

Blaine Campbell Cyclorama



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RBC New Works Gallery

Art Gallery of Alberta

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On shifting ground and topsoil

Driving through and around the edges of Edmonton, surroundings tend to blur: tracts of prairie land dotted with cookie-cutter subdivisions and generic strip malls that alternate and repeat. One such new development, Kenton Village, is the subject of Blaine Campbell's latest photo-based installation, *Transient Architectures for New Tomorrows no. 7: Cyclorama* (2017). Located in Spruce Grove, Kenton "provides residents with a fresh, unique approach to urban living," with a name that evokes aristocratic connotations of class, conservatism and colonization.¹ But Campbell's work doesn't offer a direct critique (or even view) of the new houses that populate the community. Instead, the depictions in *Cyclorama*—and the structures holding them up—draw viewers into an ambiguous, in-between space. There's no firm ground here, only the shifting surfaces, edges and optics of a landscape in transition.

Spanning the gallery in an overlapping configuration, *Cyclorama* presents two large photographic images, printed on fabric and suspended on arcing sets of metal scrims. The first image features a huge mound that, at first glance, looks like a sturdy geological formation; up close, tractor wheel imprints in soft dirt reveal the form as new and temporary, topsoil scraped from the land in preparation for construction. Dwarfed by this strange mass of earth, a neighboring subdivision's tightly-huddled homes are relegated to the background, further obscured by a small bank of trees. Only when viewers move past and around the first image is the second fully revealed: a sweeping view of Kenton, spread end to end across a flat horizon. The new structures appear squeezed, sandwiched between the vibrant cerulean-blue sky above and a swath of shadowy, vacant land below.

Inviting the viewer to move in and around these images, Campbell's installation offers an immersive, yet fragmented, experience. In theatre, the term "cyclorama" refers to a curved wall or curtain positioned as



Doorgaand (detail), 2006/2016. Giclée on photo rag paper, 110.5 x 88.9 cm

a backdrop on stage—a scenic, transporting illusion. But there is no idealized landscape here; this is a presentation of stand-ins and understudies. Instead of rugged mountains, a provisional hill; instead of rushing waterfalls, placid puddles.² Campbell has a long-standing interest in the banal, but here it is explored through the frameworks of the spectacular. With its high-resolution imagery, imposing scale and panoramic format, *Cyclorama* recalls billboard advertisements and



Desert Scape, 2008/2016. Giclée on photo rag paper, 55.9 x 55.9 cm

showroom renderings for boutique neighborhoods, marketing tools designed to provoke desire. That familiar rush to fantasy is short-circuited in *Cyclorama*, both by the impassive, indefinite terrain and the “behind the scenes” exposure of its provisional supports. As the construct is revealed from all sides, the installation’s theatrical quality proposes landscape-as-set, gallery-as-stage and viewer-as-actor.

Campbell has been developing his sculptural approach to image display for over a decade. *no. 1* through *no. 4* in the *Transient Architectures* series were smaller constructions and maquettes, testing out ways to break apart flat images and rebuild them using three-dimensional structures. His first large-scale installation, *no. 5: The Bluff (Pursuant to Supreme Court of B.C., Vancouver Registry #S062778)* (2007), depicts Eagleridge Bluffs, an ecologically sensitive watershed on Vancouver’s north shore. Subject to protests over highway expansion for the 2010 Olympics, a sizable trench was cut through the land—a rift Campbell



Transient Architectures for New Tomorrows no. 6: Three Constructs, (detail) 2009. Duratrans print, wall, office furniture, fluorescent lighting, 365.8 x 243.4 x 111.8 cm

emphasizing all of the simulation and staging at play. As Campbell describes, the series sets out to explore the (predictable) changeability of our built world and increasingly commodified environment:

“The term ‘Transient Architectures’ is a bit dystopian and tongue-in-cheek. The works are based on a melding of structural forms and photographs, but these elements are all constructs that have no real permanence (physically or culturally). The phrase ‘New Tomorrows’ is wryly pessimistic and perhaps ironic, as most of the works in the series have taken the scarified landscape as their starting point.”³

Campbell’s interest in landscape was heightened during time spent in the Netherlands, where nature is obsessively, and discretely, altered and controlled.⁴ This struck him as a stark contrast to idealized notions of landscape in Canada, where “untouched” wilderness is

embodied in a chasm between two sides of a split image, mounted on a curved wooden frame. *no. 6: Three Constructs* incorporates props to resemble a corporate office space: a generic chair and side table, artificial plant, and blinds. Seen through the “window,” a birdwatcher and strolling couple enjoy Surrey Lake Park, which was created from reclaimed farmland around an artificial lake. Viewed from the side, the structure of the false wall and backlit image are exposed,



Transient Architectures for New Tomorrows no. 5: The Bluff (Pursuant to Supreme Court of BC, Vancouver Registry #S062778) (detail), 2007. Lightjet prints on Sintra, rotary oak plywood, brass and steel screws, 457.2 x 172.7 x 50.8 cm



Transient Architectures for New Tomorrows no. 7: Cyclorama, (detail) 2016/17.
Giclée on microfibre, sandbags, custom wood & steel supports, fan, 13.7 x 2.45 m (approx.)





Pushing Up Daisies, 2009/2012. Giclée on photo rag paper, 88.9 x 110.5 cm

highly romanticized—and mythologized.⁵ These impressions influenced Campbell during his time studying photography in Vancouver, where he also took stock of “Vancouver School” artists—including Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham and Roy Arden—who broached larger philosophical and conceptual questions about picture-making, narrative and meaning.⁶ Each has approached the landscape—urban, rural or both—using the camera to examine pictorial lexicons and social paradigms.

In Wall’s essay “About Making Landscapes,” the artist offers an insightful consideration of this image form:

“...the peculiar or specific viewing distance at which the picture-type ‘landscape’ crystallizes is an example of a threshold phenomenon or a liminal state. It is a moment of passage, filled with energy, yearning, and contradiction [...]. To me, then, landscape as a genre is involved with making visible the distances we must maintain between ourselves in order that we may recognize each other for what, under constantly varying conditions, we appear to be.”⁷

Cyclorama creates a dimensional web of such thresholds, a landscape continually fading and flipping in and out of view. Distance itself is palpably felt in the installation; as viewers approach the images their

bodies become a part of the composition, yet this up-closeness only serves to emphasize the remove and remoteness of the homes and the (invisible) people therein.

American artist Robert Smithson was drawn to the suburbs as places where entropy could be palpably felt, offering that the same gratification that people get from visiting the ruins of ancient civilizations could be deeply felt much closer to home.⁸ *Cyclorama* depicts a community being born, but it also represents

erasure (the topsoil is like a layer of recent history, scraped up and redistributed), and inevitable loss. The stillness and exposed plywood of a community under construction is like a premonition of a community in decline. Even the patches of shabby grass and weeds that cling to the sides of the mound seem to have something foreboding in them, a type of ragged patience with the goings-on. Campbell sees this mixed emotional response as a way to encourage reflection: "In some way I'm aiming at a degree of both doom and optimism. Hopefully that engenders a bit of uncertainty and tension in the viewer, prompting them to engage with landscape in a different way."⁹

By focusing intently on Kenton Village, a development that blends easily into the uniformity of urban sprawl, Campbell asks us to continue looking, even at things we feel like we've seen before. Seemingly inconspicuous and mundane, these images and structures pose critical



Beach, 2012. Giclée on photo rag paper, 88.9 x 110.5 cm



demarkation 3, a.k.a. *Topsoil (three stories)*, 2009/2012. Giclée on photo rag paper, 153.7 x 76.2 cm

questions. What values and economic pressures (personal and societal) inform our various life-ways? How do concepts of “home” and the attendant notions of safety, permanence, privacy and belonging shape our environment? Inviting us to enter a particular type of in-between place, *Cyclorama* considers how and why we build new communities, and what their placement in the world—and our imaginations—reveals.

Rose Bouthillier

Endnotes

1. beaverbrook.ca/communities/kenton-village/
Kenton street names include Vanderbilt Common (the Vanderbilt family built a shipping and railroad empire in 19th-century America) and Kensington Close (Kensington Palace is the official residence of the British royal family). While these direct associations may not be intended, they speak to the status and affluence associated with the development's branding. See kentonvillage.ca.
2. Campbell's interest in vernacular architecture and the banal has also been informed by photographers such as Stephen Shore and Bernd and Hilla Becher (brought together with others in the influential 1975 exhibition *New Topographics*), who paid close attention to the mundane, especially as found in growing (and decaying) suburbs and industrial lands.

3. Blaine Campbell, email to the author, 2017.
4. Cultural theorist Simon Schama offers an in depth look of how altered land reflects societies' psychological underpinnings in *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), a text which has influenced Campbell's thinking.
5. For more on this, see *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, eds. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), which explores how romanticized landscapes, intentionally excluding markers of industry and habitation, played into colonial desire and politics, and how generations of artists have dealt with that legacy.
6. Younger artists that have pushed these considerations into playful, theatrical, and sculptural explorations of landscape include Kevin Schmidt (*Fog*, 2004; *Burning Bush*, 2005) and Mark Soo (*Monochrome Sunset (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park)*, 2006).
7. Jeff Wall, "About Making Landscapes," *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Peter Galassi (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 171.
8. Robert Smithson interviewed in 1972 by Gianni Pettena, "Conversation in Salt Lake City," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 299.
9. Blaine Campbell, email to the author, 2017.

Artist's Biography

Blaine Campbell is an Alberta-based artist working in photography, sculpture and video. He is currently dividing his time between Edmonton and Vancouver. Campbell's thematic interests have included the inherent properties of the photograph and its relation to the viewer, landscape use and modification, processes of mediation and artifice in relation to transcendent experience and parallels between Jacques Derrida's "textuality" and quantum theory. A 2007 graduate of Emily Carr University with a BFA in photography, he previously completed B.Math and M.Sc. degrees in mathematics at the University of Waterloo and University of Calgary, respectively. He has exhibited work at various galleries in Canada and Europe and is represented by Republic Gallery in Vancouver.

Writer's Biography

Rose Bouthillier is a curator and writer based in Saskatoon. She is currently Curator (Exhibitions) at Remai Modern, and was previously Associate Curator + Publications Manager at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. She holds a BFA in Photography from Emily Carr University of Art + Design; a Diploma in Art History from the University of British Columbia; and an MFA in Criticism & Curatorial Practice from OCAD University. Her writing on art has appeared in *CURA*., *C Magazine*, *frieze*, and *esse*.

List of Works

Transient Architectures for New Tomorrows no. 7: Cyclorama, 2016/17.
Giclée on microfibre, sandbags, custom wood & steel supports, fan,
13.7 x 2.45 m (approx.). Courtesy of the Artist

Cyclorama is curated by Kristy Trinier.

Blaine Campbell

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The RBC New Works Gallery features new works by Alberta artists. Initiated in 1998 and named the RBC New Works Gallery in 2008, this gallery space continues the Art Gallery of Alberta's commitment to supporting Alberta artists.



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