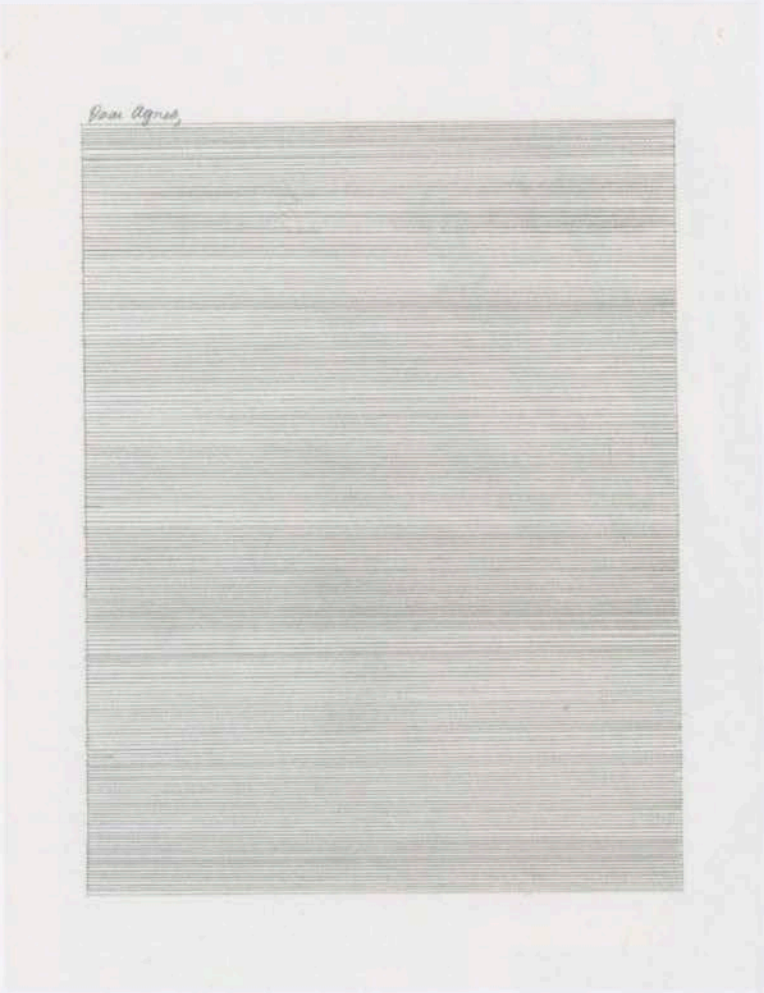
It seems almost counterintuitive that Tammi Campbell, a 39-year-old artist who lives and works in Saskatoon, would consider New York painter Frank Stella to be one of her forebears. But the idea is not farfetched. Stella led the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops in 1967, five years after the art critic Clement Greenberg made his first crazily influential appearance at this woodsy summer outpost of the University of Saskatchewan. The now-renowned Stella, who was working on his *Protractor* series at the lake, was 31. Campbell was not yet born. She ran into Stella later on, when she encountered him in art-history class as the maker of works pictured in exhibition catalogues, books and digital images on the Internet, and hung in art galleries and museums. Stella, a Modernist wunderkind hailed as a game-changing innovator, had made his mark with his radically reductive *Black Paintings* (1958–60) before he reached the age of 25. He didn't click with the artists at Emma Lake that summer. However, he was the first artist whose work had a direct impact on Campbell, even though it was many years after the fact.

"He was one of the artists I felt was speaking a language I could feel my way through at the time, working from one step to another," Campbell says. Her first works to signal Stella's influence were the ones she made in 2009, in the series *Pre Post-Painterly*. The 16.5-feet-long *Pre Post-Painterly (After Stella)*, which is based loosely on the chevron forms, composed of nesting V-shaped stripes, in

Tammi Campbell *Fool Me Twice* (detail) 2013 Mixed media Dimensions variable COURTESY DUNLOP ART GALLERY/GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU PHOTO UNIVERSITY OF REGINA PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

OPPOSITE: **Tammi Campbell** *Works in Progress (studies)* 2013 Acrylic on matboard 29.2 x 29.2 cm COURTESY GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU





Tammi Campbell *Dear Agnes*
2013 Pencil on kozo paper
27.9 x 21.5 cm COURTESY GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU

OPPOSITE: **Tammi Campbell**
Works in Progress (studies)
2012 Acrylic on matboard
29.2 x 29.2 cm COURTESY GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU
PHOTO MATT RAMAGE

Stella's *Notched-V* series (1964). *Pre Post-Painterly (After Stella)* is also the first painting in which Campbell wields her invention of *trompe l'oeil* "masking tape," a concoction of acrylic colours, gel, chalk-and-marble dust and graphite, as a conceptual tool. The work presents itself as an unfinished Stella that has been taped off in preparation for applying paint to the narrow stripes, while in fact the "tape" is the only paint you see. Full of contradictions in relation to an actual Stella, Campbell's work plays on Stella's famous statement that "What you see is what you see"—but more on that later.

The following year, Campbell began the ongoing *Dear Agnes* series, which, to date, numbers more than 1,000 graphite drawings of open and closed grids on Japanese mulberry paper. It is Campbell's practice to make one of these drawings every time she goes into the studio, which habitually is five times a week. The addressee of the wordless "letters" is the artist Agnes Martin, who also has a relationship to Saskatchewan. Martin was born there in 1912, in Macklin, and lived her early life on the province's northern prairies. Another Modernist artist Campbell has brought into her body of work, this time in a completed series of six graphite drawings, is Sol LeWitt. In each case, Campbell has entered a dialogue with a specific artist, and hence Modernism generally, through the making of her work.

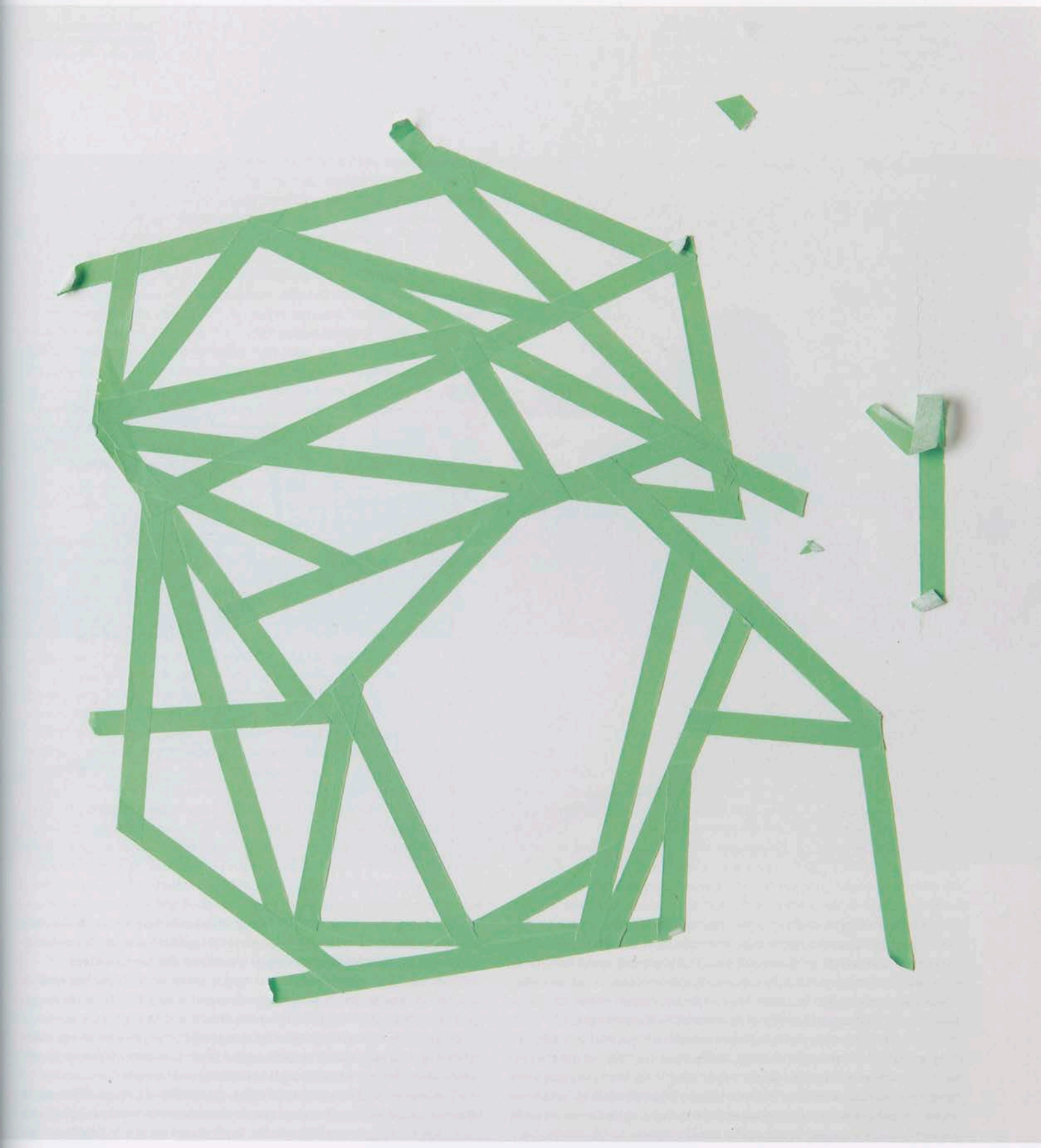
Her initial interest in Modernism was provoked by the fact that Saskatchewan artists had direct contact with major figures of New York Modernism in the 1950s and '60s through the guest workshop leaders at Emma Lake. This group of leaders included Greenberg, who exerted continuing influence on painters such as the Regina Five. Thus her interest has what she calls "a regionalist bent," but one that eschews the romance and mythology that still colour tales of Emma Lake encounters. She says, "I am knowingly painting against the backdrop of the myth of Modernism, which has since been stripped of its utopian ideals and illusions." Nonetheless, it remains a specific backdrop that foregrounds experience. "It's a personal index," she says. "It's not in reaction to Modernism."

As part of her research, Campbell has attended Emma Lake workshops (in 2001, 2003 and 2007) and shared studios and conversations with Modernist artists and critics. In all that time, however, she cannot recall that Stella's 1967 workshop ever came up. Early Stella, who astonished everyone when the *Black Paintings* first appeared in the late 1950s, might have been too reductive for Greenberg and his followers. Campbell finds that the artist is as "relevant and visible as he ever was."

Of course, references to Modernism in the work of younger artists in Canada and the United States are not a novelty. In recent years, many artists have shown interest in earlier ideas about abstraction, materiality and process. Their proliferating numbers have prompted use of the term "neomodern" to define a trend, viewed by at least one critic, David Geers, writing in the Winter 2012 issue of *October*, as "a nostalgic retrenchment" in the face of "technological transformation and economic uncertainty," and as a capitulation to consumerism. Such work may or may not itself contain a pointed critique of Modernism, just as it may or may not refer to specific figures in Modernist art. However, because it is difficult, in 2014, to make a move as an abstract painter or sculptor that does not suggest a referent in earlier art, Modernist stylistic languages have become not only signifiers but also investigative tools pressed into the service of the conceptual approach to painting that is prevalent now.

The Modernist idea that leading artists are linked by linear chains of influence, each one topping what came before to push art ever forward, has given way to self-aware reference-making. These days, artists reinvent and repeat Modernist tropes, in the most relevant iterations, to talk back to them and to give them new meanings in different times and circumstances. Campbell says, "I feel like my work has always bumped up (and at times pushed back) against Modernism." In Canada, in addition to Campbell's works after Stella, Martin and LeWitt, whose simple, reductive and diagrammatic aspects appeal to her, Damian Moppett's high-low levelling sculptures based on British sculptor Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning* (1962) also make specific references to an iconic Modernist—in Moppett's case, to close the gap between art and craft.

Two other contemporaries with whom Campbell feels kindred interests are Montreal painter Anthony Burnham, whose realistic paintings, which turn the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional, are made from abstract constructions he composes from everyday things and materials, and New York–based R.H. Quaytman. Quaytman's serial, often site-specific work in the ongoing *Chapters* series combines Op Art–style abstract patterns and



Tammi Campbell in her Saskatoon studio, January 2014 PHOTO MATT RAMAGE

photographic images in conceptually layered works on wood panels. "She is often dealing with abstraction but uses a combination of material approaches to point back at painting," Campbell says, citing photography, silkscreen, paint and diamond dust. "A lot of the work I'm drawn to looks like a remake. It looks understandable or knowable in relation to past work. Everyone wants to put their work in a relational context. You want to place it."

How to paint now is a perennial question artists must ask themselves in every generation. One night in 1960, at the Pratt Institute, Stella told his audience, "There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting." His work began speaking directly to Campbell in 2009 as she struggled with the same questions. Born in Calgary, Alberta, and raised in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Campbell graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with a BFA in 1999 and spent the next 10 years making series of abundant works that were slowly carrying her towards what she hoped would one day be resolution.

She realized that she could not read, note-take or think her way to a solution, but instead had to figure it out through hands-on, material processes. She subscribes to the present understanding of making as a form of thinking. As Campbell, who was taking oil painting lessons at age 10 or 11 and kept an attic studio while in high school, now says, "It's work, work, work, work, for me, to get to a place that seems so simple."

The lesson of the *Imperfection* series (2005–08), a group of 30 nearly abstract paintings in oil and encaustic that evoke the surface of bruised skin, was finding "a way to have the work marry the act of painting." To

Tammi Campbell *Works in Progress (studies)* 2013 Acrylic on matboard 29.2 x 29.2 cm COURTESY GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU

FOLLOWING PAGE: **Tammi Campbell** *Works in Progress (studies)* 2011 Acrylic on matboard 29.2 x 29.2 cm COURTESY GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNEAU PHOTO MATT RAMAGE

this end, she chose fugitive pigments for the fleshy but minimal works, built up in hundreds of translucent layers that, like bruises, would change colour over time. The oil mediums would yellow. The paintings were "a performance of the body," says Campbell. "The painting acted as if it were a body." A strong performative aspect remains characteristic of all of her subsequent work.

Switching briefly from oils to acrylic paint for works that investigated hard-edge painting and Post-Painterly Abstraction, she found that the shiny plastic surfaces of acrylics were not to her taste. She did not document these works, but she did save the coils of pulled masking tape that she had used to guide their hard edges and keep them sharp. The sticky, piled-up coils became the subject matter of her first tape paintings, the realistic images of the *Big Attack* series (2008–09). Here she illustrates the tape as the detritus of an act, the painter's "big attack," à la Greenberg, which Campbell's tongue-in-cheek images suggest is more workaday than heroic. When she read Greenberg's essays, she found them "prescriptive, reductive and narrow in terms of defining painting." The titles she assigned to individual paintings in the *Big Attack* series open his rhetoric to ironic reinterpretation, as in *All Over*, *Pushed* and *Pulled*.

The *trompe l'oeil* masking tape is a painting device Campbell invented in Winnipeg, Manitoba, while she was attending a month-long workshop, Summer School, at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in August 2009. Inside the gallery, the participants were asked to work with acrylic paints. Campbell had already spent some time during the previous year experimenting with mediums and fillers that, when added to acrylics, would make them behave more like oils, roughing up the surface and extending the paint. She accidentally hit on a combination that mimicked the colour and texture of green painter's tape, but with other issues in mind, made a mental note of it and pressed on. In the face of having to deal with acrylic paint again, she remembered the incident.

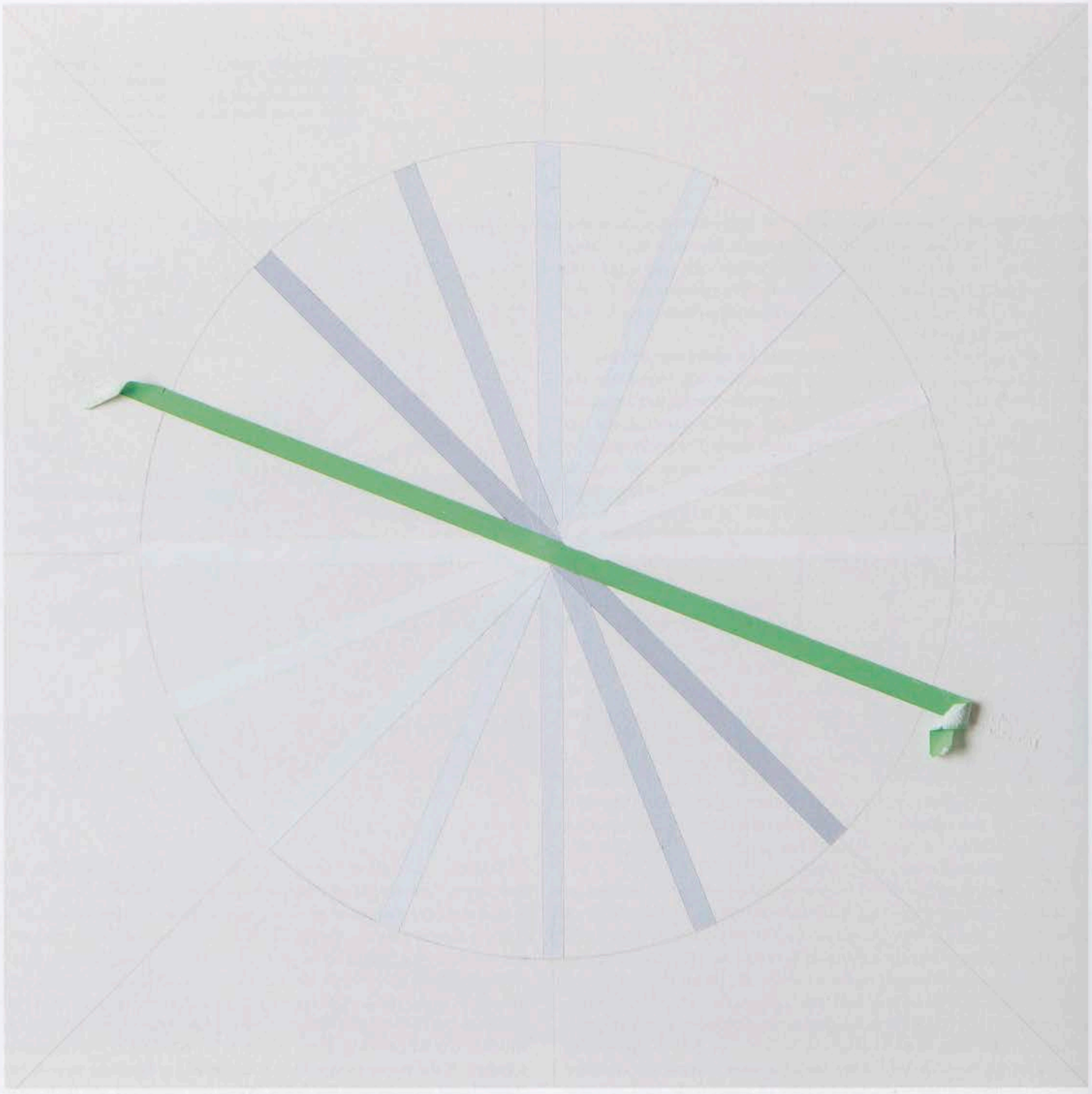
More experimentation at the Plug In workshop led her to the mixture of colours, gel, graphite and clay that produced the colour and texture of masking tape. There was no eureka moment, Campbell says. After a year of accidents and trial and error, things eventually came together. With the "tape" in her conceptual and material toolkit, she began a work that referenced Stella, but set it aside when technical complications arose to make and complete a work with more general associations. Titled *Pre Post-Painterly*, this work is 50-inches-high by 30-feet-wide. She completed the first Stella, *Pre Post-Painterly (After Stella)*, a more technically complex composition measuring 50-inches-high by 16.5-feet-wide, back at home in Saskatoon, where she could work out the painting's problems. By February 2010, she had made five more, all of them large works.

"The idea of remaking in my work is to understand [the work]," Campbell says, mirroring the stance of a student copier. To make the *Dear Agnes* drawings, which she began shortly after the Stellas, she uses the same materials that Agnes Martin used. She performs physical actions like those Martin would have performed to make drawings of grids, thus incorporating the body memory of the act of making with each "letter" she writes. "Performing that act is the closest way I have of understanding that work," Campbell says. But her "letters," unlike Martin's drawings, are inconsistent and imperfect. She uses a ruler but never measures, relying on her eye and hand to hold the grids and their allusions together.

Still the reference to Martin remains indelible and moving in the intimacy of Campbell's direct address to the artist, who died in 2004. "There is an aura of her work that enters my work as nostalgia," Campbell says. "I know this; I love this. It has to do with the viewer more than me, but I also love her work. By writing those letters to her, I am acknowledging that."

Campbell chose Stella's stripe paintings as a model for painting because the way in which his work was made is so clearly articulated and apparent. However, it is the inauthenticity of her work that is the crux of her project, which is to make paintings about painting. To make a Stella, she constructs a stencil of the entire design with actual masking tape and trowels her "tape" paint mixture into the voids. When the paint sets, she pulls away the actual tape, leaving the painted tape in place. She then enhances the object-like appearance of the painted tape by cutting the paper or matboard surface underneath the paint, so as to free the edges and the ends of strips where the painted tape looks as if it has been cut or torn. The effect is remarkably realistic. But, of course, Stella did not use masking tape on his stripe paintings. He drew their compositions onto the canvas with graphite and painted in the stripes with a housepainter's brush, using the pencil lines to guide his hand. What appears in his work to be narrow white stripes is raw canvas showing in between the wider stripes of black enamel.

Campbell's Stellas reverse the terms of an actual Stella. In her work, the surface appears to have been prepared, or taped off, to allow paint to fill only the narrow stripes. Her thickened and texturized "tape" replaces



Stella's stripes with a device that presents itself as an object, which exceeds the highly realistic, shadow-enhanced descriptions of *trompe l'oeil* with its physicality. Campbell remakes masking tape, as well as a Stella; it is more accurate to refer to the "tape" as a simulation. To exchange these terms helps to better understand Campbell's work. In Baudrillard's words, speaking of the simulacrum, her painting is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself." Her painting simultaneously affirms and negates her references, as well as Modernism's myths. Ultimately it addresses only its own making, and represents only itself.

At the same time, her work turns on improbable dualities that she articulates in a description of her own production: "The finished works are at once complete and incomplete, abstract and real, referential and self-referential." They simultaneously present a painting and demonstrate how a painting is or can be made. Their images point to a future when the tape is pulled and the finished painting it implies is revealed. That future is constantly deferred by the remake and the copy, the simulation of the real. The proposition that Campbell's work presents is this: despite deferrals and pronouncements of its death, painting remains an unfinished project. ■

Discover recent work by Tammi Campbell at canadianart.ca/tammicampbell