

## TAMMI CAMPBELL: Working towards Perfect Imperfection



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1. Tammi Campbell, *Monochrome with Corrugated Cardboard with Tan Packing Tape*, 2017–2018, acrylic on linen, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy Galerie Division, Montreal.

2. *Monochrome with Poly Wrap and Packing Tape*, 2017, acrylic on linen, 40 x 32 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy Galerie Division, Montreal.



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**BORDER CROSSINGS:** You have said you were “painting against the backdrop of the myth of modernism.” I want to tease out what you mean by that and what were the implications of that resistance.

TAMMI CAMPBELL: I think the main focus of my work, intentionally and maybe unintentionally, concerns a dialogue with the history of modernism and its male dominance. Everything I have done has reverted back to the history of painting in Saskatchewan, and while it is shifting, it is still linked to that modernist theme. At first it was me working against the Greenbergian influence on painting, particularly in Saskatchewan. So I was taking that as a starting point and trying to flip it in a small way. Not so much like zombie formalism where you’re bringing up these ghosts to reinhabit that power and space but instead to call them up and rework them to add a new perspective.

You also said Frank Stella was speaking your language. What was it that you were hearing that made his language so congenial?

It was his approach. I am attracted to systematic painting practices, to something that is repeated or something where you can understand how it is put together. When I look at some paintings, I can feel how they are made; I can feel the brush strokes and the texture of the canvas. I can almost imagine what types of brushes were used. There are some works that just make sense physically by looking at them closely. Stella does something that I have always been drawn to and that is working repetitively. I like process and doing things step by step, improving them along the way but also seeking a consistency. Once I make one painting, I want to make a hundred variations. Stella was so systematic that I could feel where his next move came from; the shift from one work or series to another made intuitive sense to me.

**I'm interested to hear you say you can actually feel the way the painting is made. That is a measure of your practical understanding of the material things that we use to make paintings, but I sense that there is something additionally emotional in your understanding. It goes deeper for you.**

I think it does. It's something felt and understood in terms of why we make things. The reason I make things is because I find a real peace in the act of doing. When there is something repetitive and set out as a task, you can shut off a part of yourself. It's a left brain/right brain phenomenon. Once you do that, a part of yourself has had a deep rest. That's what I love about making art and probably why I am an artist. It feels so good that it is almost like a drug.

**You have talked about being "possessed by art," you have referred to "obsession," and some critics have used the word "fetish" in connection with your work. Do you embrace the concentration and focus that the word "fetish" carries with it?**

I'm not sure I do. I think when people see my work, it seems fetishistic or obsessive or very complicated and detailed, but it is not really that precise. It may look precise, but it's not fetishistic. Maybe I'm fetishizing the history of art more than the technique.

**If you're a fetishist you're one in the thinking and you're a hard worker and craftsperson in the making. The obsession may come up in the making. It's a practical, pragmatic obsession.**

It is. I'm equally interested in the different steps involved in making an artwork. So the first stage is my being fixated on wanting to make something work out of paint, so I'll keep testing and testing and testing until I can find a way to make bubble wrap out of acrylic paint. So I might plug away for six months on that while I am working on other work, just doing new mixes or figuring out how I can make a mould. So there will be that sort of research on technical things and also keeping notes and testing materials. Then I am also interested in the history of art and the work of other artists. I love looking at and thinking and reading about art. Once the concept and technical aspects are sorted out, it becomes the act of making and then improving it, in multiple steps and in multiple works, and letting that grow into a piece. All the things about painting and its display and its history are equal. But I most like the act of making, possibly because it's a bit of solitude.

**When you talk about your early process, you sound like a researcher/scientist as much as a painter/aesthete.**

Yes. It is just a question of figuring out the technical components and aspects of painting and researching the materiality of acrylic paint. So I'll throw anything into anything to see what happens: if you pull it, if you brush it, if you put it on something, if you mix it with something else, how can you peel it off? Anything to push the possibilities of what paint can do.

**Tell me about the significance of the Plug In ICA's Summer Institute and the influence it had on the direction of your work.**

At that point I had done my BFA and was working at the former Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon and making work in the evenings. I couldn't see myself outside of the kind of painter I was in that community and also because I hadn't gone to grad school and hadn't really thought about myself in a serious way. I was serious about making art, but I hadn't looked for opportunities to exhibit or move outside of Saskatchewan. When I got to Winnipeg I was suddenly among peers, people in my age group, and working alongside artists who were working more conceptually, which I was doing but in a completely different framework. There was a fine mix of participants: some were outside of art, some were architects, some incorporated dance and filmmaking.

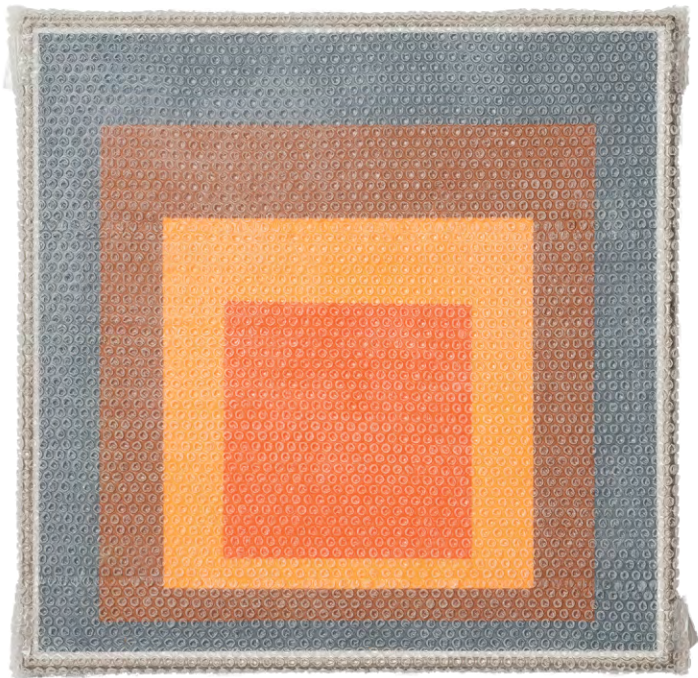
**What was it about the material side of what you were presented with at the Summer Institute that you found so inspirational?**

I had just read the complete essays of Clement Greenberg and I had been making still life paintings out of the scraps from hard-edge paintings. I was working through some of the ideas and the language from Greenberg's texts and they were really fussy paintings that I had planned to continue making, but when I arrived I found out we were all going to have little nooks in the gallery and I couldn't use oil paint. My first reaction was, "What am I going to do?" I had been oil painting from a young age and I didn't like acrylics because they were so plastic-y and shiny and I had never had a good experience with them. So I went to the art supply store and got some acrylics and some extra things to fill them out and change the sheen. I bought some chalk and some marble dust and I started playing to make the acrylics work for me. I accidentally found a way to make masking tape in a more illusionary way; from that point forward everything shifted. I was thinking about what lingers and hangs on. It was also posing the problem of how you make something out of scraps and then how do you make it your own, or add a new way of looking at that type of work? It was all there conceptually—the ideas, the research, my

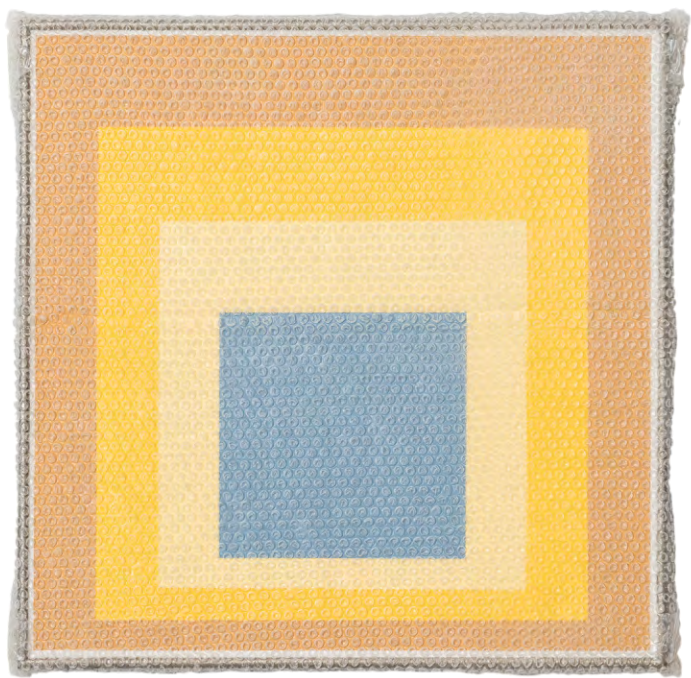
*Dear Agnes series, July 26 2010, 2010, graphite on Japanese paper, 11 x 8.5 inches. Courtesy Galerie Division, Montreal.*

Dear agnes,

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1. *Homage to the Square with Bubble Wrap and Packing Tape (#24)*, 2019, acrylic on board with metal frame, 25 x 25 inches. Photo: Matt Ramage. Courtesy of Galerie Division and Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles.

2. *Homage to the Square with Bubble Wrap and Packing Tape (#06)*, 2019, acrylic on board with metal frame, 25 x 25 inches. Photo: Matt Ramage. Courtesy Galerie Division and Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles.

3. Installation view, "Dear Agnes Series, 1 October–31 December 2017," 2017, Arsenal Contemporary, New York. Photo: Greg Carideo. Courtesy Arsenal Contemporary, New York.

intent—but that shift in material and having a new constraint to grapple with actually made it possible.

**What is it about the unfinished that is so interesting to you?**

I am honestly interested in what a painting is and how a painting is painted. In my early years I was questioning why am I painting, what is the history of painting, what does it mean to be a woman painter with an interest in abstraction, how do I go about doing that and not redo what has already been done? How do you insert yourself into that narrative and that history? There was a lot of questioning, so a lot of work was unfinished because I hadn't come to the conclusion that it was okay just to throw on paint. Painting is never finished. I don't really know that a work is finished and then I want to redo and change it in some way. I don't let go of a painting quickly. I need to work in a series in order to feel like I've arrived at some completion.

**I get the connection to conceptual and minimalist practices in your work, but I also see what it has in common with 17th-century Dutch painting, with artists like Pieter Claesz and Balthasar van der Ast. You paint material that is quotidian and impoverished whereas their subject is the overflowing plenitude of the Dutch middle class. Do your influences go back before the modernist project, and could you be comfortably lodged in 17th-century Holland as much as 21st-century Saskatoon?**

Definitely. There are some trompe l'oeil paintings that are commonplace, like a bulletin board that holds letters and notes. There is a lot of that going on in my work, where the simple thing could be anything, anywhere. I'm trying to create an illusion of something in the same manner that they are, trying to make someone believe that what they are looking at is not what it is.

**The artist who has had the most influence on you is Agnes Martin. What about her work was captivating enough that you could establish an epistolary relationship with her in your "Dear Agnes" series?**

It's similar to what I was saying about Frank Stella: I am drawn to artwork that is pared down and simplified and repeated through a grid or a structure. With her painting, I can feel that pencil going across that canvas; I know the sound of it; I know how she is holding that ruler; I can completely and intuitively feel those paintings. I've always been drawn to that minimal language. I saw her work at MoMA the first time I went to New York when I was 20 years old and I stayed looking for hours. From that point on I started researching and reading about her and there wasn't much available. The way people talked about her was a curiosity for me because I never thought that she was a mystical type of creature. I saw her as very pragmatic and process-based. But there was an affinity that I wanted to capture and understand. So I started the letter series and it continued for seven years. I never intended it to be that long.

**Her abdication from painting also lasted for seven years, from 1967 to 1974.**

Yes. She left New York and took off and drove around and ended up in New Mexico. She didn't produce work for seven years. As an artist with a studio practice, it is advantageous to find

one thing that you can complete in a day, so taking the time to make one grid a day to honour the process of making and to understand another artist's practice seemed meaningful for the period of time when Agnes Martin stepped away from making and then returned.

**So you did an homage ritual every day for seven years by doing one of the "Dear Agnes" works?**

Yes. Sometimes there were six a week; sometimes it would be all seven days; once in a while it would be five. So every working studio day it was the first thing I did.

**The ritual side is one thing, but it also fits a conceptual framework. In lots of ways you are plugging into the kind of project being done by Jonathan Borofsky and On Kawara.**

Definitely. I wanted a regular daily practice and I had been sorting my way through that by writing in the mornings. Then I attended a month-long residency at the Banff Centre where I started the letters. I initially thought I would do it for a month and then it grew, and within a few months I had decided to do the seven years.

**How important is it for you to get as close as you can to the literal feel of Martin's work? Are you after that kind of mimeticism?**

Not necessarily. I think it is more of a feeling. I can't recreate her work, but I can come to a closer understanding of what it means to produce a work like she does. That act of making a letter every day brought me a little closer to her process and her ideas, but I'm sloppy. A lot of the letters are rushed or imperfect in ways that I don't think she would accept. She would strip a painting off its support and get rid of it if she wasn't satisfied, whereas I am allowing a lot of those slip-ups and mistakes to remain.

**How do you decide where to go next? What is generative for you?**

I think it always goes back to having to learn something from materials or techniques. I'm interested in a history of art but also in how we discuss, preserve and present art. Recently I've been thinking about what a Criterion Collection of Modernist Art would be. You can go to almost any museum and find an example of Warhol and Stella and Baldessari. So what would it mean if some of those works came down and something else replaced them? They are important works and I'm not saying they need to leave, but start imagining how other things can insert themselves in those important spaces and open up a new conversation about time and place and meaning. I did a residency in New York last year and spent a lot of time visiting MoMA, which is changing the placement of its whole collection. They had inserted a lot of female artists and they would have little cards next to the women's works explaining why they were in the show. The one about Agnes Martin went something like, "Agnes Martin is a female painter who shared a studio with Robert Indiana." I thought, why don't they mention that Morris Louis visited Helen Frankenthaler's studio and ripped off her technique? I mean, why do we have to justify the inclusion of women artists through their relationship to a male-dominated history? So I got riled up and started thinking about what could be removed, what could shift, what could be inserted. So I started

a new series where I'm thinking about key works that show up in nearly every major collection and am recreating these works by wrapping or packing or reworking them in a way that they can be packed up, moved to storage, or shown in a new context. I have a show at Anat Egbi in LA in September so I am doing a big, protracted Frank Stella, I'm doing John Baldessari text pieces, an Ed Ruscha text piece, and a variety of Albers pieces that are wrapped and packed up to go into storage, or somewhere.

**So we won't see the Ruscha text piece; we are seeing what it would look like were it taken off the wall, wrapped and about to be put in storage in a museum?**

Yes. So the Ed Ruscha is *Another Hollywood Dream Bubble Popped* (1976), a pastel piece that has been framed and wrapped in bubble wrap. I did Barnett Newman's *Vir Herocius Sublimis* (1950–51) in MoMA's collection and I completely covered it in painted cardboard, and where the zips are, it is packing tape. Most of these works are to scale.

**One of the words that crops up in the criticism about your work is "deception." I'm not sure whether it is being used as a description or a criticism. This addresses an aspect of your making paintings about paintings that pretend to be one thing but are another thing. You don't put masking tape on a surface; you actually paint masking tape on the surface so people feel fooled.**

Someone who has no knowledge of the history of art, or what I'm referring to, can be surprised that what they're looking at is cardboard and masking tape without realizing that it is paint. If they understand that there is an illusion or a deception or a trompe l'oeil of some kind, then that is fine. I'm not expecting someone to deep dive into what I'm doing, but there are people who understand my conceptual interests. But to go back to your question, I don't think my main interest is in fooling people or in deception.

**Is there some integrity in your process that insists upon its actually being paint? Why couldn't it be some paint and some masking tape?**

I just won't allow myself to do it. The idea would be the same if I wrapped something in bubble wrap, but I want it to be a painting about painting.

**Is "originality" a word that you want to have in your lexicon?**

Not really. I don't even believe in originality because everything feeds off another thing and we can't escape that. Any creation comes from something that comes before.

**Does that mean you are anti-aura?**

Oh, no. I like the idea of a work of art's holding an aura. I think one of the arguments used about work that references other work is that you are pulling the ghost, the aura, of the past to heighten what you are doing now. So you're not authentic; you're not adding anything; you're replicating or copying, you're taking that aura and that energy and that power from the past. I like to think that I am pulling that, but I am also making fun of it at the same time. Even though a lot of it is minimalist and conceptual and serious, to me the work is hilarious. There is a lot of silliness and a lot of seriousness. It is like making a really detailed deliberate joke that might sting a little.

**Where does beauty fit in? Agnes Martin writes that beauty, which is in the eye and in the mind, is the mystery of life.**

Every work that I replicate I have a love for and find beautiful in many ways. I love the work of Stella and I love the work of Agnes Martin and it is partly homage and partly working through the critical affects of what that means. I know what you're asking me about beauty and I'm sidestepping it because it is hard to answer. I find beauty in simplicity but also in complexity so that everything I do—the objects I recreate, the cardboard—is something that I find appealing. I find certain textures and material beautiful, but I recognize that not everyone would say some crinkled-up packing tape is breathtaking, or that some dinged-up cardboard is beautiful.

**What makes one work more successful than another, and what would the criteria be for you in making that determination?**

Any work has to have some flaw that I didn't orchestrate. Usually everything is mapped out: I am going to have a painting this size and it's going to be on linen and I am going to use this kind of tape and it is going to be wrapped in poly. But in the process of making and wrapping, something will happen that I don't intend; some paint might stick to itself and cause a crease in the skin that makes the fake polywrap, or something may not fold properly when I am intending it to be neat. But something comes about in those unintentional errors; I can't make it happen, but when it does, that is what I most like about the work. So much of what occurs is accidental. When you're working within a tight framework or a structure, those accidents are heightened because that is where things are usually so minimal, or it's a replica, and something goes off and you have to embrace it. That's where the work becomes an artwork and not just a copy. You can't make it the way you want to make it, but something happens in between. Like Agnes Martin says, in your mind's eye you envision something like perfection, but what comes out is slightly off and that is actually the perfection. ■