

Notes of Persistent Awe

Columns by Benjamin Terrell

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Brian Scott Campbell

by Benjamin Terrell



Speaking about a particular work by the American modernist painter Marsden Hartley, the contemporary painter Tal R. said, "if you tell someone you want to paint ... the sea, perhaps a boat, maybe the sun... any art school teacher would say it is suicide. But in fact," he mused about the master artist's straightforward subject, "it is everything a painting is ever about." Hartley had been considered a Cubist, an Expressionist, had painted pointillistically and abstractly. He had lived in Paris and Berlin before returning late in life to the place he was born, declaring himself "The Painter from Maine." That doing or undoing of self reveals a reunion of the child heart in harmony with an old poet's head when unpacked effortlessly in Hartley's late landscapes.

Brian Scott Campbell, *For Robert*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2020. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

As I approach my fiftieth birthday I think about homecoming and landscape a lot, especially living so close to the area damaged by last year's Holiday Farm wildfire in Eugene, Oregon. I now spend more time outside looking at what the fire took and what was left behind. Surviving and aging are like being in the presence of grandness, whether a masterwork of great art or a field full of birds, and both produce awe and awareness. Important in life and in a landscape painting, but sometimes unseen, is the force of nature itself. In art, it can be enhanced by the enormity of the elements depicted or implied by the harmony of the artist's hand and the heartstrings it plucks by what it portrays. For me, landscape painting itself is both spacious and contemplative and is what decorates the cosmic canopy of what connects us all.

The landscape paintings of Brian Scott Campbell found on Instagram (@brianscottcampbell) or seen in his new publication, *Home and Garden*, feel familiar and appear one house away from Hartley's heritage. Campbell paints boats as remote geometric shapes, houses like distant desired destinations, also images of blocky trees, forgotten fences and walls and bridges we can't access. Sometimes the latter divides, provides a nostalgic sense of "over here" and "over there" and asks, "have we come that far?" or "do we long to go back?" But, either/or aren't opposites in a Campbell painting, they are kin and cousins related to longing itself. Campbell, like Hartley, is a reductionist of form and feeling. Both artists are poets of the picturesque and each is a station master of his own emotional railway running from desire to something divine.

Campbell uses a vinyl-based paint called flashe, which is flat, matte, and opaque. Unlike oil, flashe dries quickly and allows easy layering. Campbell's thin monochromatic washes have the graphite grit of a grave rubbing. They remind me of the story of an anthropologist on a safari who is enamored by an opulent snake, only to have it presented to her by locals at the end of the trip as a belt. Seeing it grey, black, and unanimated, the anthropologist realized what

had given the reptile its mystery and unique color was its life force. Not to say a work by Campbell is without life. Rather, he paints similar states of in between, like embers or boats that float in anticipation of being boarded. His landscapes are cocoons, vessels or Otis elevators where the viewer is taken elsewhere to emerge.



The best trips are measured by enjoyment rather than distance. In Campbell's world of the familiar and the forgotten, both old and new have directionality and offer the viewer a slow stroll to come and go. His palette of grey, yellow, blue and sometimes red (as in a hot dot for a blazing sun) functions like traffic symbols for the eye. Campbell can cartoon in style, not out of informality but from urgency, as if to discard worldliness in favor of palms up surrender. His black lines and simple shapes are bones bereft of ego and boiled down nature is the broth we are immersed in. His is a land where information gives way to wisdom and where a winding path or the wind felt over a river tells you: you were greater in your nothingness than you are now in your somethingness.

Brian Scott Campbell, *Cape*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16".
Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

Look at the boat that floats center stage in the painting, "Dockers." It sets sail not in sea but cinema, suggesting the tension of the Roman Polanski film, *Knife in the Water*. In the film, three people are forced together by the magnetic push and pull of chance and fate. The friction aboard Campbell's vessel is the opposing forces of the old ways, the new ways versus us and each wants its way. In this painter's world, tossed overboard first is not a knife (like in the film) but the cell phone, a devise that connects and cuts, enables but confuses- an object offering us the unjust exchange of our real-life for the sinister shackle of screen time. You don't sense Campbell prefers the old over the new, but both are taken like necessary trains to the same place- one operating locally and the other an express.



Left: Brian Scott Campbell, *Little House*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2019. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.
Right: Brian Scott Campbell, *Blue Mountain*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2019. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

Campbell's work musters another master, being comparable to Philip Guston's late-career cartoon painting. Guston, like Hartley, had a change of style, inspired by his own homecoming and renewal. Roy Oxlade wrote of the iconic painter's final transformation of artistic alphabet, "If it is to live, language must constantly be renewed; the present depends on the past, but it is doomed to leave it.." Often appearing in Guston grey, Campbell canvases can keenly balance staying and leaving. They are postcards from the places where Guston's characters grew up, are animated ashes of rebirth, and are photo negatives of repatriation. A Brian Scott Campbell painting can feel like the last card dealt to the genre of landscape painting. Once dealt, much like a river card, it has the potential to change the way you see everything else in your hand.



Left: Brian Scott Campbell, *Twin Flame*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16". Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

Right: Brian Scott Campbell, *Blood Orange*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16". Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.



Left: Brian Scott Campbell, *Dockers*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2020. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

Right: Brian Scott Campbell, *Guiding Light*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2020. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

T.S Eliot wrote to passengers on a similar journey. "You who think you are voyaging" He warned, "you are not those who saw the harbor receding or those who will disembark." As if to say all binary thinking belittles the ones who always belonged. You can not return because you are not the one who left home and we are never really separate from the whole. This truth is the timelessness found in a work by Brian Scott Campbell. Also infused is the idea that once we fully appreciate this life, so starts the clock measuring the moments to the next. After we pass through that veil, on the blank canvas of the other side won't be a something, but everything.

Coda: Being an art book junkie, I was always frustrated by publications on amazing painters with only black and white reproductions. For a long time, the only way outside a museum to see work (before the internet) by artists like Soutine, Avery or Ryder was in books like that. Try making sense of a Milton Avery painting in only two tones, it's like eating soup with a knife. But compare a work by Campbell composed in black and white with an older Marsden Hartley reproduction, like seen below. The two get along like littermates, ask us to stare longer, work harder, stay late if necessary, to get at their bold italic truth. Like newspaper headlines, both also beckon with immediacy, gut and gravity. This is the first ripple in the artist's pond of secret source and the opening words of a candid conversation by the product of painting itself.



Left: Brian Scott Campbell, *Jimmy's Hideaway*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16", 2019. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume. **Right:** Brian Scott Campbell, *Gone*, flashe on canvas, 20" x 16". Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.



Home and Garden: 100-page full-color exhibition artist book featuring works by Brian Scott Campbell. Published by [Arts+Leisure](https://www.artandleisure.com/) in 2020. Edition of 100. Photo courtesy of Freight + Volume.

<https://www.thesemi-finalist.com/notes-of-persistent-awe/5-3102021>