



Visual Art Source

Rebecca Campbell, "Young Americans"
By Andy Brumer

[L.A. Louver Gallery](#), Venice, California
Exhibition continues through July 20, 2024



Rebecca Campbell, "Greenhouse," 2023, oil on canvas, 96 x 144". All images courtesy of L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California

In "The Winter's Tale" William Shakespeare has an old shepherd opine, "I would there were no age between ten and twenty-three, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there's nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing and fighting." The bard's harsh characterization of youthful struggle gets a gentler and far more sensitive treatment from Rebecca Campbell in a luscious collection of nearly thirty paintings of young people she has titled "Young Americans." Far from endorsing the shepherd's solution to annihilate this essential stage of life altogether, Campbell visually problem-solves this period of trials, tribulations, and transformations. Her paintings are invigorated by empathy and epithelial detail, enough to make the old shepherd shudder in his grave.



Rebecca Campbell, "Hollywood is a Sign," 2023, oil on canvas, 60 x 120"

All of the kids in these paintings, including the artist's three children and some of their friends, interact either explicitly or implicitly with actual, alluded, or mythologized space and/or places in and around L.A. Rendered with HD clarity, the textured, organically flowing fields of deep color in each painting fit together like flexible mosaics into cinematic dreamscape narratives that feel simultaneously intense and curiously calm. Campbell's consistently dynamic palette presents precise and poetic hybridizations of symbolist colors, air-brushed atmospheres, expressionistic sparks, surrealistic scenery, and pop art poses.

In "Greenhouse," the largest painting in the show, a squarish, green clapboard craftsman style house, common in Southern California, frames a young man on a second-story porch working away on an easel painting with headphones firmly in place. Through one of the windows, we can peer voyeur-like at the silhouetted profile of another youth. On a cement banister siding the steps that lead to the house's entrance, a girl sits, clad in a tee-shirt, shorts, and colorful knee-high socks. She is lost in reverie which, given her attire, could be of the goal she scored in last Saturday's soccer game. Each is absorbed in their own space and thoughts, the whole describing an insouciant, casual menage of Southern California's new generation.



Rebecca Campbell, "In Between," 2024, oil on canvas, 80 x 120"

"Hollywood is a Sign" finds a girl and boy lost in their independent dreams while lounging on opposite ends of a very David Hockney-like swimming pool. Flanked in the distance by a row of generalized, fuzzy and slightly jagged foothills, the iconic Hollywood sign seems to have crept right up to the pool's glistening edge, more an upscale yard decoration than public icon. The fact that Hockney's "Splash" series helped to establish this city as an emerging contemporary art mecca becomes a bit of conceptual glitter that lends some modest additional gloss to the show.

Campbell paints the same beautiful young woman twice in "In Between." Each figure is clad, if not cocooned, within the vulva-like folds of a flowing, Gothic-style red dress. On the right the teen looks pleasantly towards us, while to the right she is turned completely away, with her eyes delving deeply into the space at the L.A. skyline. A curving ribbon of freeway leads the eye into the city and, like an umbilical cord, connects the two views of the young woman metaphorically to the childhood she's begun to look back on and the journey of a future life which has not yet begun.



Rebecca Campbell, "Halcyon," 2023, oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

There's no lack of humor in this show, which the artist delivers with a joust or jab at the canon of male/white/straight European art history. The smart and playful manner in which Campbell camouflages these visual quotations deflates, perhaps even subverts, some of the canon's more noxious social and societal messages. Stimulating more of an "Ah-ha" moment of art sleuthing than a belly laugh, these small gifts land some gut punches.

"Halcyon" stands out as perhaps the cleverest of the lot, with the image of a pouting, bare-chested, brown-skinned adolescent boy peeking out at us from a lush lemon tree, submerged horizontally almost inside the leafy branches of the fecund citrus. The apexes of the lemons cover up and stand in for his nipples. The painting channels Gauguin's "When Will You Marry," depicting a young and seductive Tahitian woman, her sexuality concealed and protected by an accompanying guardian placed in the foreground. In Campbell's piece the figure's dreamy adolescent stare satirizes, even ridicules what now feels like an outdated trope.



Rebecca Campbell, "Young Americans (Lucy)," 2024, oil on canvas, 30 x 24"

The name of the show, "Young Americans," also serves as the umbrella for a group of 15 individual portraits of teenagers identified only by their first names in the titles. Each painting signals the black and white snapshot pictures kids once loved to take of themselves in photo-booths at the mall, rather than the now ubiquitous selfies. Vibrant in the sophisticated space they occupy and the moodiness of their iridescent and streaky highlights, each youngster is a pitch-perfect tone poem that releases their individually emerging personalities. These "Young Americans" are not stereotyped but address their age as a natural roadblock to the kind of fully independent adults they are on the way to becoming.

While Shakespeare's hard-edged description of youth's lax sense of civic and personal responsibility has stood the test of time, Campbell offers a more fluidly romantic and kinder vision of young people, one that offers reason for optimism during a time of uncertainty.



Andy Brumer is a poet, book reviewer and art writer, whose work has appeared in The New York Times Book Review, The Los Angeles Times, The San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner, Artweek, Artscene, Visual Art Source and many other publications. His latest book of poetry, with drawings by Joseph Slusky, is Below Understanding. He also writes about golf.

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