



Search and Rescue: Diagrams of Monotony and Distress in the Work of Dustin Campbell

**By Addie Langford, Detroit, MI
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Though the subject of countless artist/thinkers, memory and nostalgia remain a fascination. But inherent to nostalgia is not only the recall of activities, but the longing to return to a time deemed more full in certain ways than the now we are living daily. Viewing Dustin Campbell's work is like walking onto an iced pond and peering through a hole or thinning in the surface. Through mark making, color, opacity and a reoccurring sense of flinching or being thwarted, a sense of caution emerges. It is not a sense of violence, however, but a mild mistrust or disillusion, a re-writing of a history you thought you understood. In the words of French novelist and philosopher, Albert Camus, a heavy influence for Campbell, the condition of modern being - and the makers responding to this modern being - is captured in the predicament of Sisyphus, and Campbell is yet one more as he shifts without warning between the claims of his medium and the latest trend of anything-goes.

Through Camus' lens, it is clear that Campbell has joined his tribe of contemporaries in the bath of super-exposure where anything and everything is fair game for influence. The membrane of classicism that once provided metrics for quality and meaning, unseated by modernism and obliterated by Richards Tuttle and friends, means that meaning/content now comes at a body from innumerable directions like light rays. Camus' words ring true, "There is no longer a single idea explaining everything, but an infinite number of essences giving a meaning to an infinite number of objects." Staying with Camus' insight, he also stated that "a man's sole creation is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works. One after another, they complement one another, correct or overtake one another, contradict one another too." In keeping with this spirit Dustin Campbell commits to an exploration of his experience through multiple media and positions.

As one who in his time took odd jobs to sustain himself, Camus was no stranger to monotony, indeed, much of the literature of the Absurd is an archeology of various states of boredom and empty time, what in French is called *le temps mort* (dead time). Likewise the front seat of a delivery truck is where most of Dustin Campbell's ideas take form whilst traversing Philadelphia shifting boxes from storage to stores. Between stoplights, and drop offs is the sky, the brotherhood of deliverymen, Camus and installations in the studio of his imagination.

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NAPOLEON is a collectively-run project space that strives to provide a platform for new work and new ideas.

In his painting, photography and installation, Campbell leaves the viewer grappling with a sense of incompleteness. There the diagram serves to decipher or reduce predicament into digestible parts. Painted works approach bodily scale as if to ask the viewer to enter the swirling orbit of line. The sense of a thinking and re-thinking, declaration and erasure - what in the technical language of painting is called *repentir* or *pentimenti* - advances and recedes like the drone of the seventeen-year cicada, waiting for its life to hatch. In each work, and even if it is wispy and spare, there is heavy construction/reconstruction underway.



Untitled #1, oil on canvas, 2012

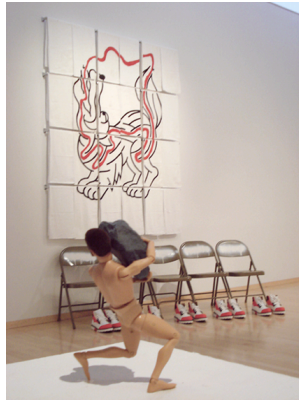


ServiceVeh#17(Flag), digital photograph, 2012

The painting, *Untitled #1*, and photograph, *ServiceVeh#17(Flag)*, both composed with layered, swirling interiors, are girded by a dense frame. The frame provides enclosure or a fortress wall that guards an interior space, literally and figuratively. Campbell's alignment with Camus's philosophical position points to a shared concern with walking the tightrope between the inspired and profane, the philosopher providing reassurance that the inspired and the profane need not destroy each other, but rather inform, enhance and enrich. In his MFA thesis work, Campbell posed a small male figure, denuded and straining under the weight of a tiny foam boulder, a mocking Barbie Doll Sisyphus. The work-a-day gulch characterized by the boulder embodied the absurd to-and-fro of daily anthill toil that trades out meaning for movement. Yet all of this thinking is expressed through pedestrian materials such as work boots, folding gym chairs, and spray-paint on a wall, a contradiction embodied by the fretful mark making and masking of the painted canvases. Doubt or apprehension licks at the heels of each finished work.

There is another aspect of the work that hints at scam. The use of thin skins, painted diagrams on a wall, thin as projections or anti-objects, not even the thickness of paper, not to be purchased or collected in its exact form, it's something you may want but cannot have. Something that cannot be reached stares back through his work, work inspired from instructional diagrams - a constant effort to learn how, or to decipher - as, for example, the stars floating in the sky in the photograph, *ServiceVeh#17(Flag)*, indicate a sense of aspiration, even the blind faith of patriotism, yet the drab ratchet-strap lurks in the lower quadrant of the work, the slithering reminder to abandon one's dreaming and 'get back to work.' The development of this body of images is one to watch.





Soul Drummer, Installation View, 2009

To continue the concern with the halting process of painting, one notes how the use of a putty-colored palette evokes erasure. The manner in which Campbell applies ink or paint to surfaces, walls, hanging terrycloth or wooden slats has a way of derailing or distracting from original function or intent. He uses this color putty in chunks and straps to strand or detain fleeting energy, like an anvil dropped on a flock of scattering canaries.



They Can't All be Animals, Oil on Canvas, 2011



Fig. 54C (Drowning), Digital Print, 2012

The work in every form indicates pending failure, or promises that the subject, be it color, image or built form, is unlikely to reach its destination: workman's boots lined up in front of empty chairs, painted to look like training sneakers, their function altered and abandoned by the wearer, or to revisit our guide, Camus, again from *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

In certain situations replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of the soul in which the void becomes the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.

Yet it is also true that Campbell's paintings owe a debt of gratitude to the frantically seeking line of Joan Mitchell, and Richard Diebenkorn's view-finding segmentation of landmasses through blocks of icing-like color. The qualities of opacity and thinness are working hard for this artist, and transmitting vibrations of stability and direction interchanged with fragility and indecision, a reflection of the culture of this decade and his experience of its shifting terrains.



The process of layering and organizing a shifting load of memory and the looming unknown, like boxes in his delivery truck, is the product of Dustin Campbell's daily progress toward the understanding of a life in the process of being lived on the edge of absurdity. Campbell's collective works are like a fascinating, haphazard recording of layers on VHS tapes where episodes of *The Guiding Light* and *Gilligan's Island* ended up spliced between home movies of birthday parties. The paintings give a sensation of peering into a rolling boil, the printed works a sense of control over the noise created by the distance between memory and unrequited desire. Dustin Campbell is spear fishing through an ice-hole netting memory, measuring, and pitching it back, flickering like anchovies into the depths.

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