

# art ltd.



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**REBECCA CAMPBELL**  
**MONSTER ROSTER**  
**STATE OF CERAMICS**  
**JULIA HAFT-CANDELL**  
**GEORGE RODRIGUEZ**



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## REBECCA CAMPBELL (This is Your Life)

Investing narrative painting with her own personal content and a keen appreciation for artifice, the LA-based painter is hitting her stride with three new bodies of work.

By Shana Nys Dambrot

Rebecca Campbell at just 44 is already established as one of the most intriguing and accomplished artists of her generation and a brightly burning star of the Los Angeles painting firmament. What is particularly fascinating about her popularity (among curators, critics, collectors, and most especially other painters) is that she arrived at it while practicing an almost counter-revolutionary dedication to craftsmanship, technique, and facility in the historically conventional genre of representational, narrative, and [gasp] deeply personal figurative painting, at a time when academic thought heavily favored conceptual, abstract modes of art making. But if the region-wide Rebecca Campbell exhibition juggernaut that has been her 2016 so far is any indication, it may finally be time to pronounce that particular mountain conquered.

Circumstances conspired to produce a cluster of three major gallery and institutional exhibitions in a partially overlapping consecutive rollout which, when considered together, formulate a kind of ad hoc mid-career survey for Campbell. The triad is comprised of "You are Here," a solo exhibition of portraits of female art-world colleagues at LA Louver from January 13 – February 13; "Dreams of Another Time," a two-person show with Samantha Fields of early and very new paintings and process materials at Cal State Long Beach's University Art Museum from January 30 – April 10; and "The Potato Eaters," an ambitious painting and sculptural installation completed in 2013 but not shown in its entirety until its May 7 – July 24 run at Lancaster MOAH, after which it travels to Brigham Young University Museum of Art in September.

While showing discrete bodies of work, and organized by three different curatorial teams, the pronounced interactions that emerge between them—some of which even came as a revelation to the artist herself—serve to highlight the evolution of both the conceptual and formal dynamics underpinning the span of her entire practice. Taken together, the result is a thoroughgoing articulation of who she is as an artist and as a woman, and of how her personal experience has come to shape her public style over the course of, as she describes, a lifetime of figuring things out by painting them. "Decorum, wit, and vagary posing as intellectual reserve," states Campbell, "are just not that interesting to me."

Partly due to her willingness to experiment in public, and partly because complexity, contradiction, paradox, and a gift for fusing chaos and control suit her tastes, Campbell's stylistic gestalt is hard to encapsulate. She is more than adept at a panoply of aesthetic modes from thick impasto to silky-fine surface, precise realism and abstract expressionism, kaleidoscopic atmospherics, and black-and-white reductivism. She is at her best when, as she frequently does, she deploys several of these modes within a given singular composition, forcing dualities of mind and body, emotion and intellect, allegory and formalism into uneasy, dynamic coexistence.

"Dig," 2013  
OIL ON CANVAS, 80" x 80"  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER



In "Dreams of Another Time" at the UAM, curator Kristina Newhouse organized an utterly original two-person show with Campbell and her contemporary, the equally accomplished and highly regarded Los Angeles painter Samantha Fields. One premise of the pairing is the idea that while our imaginations and identities are formed early in life, they remain perennially available for revision and remediation. While Newhouse selected older pieces from each artist in support of the presentation of major new works, the core exercise of the show was in the construction of their almost mythological origin stories. Each chose events culled from popular culture that happened in the year they were born. Fields, whose landscape-based practice is known for depicting natural disasters and urban inconveniences, chose the landfall of Hurricane Agnes in June 1972. Campbell chose the April 1971 issue of *Playboy*.

"I thought this was a truly fascinating starting point," says Campbell, "both in the collaboration but also in terms of speaking to our long-term evolution as artists. I thought it was very telling that what I

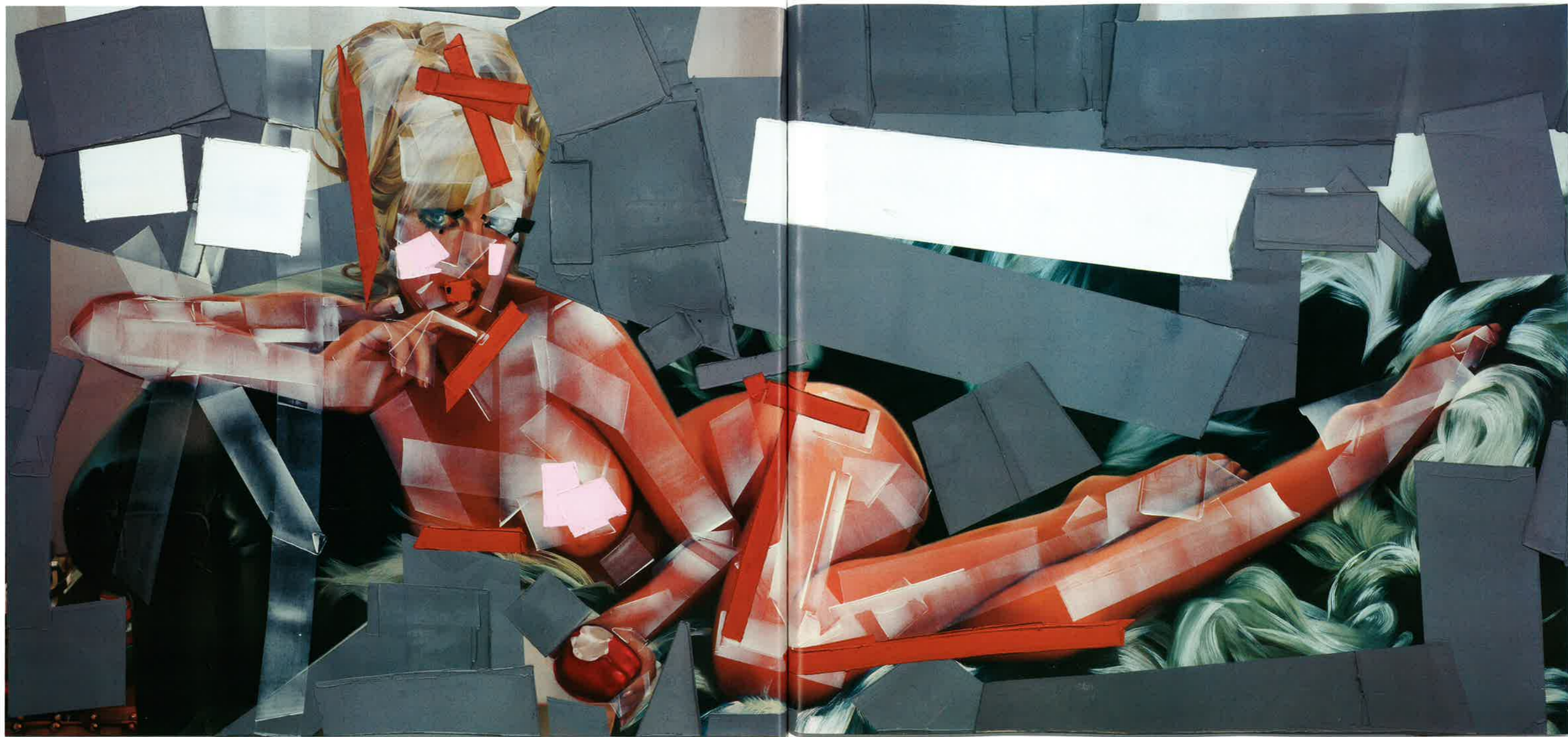
chose and what Samantha chose were so fundamentally different and yet relatable as essential to our practices." Campbell chose a social situation and cultural institution that immediately conjure the human (nude, female) figure, which is fundamental to her practice. While the correlation between hurricanes and soft-core porn might not be obvious in any other context, both artists commend Newhouse's insight into the territory they do share—the allegorical coexistence of darkness and beauty, along with the formal concerns of advancing abstraction within pictorial space."

As Newhouse writes in the catalogue, both artists employ "compositional devices [which] serve to alert the viewer that any act of painterly representation is always already an act of artifice and consciously so." For Fields, this has to do with faithfully representing the distortions inherent in her photo-based image sourcing when migrating to the canvas. For Campbell it's the heavy trowelling and application of tape, whitewash, gold leaf, and glitter to perfectly finished works, that both "obscures" and "re-fetishizes" the women

portrayed. In works like *Miss April 1971*, *Glitter Girl*, and *Candy Darling* (all 2015), Campbell creates a rainbow-pierced whirl of seduction and obstacle, desire and artifice, art history and empty calories, spectacle and interiority that speaks directly to her long-standing interest in notions of beauty, femininity, and sexuality and the people and institutions that define those terms. "These are ideas I find myself intensely drawn to and repelled by at the same time," says Campbell. "Conversations going on now in feminism about intersectionality, pragmatism, or even betrayal are very important to me. This confusing and exciting phenomena for me perfectly exemplifies the human condition of existing in multiplicity." In this context, her decision to include at least one drag icon in a presentation on constructing female identity makes perfect sense, as both a political and a practical gesture.

"MISS APRIL 1971," 2014  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 11½" x 23"  
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND L.A. LOUVER, VENICE

Another thing the two artists have in common is that Fields and Campbell both view photography as integral to process and germane to subject. Fields takes her own road-trip pictures, while Rebecca favors extant materials, but for both it's still about personal experience being tethered to the general zeitgeist. Fields' relationship to photography posits a version of realism that includes the reality that our perceptions and experiences are constantly, indelibly mediated. "For me, photography often fails to capture the moment, and I'm interested in how the act of translating that photograph into a painting can imbue it with what's missing. A camera lens can see more than my eyes do. So what is reality?" Campbell describes her relationship to photography as more mixed. "Like a paintbrush, it is a tool I use to make the object I'm interested in making. On the other hand, I have a very formal relationship with photography. I'm interested in the way it speaks to light and flatness and color blending. And finally there's the conceptual conundrum of photography. Is it performance? Is it just outdated technology? Are photographs magical relics of bodies moving in space that subversively rage against death? Well, yes, yes, and yes."





Iterations of photographs appear in different roles throughout Campbell's work, suitably reflective of this mixed relationship. In the operatic, captivating masterpiece *Tangle*, for example, a woman sleeps in her bed under a salon-style wall of small paintings and framed photographs positioned in such a way as to read both as the woman's memories and dreams. The large central canvas containing this scene is flanked on either side by a number of small paintings just like the ones on the wall inside the picture, except they have

bellion against authority, religiosity, and provincialism and the legacy of that time in the formation of her character and life path. But because she is the artist that she is, every bit of that tumult finds physical expression in the way paint sits on canvas. And in the way light strikes the hefty sculptural installation made from hundreds of mason jars of canned yet slowly decaying fruit—part *Light & Space*, part Damien Hirst, part country farm life. Though completed in 2013, its juxtaposition of large-scale, multi-dextrous and florid works like

**“On the other hand, I have a very formal relationship with photography. I’m interested in the way it speaks to light and flatness and color blending. And finally there’s the conceptual conundrum of photography. Is it performance? Is it just outdated technology? Are photographs magical relics of bodies moving in space that subversively rage against death? Well, yes, yes, and yes.”**

peeled off Pygmalion-like and become their own works existing in the gallery space, as self-contained objects. Aside from the charming conceit of this strategy for blurring boundaries between real and depicted space, it serves to remind the viewer that by the time you see the work it is always already modified by terms of art and operations of consciousness.

Photographs used in the same way—as both source and content, object and document—are central to another of these shows: “The Potato Eaters,” coming up at MOAH. Based on an archive of family photographs, many dating back to her parents’ and grandparents’ youth, this series is one of the most literally autobiographical she has undertaken. In considering her roots, Campbell seeks to examine and confront the tumult of rejection and acceptance contained in her re-

the Courbet-inspired *Dig*, with intimately scaled, often black-and-white snapshot-based works like *Dad in Snow*, *Big Sister*, and *Little Brother* prefigures the recombinant consciousness of the *Tangle* installation in ways both conceptual and formal.

Meanwhile, “You are Here” at LA Louver presented a sort of snapshot of an ongoing project which is “definitely not done” to portray the women populating her world—especially her art world. All the same size and all utilizing more or less the same constrained palette of black, white and touches of dusty rose, rendered in an orchestration of loose strokes and tender detail, the overall effect is both equalizing and individualized. Each one is a powerful single image, but presented in formation, it takes on the tenor and mantle of a movement. Although on the surface this undertaking might seem

like something of a departure from the intensely personal content of the other projects, one quickly sees that it is both a feminist gesture of social/personal/art historical rectification, addressing the untenable marginalization of female artists in the art historical discourse, as well as an investigation of the current status of portraiture specifically within the contemporary painting conversation. In other words, vintage Campbell. “I foresee a much larger and more inclusive body of work,” says the artist. “In the end my fantasy is to have a giant museum show with huge walls covered with images of amazing women. They will be undeniable in their collective power.”

One of the most arresting moments in the Long Beach show was the inclusion of a group of a dozen or so 1999 self-portraits, each one an elaborately detailed alternate persona. They are the same size and style as the new portraits, and were installed in direct reference to the Louver configuration. Campbell characterizes the 1999 series using now-familiar language, as an attempt to get to know herself better, “to figure out who she was” politically, sexually, creatively, and intellectually. The connections seem clear, yet Campbell was not thinking at all of the connection between these two bodies of work. She had already started the new series of artist portraits when Kristina came to her with a vague remembrance of them, sitting in a drawer at LA Louver for over a dozen years. Campbell immediately came to “absolutely love the connection between these two series. The self-portraits with their interior gaze, and the artist portraits with

their exterior gaze.” Noting the fact that the older self-portraits are actually alter-egos, both not herself and at the same time, “very deeply me,” Campbell accepts that undertaking the artist portraits project now on some level says as much or more about her as it does about the sitters. “Narrative painting and personal content and, dare I say autobiography, have been and always will be radical. It’s hard and brave work and when it goes wrong it is a train wreck of epic proportions, embarrassing the artist and audience. But when it goes right it hits us exactly in the center of our humanity.” For Campbell, it is definitely going right.

OPPOSITE:  
“BIG FISH,” 2014  
OIL ON BOARD, 33" x 40"  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT:  
ANNIE, HEATHER, KRISTIN, PATRICIA, MPAMBO, SUSAN  
FROM THE “YOU ARE HERE” SERIES  
2015, ACRYLIC ON PAPER, ALL WORKS 30" x 22½"  
AS INSTALLED AT LA LOUVER GALLERY

