

# Sulfur<sup>43</sup>



# Sulfur



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A LITERARY BI-ANNUAL OF THE WHOLE ART

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# C O N T

- 4 **KENWARD ELMSLIE:** 70 I Remembers
- 18 **KENNETH IRBY:** Two Poems
- 20 **ANNE GORRICK:** Wiltwick, Wallkill as Memory
- 24 **ROSMARIE WALDROP:** *from Reluctant Gravities*
- 29 **DAN FEATHERSTON:** Odors
- 32 **ROBERTO TEJADA:** The Photography of Horace  
Bristol
- 36 **HORACE BRISTOL:** Six Photographs
- 42 **ALAN GILBERT:** Two Poems
- 44 **ELIOT WEINBERGER:** Vomit
- 48 **JACKSON MAC LOW:** Swift-Flowing Water Where  
Bales of Hay Explode
- 51 **E. CAMERON SCOTT:** Two Poems
- 54 **TINA ROTENBERG:** Jerusalem Story
- 68 **BRIAN SCHORN:** Two Poems
- 70 **BRIAN SCHORN:** Five Photographs
- 75 **ADRIENNE RICH:** Rusted Legacy
- 77 **CHRIS SIA:** Scorpio Moon
- 80 **ANDRE BRETON:** My Heart Through Which Her Heart  
Has Passed: Poems of Love and Desperation,  
1926–1931 (Tr. from the French and Prefaced by  
Mark Polizzotti)
- 101 **JOHN OLSON:** Two Poems
- 105 **MAXINE SHEETS-JOHNSTONE:** Neandertals

# E N T S

- 131 **BRYAN JOHNSON:** H. De Soto
- 133 **ELIOT WEINBERGER:** What Was Formalism?
- 139 **BRUCE BEASLEY:** Two Poems
- 151 **NANCY LOCKE:** Some Possibilities for Painting's New Topographies
- 157 **CHRISTOPHER CAMPBELL:** Four Paintings
- 161 **CHARLES BERNSTEIN:** Captain Cappuccino and His Merry Con Leches
- 163 **JAMES HELLER LEVINSON:** Isaac Stern Thursday April 23, 1998 8:00
- 165 **MILTON KESSLER:** Two Poems
- 168 **COMMENTARY:** A letter from Basil Bunting to Carolyn Burke; Kevin Killian on *Moving Borders*; Dallas Wiebe on Alison Bundy; Dan Featherston on Jessica Lowenthal, Heather Ramsdell, and Benjamin Hollander; John Olson on Paul Metcalf; Sylvie Kandé on Christine de Lailhacar; Roberto Tejada on Audre Lorde and Peter Gizzi; John Olson on Cecilia Vicuña; Marjorie Welish on Jacques Roubaud and Raphael Rubinstein; Rachel Loden on Paul Hoover; Dale Smith on the Yasusada Notebooks.
- 223 **CONTRIBUTOR NOTES**

**COVER:** CHRISTOPHER CAMPBELL: Huron III (Black Ice), 1996, Oil, Charcoal/Linen, 60 x 48".  
Collection R Epping, Zurich, Switzerland

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# NANCY LOCKE

## SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR PAINTING'S NEW TOPOGRAPHIES

One might point to the late nineteenth-century artist who dreamed of a painting that actually realized the materiality of things: a way of painting in which the artist forgot what the mind knew and isolated the evanescent sensations of what the eye perceived. Not that the mind's knowledge could actually *be* banished from the work, but a way of working might be found in which the purely optical would be privileged. Oddly enough, at the end of the twentieth century, the contemporary painter also privileges the "optical," but not in the same way. Today, the optical might stand for an access to a world perceived not by the eye, but by various imaging technologies; the optical might be marshaled, but it might also be heavily manipulated and made to take its place in an order determined by a theoretical construct. Christopher Campbell neither begins from a theoretical construct nor from the empirical in its raw form; rather, he readdresses the relationship between them in terms of what contemporary painting might set out to do.

Representational painting locates itself along a continuum between the illusionistic and the schematic. On one end of the spectrum is complete verisimilitude: the proverbial bird pecking at the painted grapes; on the other end, representation as writing, as code, as diagram. In one case, the artist attempts to mimic the seen; in the other, the relationship between figure and referent is arbitrary and must be understood by the viewer as such. In many ways, abstract painting is no different. In the sense that most abstract painting does have sources and representational goals and content, abstract painting too can be understood as navigating between the poles of illusion and schema. Cézanne's late unfinished canvases, for example, have the look of abstraction even while every patch of color remains tied to the artist's project of registering his "sensations"; even Mondrian's black lines have their roots in landscape and architecture. Abstract painting from forty or fifty years ago can be seen as imitative of a certain emotiveness, for instance, or of pure improvisation, but these forms of mimesis are not much seen in painting today.

Christopher Campbell's early work had clear roots in nature: sketches made in the Fontainebleau forest, on the Connecticut shores, or in thickets around southeastern Michigan, where he now lives and works. He slowly inventoried brushstrokes of past masters: a *tâche* here from French landscape painting of the turn-of-the-century, a calligraphic mark à la Joan Mitchell, a thrown line from Pollock. These investigations gave way to new interests and innovations: the hand gesticulating without the eye's corrections, a brush made from a few stalks of bound prairie grasses creating unplanned irregularities in the marks, a fat baton of charcoal dipped in medium in order to make it smear and spread its marks even as they were being made. In the early '90s, the studious, contemplative nature of Marden's work became a reference point. Campbell's interest in nature was only partly an issue of content; it could perhaps best be understood as a contact with *newness*, with the complexities of forms and hues determined in nature. It remains tied to a desire to avoid, at all costs, painting from any sort of *a priori* notion or procedure.

Christopher Campbell's childhood in upstate New York was spent between his father's painting studio and the shores of Lake Ontario. Before devoting himself to painting, Campbell studied the history of art at the graduate level after spending years producing documentary film and media presentations. As a Fulbright Fellow in France, Campbell undertook dissertation research on Pissarro and Cézanne, but then encountered the American emigrée Joan Mitchell, who lived northwest of Paris in Vétheuil. Mitchell offered Campbell studio space and took him on as a student. He would work with her off and on for three years before her death in 1992. Her acerbic wit and advice during Campbell's student years enabled him to work through the legacies of Abstract Expressionism—especially the work of Pollock and De Kooning—that held such interest for him, and to reformulate the problems facing contemporary art having come to terms with painting's history.

In painting today, the individual mark is almost never identified with authority or authenticity. Minimalism and conceptual art have seen to that. A prime example would be the work of Gerhard Richter. He not only challenges the claims of abstraction through a continued dialogue with photographic mimesis (a project invested not in fresh empirical observation, but in the recycling of preexisting representations), but also his abstract paintings do not depend on the form of a given gesture. Even Marden's patient work on paper, with its faith in topographies of shells, stones, or ripples on water, can be seen as tipping the balance away from mimesis and toward a kind of writing.

In Campbell's most recent work, the artist might begin a piece by asserting the potency of the mark, whether in an aggressive gesture or in a passage of delicate tracery. These linear sequences, with their roots in Pollock and Marden, are then effaced by a swathe of color; they are bathed in a field of light, or troweled over with a plaque of white or black. It is as if a lens were focused on the intricacies of stems and leaves, only to allow its aperture to open and, in a double exposure, to capture the spray of light over the branches in the wildest play of magnification.

The image of the wide-open lens is not a conceit. Campbell does undertake motif and composition studies by taking a camera through forests and down deer trails. There he observes the distortions of color and form that extremes of weather and light will render: a red osier dogwood branch seen at dawn becomes brilliant cadmium red. Through a lens focused at a point in front of the tree, the slender branch becomes a cadmium beam of light; a patch of sunlit sky seeps brilliantly over the dark trunk; leaves turning to catch the light take their places in glimmering constellations. The light-writing that is photography sets a challenge for the translucencies of oil paint and alkyd gel: can these most pellucid of painterly media somehow respond to such ephemeral effects? It is a question Monet would have asked of himself and his brushes, but then Monet would have wanted the image of the dogwood to be clearly readable on the canvas. The nineteenth-century painter may have been interested in "effects," but they were effects of a Real all the same, and a certain faith in the concrete reality of the Real was maintained to the end.

Is it fair to say that the contemporary painter no longer believes in the Real? That would appear to be the case in looking at a number of artists who involve perceptual questions in their work. One thinks not only of Richter's interest in the status of the reproduced image, but also of Ross Bleckner's melodramatic allegories, Mark Francis' brush dragged through magnified bacteria. These very different artists maintain touchstones in some level of optical perception, but also explore discontinuities between that which a painting sets out to represent and the nature of the physical or technological apparatus deployed. One can no longer apply Gombrich's terms of making and matching: the latter is simply no longer the goal of the former. The relationship between Campbell's blurred abstractions and his motif studies is similarly one of dissonance, not replication.

In addition to the structures suggested in Campbell's own motif photographs, those from the world of medical imagery have become an interest. In some of his more recent work, the artist frequently turns

to the domain of the body, of computed tomography or photomicrographic imagery in order to discover cellular structures or tissue compositions in which a complex network is suggestive both of order or function, on the one hand, and nearly chaotic irregularity on the other. These most recent works continue what one might call his critique of representational fidelity to a perceptual apparatus, but they transfer the locus of that critique from exterior nature to interior nature, from the vegetal to the animal. In place of the rotating axis of a branch or the shimmer of a leaf, the pulse between dendritic nerves is suggested; in place of a screen of trees, one finds a complex of neurons that informs the work's structure.

The artist's desire to exploit the extraordinary translucency captured in the nature photographs has led him not only to new techniques but also to new media. In the domain of painting, Christopher Campbell now frequently works on large sheets of polyester sailcloth, a semi-translucent support that admits light from behind the work and makes it part of the ground. The painting's "reserve," first tantalizingly revealed and valued by the Romantics, has now become an almost intangible presence in paintings such as *Screen I (Black)*; the reserve is an element of immateriality at play in an otherwise terrifically material mode of painting. Campbell's use of sailcloth not only enables him to move paintings away from the wall and to display them, scroll-like, hanging from machined aluminum brackets, but also to experiment with the chromaticism of monochromatic works. Whereas color has always come easily to him and been a strong point in his work, the sailcloth paintings possess an inherent luminosity that allows for a range of subtle hues and values shifting from an ostensibly single hue. *Screen I (Black)* is almost completely black on a white ground, but out of the black come green-grays, warm grays, and blue grays to supply all the colorism it needs. The sailcloth paintings, as well as *Axon Bundle*, a painting on transparent Mylar, emerge as deconstructions of the paintings' support. Without an opaque ground layer, the physical assertiveness of oil painting, instead of appearing embedded in its five centuries of tradition, dances and floats over the lightness of the sailcloth. Figure does not merely posit itself on ground; instead, the ground stands for the potential unraveling of the figure.

Work on paper has become a forum for similar maneuvers. *Suspension VIII (Soma)* combines the layering of sheer veils of white and gray that barely reveal blue and flesh tones underneath. Over these layers is a spray of drawing: a few black fines that suggest a set of biomorphic forms. The play between figure and ground undoes the certainty of either one. An illusion of spatiality exists in a dialectical relation with the drawing-as-writing on the surface.

Christopher Campbell has recently moved outside a concentration on painting alone. After a collaboration with a choreographer to create a set design for a dance production, Campbell went on to work with friends on video and photographic installations. These projects have in various ways involved body imagery. The artists' cooperative Skate, of which Campbell is a member, is currently engaged in exploring what Foucault has described as the subversive nature of friendship.<sup>1</sup> The artists in Skate photograph themselves and each other so as to create ambiguous juxtapositions of bodies and identities. The photographs are then projected in an installation filled with objects from everyday life. Viewers can retrace and even experience the artists' activities as they contemplate the images, montaged or superimposed on one another so as to complicate their status as discrete art objects.

Not reproduced here are Campbell's latest studies for paintings on sailcloth, in which the support is bent, curved, doubled, or shaped to create a viewing environment. The possibilities for painting to pick up where the *Nymphéas* left off are apparent. For what confronts the viewer here is not an oversized *tableau*, but an art that questions painting's status in light of Minimalism: painting as an art takes on installation. These are works that attempt to revise the status of painting as a luxury object, as a commodity with which members of a certain class adorn their walls. One thinks of Richter's statement: "And I see myself as the heir to an enormous, great, rich culture of painting, and of art in general, which we have lost, but which nevertheless obligates us."<sup>2</sup> The pressure to push painting's envelope is palpable here; "painting should be accomplishing more," says Richter. As an artist who has extensively studied the history of art, Christopher Campbell too feels a sense of cultural obligation. Painting somehow must continue to be rich and expressive even as it faces the artistic and political forces that have transformed and critiqued it in the last century and a half. It cannot do so, believes Campbell, by simply retreating from illusion and mimesis in favor of cerebral schemata. It must shift the territories of what kinds of illusions it might create: not abstraction for its own sake but a formal language that actually provides an account of experience. Campbell wants to find ways of describing somatic experience, hence his interests in nature and the body, hence his experiments with new materials, new levels of the optical, new modes of presentation. The external and internal worlds of Campbell's subjects suggest possibilities for somatic experiences that the forms of his art have begun to chart.

## Notes

- 1 See Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," trans. John Johnston, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault; Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (NY: The New Press, 1997), pp. 135-140.
- 2 From an interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, trans. Stephen Duffy, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), p. 1038.

# CHRISTOPHER CAMPBELL

## FOUR PAINTINGS



*Dark Brush (Waterloo)*, 1995  
Oil, charcoal/linen, 38 x 50"  
Herbert Barrows, Ann Arbor, Michigan



*Suspension VIII (Soma)* 1996–97  
Oil, oilstick, charcoal/paper, 30.6 x 23.1"  
R. Epping, Zurich, Switzerland



*Screen I (Black)*, 1997  
Oil, alkyd resin/polyester, 76 x 59.8"  
collection of the artist



*Axon Bundles*, 1997  
Oil, alkyd resin, oilstick/Mylar, 84 x 60"  
collection of the artist