

Los Angeles Times

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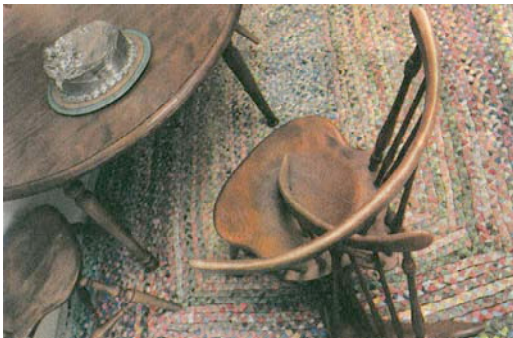
SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009 F7

IN THE STUDIO

Rebecca Campbell mines her childhood for 'Poltergeist,' a solo show at L.A. Louver, striking a productive vein.

A look back to eternity

Bluebirds brighten a black velvet-covered avocado tree, detail at right. Cubism informed a kitchen scene, below. Far right, installation pieces in the studio.



Photographs by STEFANO PALTERA For The Times

SCARLET CHENG

Childhood is a time of joy and of terror, and even as adults we hardly fathom the forces that shaped us. Some seek answers in therapy; Rebecca Campbell tackles the questions through art. Her new solo show at L.A. Louver, "Poltergeist," flexes multiple talents -- painting, for which she is known, on nine large canvases; then there's sculpture and installation and a short film. Every object tells a story related to her childhood in Utah, but she points out that those experiences have blended into other things that have happened since. On a professional level, she references formalist concerns about the history of modern art; on a personal level, the tuggings of nostalgia, parenthood and mortality. "I use the personal metaphor as foundation for a larger conversation," she says.

The exhibition invites the visitor in through an entrance made up of the double doors from her parents' home. They're flanked by palette-knife painted bricks and topped by a sign saying "Poltergeist." Inside, the gallery has become a haunted domain -- a gnarly full-sized tree covered in black velvet and dotted with glass birds filled with bright blue liquid; a Cubist kitchen table and chair set, with a "window" looking out to cornfields rushing by; and a wall-mounted oven with a clock that runs backward and is stuffed with books.

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At her studio in Los Angeles two weeks before the opening, Campbell is engrossed in putting the finishing touches on one of the two paintings that make up "Highlander." They are larger-than-life paintings, one featuring a brunet adolescent girl and the other her looking-glass twin, a blond. Both are pretty and a little Lolita-like with their tanks tops, their short pleated skirts and lots of pensive attitude. Two assistants work in an area behind the studio. They're methodically measuring the steel wire for the sculpture "Satellite." When installed, 600 copper bees will appear to be flying in a swarm, with each one suspended on a wire and held in place by a bead of solder underneath, its position determined by a logarithm. Bees are the symbol of Utah, Campbell points out, and copper is mined there.

Wearing a paint-stained warm-up jacket and her red hair in a ponytail, Campbell is intensely focused, whether painting the rubber bangles on one girl's wrist while a third assistant uses the drill or sitting down to talk about her work as her son toddles in the background.

Eight years ago, she had the distinction of being signed on by Peter Goulds, director of L.A. Louver, shortly after she got her MFA from UCLA -- thus joining one of the city's most prestigious art galleries. It's been four years since her last solo show there, and in between she had her first child and bought a house with her husband. With a slow smile, she credits pregnancy with triggering this avalanche of creativity. "I had an explosion of ideas. It was hallucinatory," she says. The resulting work wrestles with both the strange beauty and the disquieting demons of growing up, and in doing so, she proves that you can go home again -- only what you find there may surprise you.



'What I'm interested in is presenting multiple perspectives in time, a nonlinear time.'

REBECCA CAMPBELL,
artist, on "Poltergeist"

The title of the show is "Poltergeist." I'm under the impression that a poltergeist is domestic, it's in someone's home, and also, it's disruptive.

It's not necessarily evil, or harmful; it's just a spirit that's restless. [For the show] I made it very literal and wanted to go back to the ghosts. I literally set up my parents' front doors to go back home. You'll walk in and see the tree.

Where did you find this tree?

The tree I found walking my dog, about six blocks from my house after spending months and months looking for a tree. It had to be dead in order for the wood to be properly cured, it couldn't be diseased, and it had to be beautiful. It's an avocado tree. I was walking along with the dog and said, "That's the tree!"

The bluebird can be a symbol of wishes and dreams. Does it have that connotation for you?

It definitely does. This comes from what I saw when I was driving home to Utah once -- I drove through a stand of burned streets. They were standing in the sparkly snow. It brought to me the drama and the feeling of Sargent's painting "Madame X." Then somehow the birds came into it. . . . And I love the color: They're filled with Windex.

Let's talk about the kitchen installation. One element is the table; you have it pitched and cut into the wall. The chairs are lopsided; one is spliced into the table. There's a metal cake on the table. It's all a little disorienting.

I'm interested in Cubism; it presented multiple spatial perspectives. What I'm interested in is presenting multiple perspectives in time, a nonlinear time, and I wanted to reference that formally. The surfaces are not solid. Things merge into each other. Things are not as you think.

On the other side is this oven with books inside. It's a double-door wall oven in avocado green, and I'm going to paint a striped wallpaper around it. It's a reference to "Hansel and Gretel," also to my mother, and also to the burning of books, the destruction of culture.

Were these books you've read yourself?

Many are books I read as an adolescent. You get "Madame Bovary" by Flaubert, you get "Lord of the Rings" by Tolkien. My mother insisted I be able to read and not be edited -- and that was a very dangerous thing and a wonderful thing. Some of the more conservative Mormon families were taking their kids out of advanced classes because of this particular reading list they had. My mother quietly but insistently said, "No, she's smart enough to get into a gifted class, and she will stay in."

Before this, most of the works I've seen of yours were paintings, and suddenly, you've gone in a major way into installation and sculpture. How did that happen?

For me it's not totally new. When I went to graduate school, I applied with a portfolio of performance and sculpture and painting. I have always loved all of them. I'm sort of a contrarian. At UCLA people were allergic to painting, especially figurative painting, so I was like, "Perfect!" Once I got away from school, it wasn't so important, people's reactions. One day Peter was looking at some of my early ideas, and he said, "Why don't you do it?" And I said, "Why don't we?"