

Rebecca Campbell: Picturing The Chrysalis Of Adolescence

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Jun 14, 2024, 12:47pm EDT



Rebecca Campbell, California Love, 2023 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

Rebecca Campbell's arresting new show, *Young Americans*, at LA Louver in Venice, California, looks at first to provide surface pleasures – beautiful images of dreamy teenagers, an attractive home, blooming flowers, and a lemon tree plentiful with fruit that shimmers in the California sun. Campbell wants us to look at the beauty of California and of adolescence itself and see ourselves in it.

Art's great power, Campbell told me recently, is that "it holds questions brilliantly." However, "It doesn't always work best when it resolves an issue for you." For Campbell, Art is the place "to wrestle with the question."

Campbell grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah, where her father was a Bishop of the Mormon Church, and she was the youngest of seven children. "There was not a lot of freedom in my life," Campbell said recently. As a child, and as a teenager, Campbell always had questions for the church concerning its patriarchy and inherent sexism. Art was her place of self-expression and where she could grapple with her own inner turmoil. At 18, many of the women she knew got married and began having large families.

Instead, her mother, who had always allowed Campbell to read whatever she wanted regardless of the church, paid the tuition for Campbell to attend art school. Her undergraduate thesis was an installation called, "On the Threshold." It was, Campbell now says, "Basically a wedding. It was an installation around the idea of a wedding, because none of my siblings had reached that age without marriage and children."

Campbell got her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) in Portland, Oregon where, Campbell says, "I learned how to make everything: I took four years of sculpture, four years of print making, four years of figure drawing." PNCA was also where she found her first mentor, Kristy Edmunds, who is today the Director of MASS MoCA (and who many of us in LA miss from her days as Artistic Director of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance). "She totally took me under her wing." Edmunds made Campbell her assistant, involved her when other artists visited, and encouraged Campbell in making mixed media works.



Rebecca Campbell Young Americans (Riley), 2024 PHOTO BY MATT EMONSON.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

At UCLA, where Campbell went for her MFA, “I figured out that the most transgressive thing you could do at that moment was make paintings.” At UCLA, Campbell made large figurative works. UCLA, she now says, “taught me how to talk about my work and think about my work.” It also provided the launching pad for her career.

UCLA held open studio days. At one, “this guy came into my studio. Little round glasses and a white linen suit, kind of a Truman Capote character. I had no idea who he was. And he just loved [my] pictures. And he said, ‘Do you have more pictures? I said, I have so many. And he said, “bring ‘em all out.” It turned out to be Robert Shapazian from the Gagosian gallery. “And he was kind to me.” Campbell’s first show, before she even graduated, was at Gagosian in a show with Chris Burden.

Gagosian had a right of first refusal on her work. “I got to have dinner at Spago,” Campbell recalls. However, “It’s a very cutthroat situation. And I was naïve.”

Another mentor, the artist Don Suggs, offered to show her work to Peter Goulds at LA Louver. He did, and that began a conversation with Goulds, who offered to store her work after she graduated UCLA and had nowhere to house her very large works.

Once Campbell and her husband Todd, a musician, decided to make LA their home, Todd, having met the folks at Gagosian and at LA Louver said to her, “You should think about who you want to talk to on the phone and who you want in your life.” Campbell joined the roster at LA Louver soon after. “I’m grateful I did,” Campbell told me.

Campbell’s latest exhibition, *Young Americans*, is a gathering of thirty works made in various sizes in a combination of painting strategies over the last two years of her pre-teen and teenage children and their friends. Like the exhibition title which references a David Bowie song, many of the works carry references to the music of Campbell’s own teen years such as *In Utero* (Nirvana), *Where Have You Been My Blued Son* (Dylan), *Halcyon* (Orbital), *California Love* (2Pac). This is not a coincidence or accidental. Rather, Campbell is telling us that she is looking at these teenagers as someone who was once a teenager herself, as a woman who has been looked at when she was a teenager, as a woman whose connection to her children is intimate, having birthed, nourished, and watched them as they entered and are emerging from the chrysalis of adolescence.

“I’m very interested in the gaze,” Campbell told me. “I think there is something extraordinarily complex about the fact that not only do I know the position of the looker and the looked at, but I am also looking at something that actually used to be me at one point.” Or stated another way, Campbell explained, “I’m painting these kids in 2024 in Los Angeles, but I’m painting myself.”

In these portraits, we see the haze that settles on children and the beauty it creates, one which we, as adults, read into: Is this child, happy or depressed? Confident or insecure? In the Sally Mann of it all, looking at these portraits and the intimacy they convey is something we still keep at a remove.



Rebecca Campbell, *In Between*, 2024 PHOTO BY MATT EMONSON. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

In one of the larger canvases, *In Between* (which serves as the exhibition's signature image and calling card), we see a young woman sitting in what looks like the ruin of a stone archway wearing a gathered-up red ball gown. She is not looking at us but rather at something beyond us, and her face seems to catch all the available light. However, we then notice her double in the shadow on the other side of the arch looking away from us. We see Los Angeles in the hazy distance and her and her double's dress, whose folds around their arms are finely rendered, and which seem to dissolve into one as the bottom of the painting has drips of paint, as if to signal the rot, the dirt, the stains, the decay, that will mar their perfect appearance and future lives.

With *In Between*, Campbell is playing with convention – At first glance this work would not be out of place as the cover of a YA novel – it speaks of a

certain exaggerated almost Pre-Raphaelite femininity and as such it mirrors the imagined interior mindscape of many teenage daughters. “I love to mix references in a way that creates a new narrative,” Campbell said.

Similarly, *California Love*, Campbell’s painting of the lemon tree in her backyard, is itself an explosion of styles and textures, some hyper-defined, others made with a palette knife to build up the surface of the painting so that it seems as if actual leaves have been painted into the canvas. Inspired by the landscapes of Gustav Klimt, there is something surreal about the tree, and like Cezanne’s fruit bowls, the lemons themselves don’t follow the laws of gravity or nature in how they appear in the painting.



Installation view, Rebecca Campbell, *Young Americans*, LA Louver 2024 PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

One whole wall of the gallery is devoted to a grid of fifteen smaller portraits, five across in three rows, which look almost like passport photos. These, too, are painted with a variety of approaches, that in ways different than the lemon tree, conjure up references as varied as Eric Fischl as well as the Fauvists.

Others, such as *Pink Light*”made me think of Gauguin in the way the background is of a piece with the subject. Individually and as a group portrait, they do capture the unspoken language of teenagerhood, like the feeling in Richard Linklater’s film, *Boyhood*.



Installation view Rebecca Campbell, *Young Americans*, at LA Louver. Left to right: *In Between*, *Wolf ...* [+] PHOTO CREDIT: ROBERT WEDEMEYER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LA LOUVER

Last but certainly not least, *Wolf Moon*, is a painting unlike the others, a diptych, in which two figures seem to be standing or walking in a stream under the full moon, clothed in large plastic drop cloths. It’s unclear if the figure in the background who is mostly in shadow is real or a spirit, or some projection of the boy’s inner life. When I asked Campbell about this, she tried to explain that coming from what she described as “this very extremely religious background,” as an adult, she had firmly become a rationalist. However, one of her children had been recently challenging her about that.

“I carried skepticism around for a long time.... [but] I’m in a place in my life where I don’t think it’s serving me as well anymore.” One of Campbell’s sons

has been challenging her to ask whether there might be more to the world than we can know.

Campbell is clear that she has not started to believe in magic, but *Wolf Moon*, is for her an homage to the possibility that there are “different dimensions of aliveness” and that “there's a lot of things to learn.”

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomteicholz/2024/06/14/rebecca-campbell-picturing-the-chrysalis-of-adolescence/>