

## **Peter Campus: Dredgers**

*The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.*

William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)

Over the past decade Peter Campus has been exploring the coastal shores of Quogue on the east end of Long Island around Shinnecock Bay with his digital video camera. It is a landscape and coast he loves and knows well and has engaged with on many levels:

*I know the land here, and the light. I have swum in the ocean and the bay. I have walked the dunes and the beach. I have seen a solar eclipse here. My comprehension of its infinity is part of my life.<sup>i</sup>*

Returning repeatedly to this particular area on the Atlantic coast of New York for his inspiration and source material, Campus has produced a substantial and eloquent body of digital moving image work. Characterised by its consistently contemplative pace, its shimmering, luminous beauty and pulsating hues and tones, these works touch on the sublime, but seek it through a careful and sustained attention to the ordinary. Ostensibly the subject matter of these works is the everyday industrial exploitation of the natural environment—ships and machines loading and unloading their cargoes, dredgers clearing the shipping channels, bouys bobbing rhythmically on the waves—but Campus' fascination with these mechanical processes and workaday activities is but the first layer in a complex and profound engagement with the nature of time and visual perception, of the experience of light and colour and the interrelationship of sound and image.

Recording continuous sequences of carefully framed images and sounds on location is only the first stage of his work. These initial sequences are the latent

material to be reworked and digitally processed through a careful layering of light and colour and a subtle manipulation of time. Although none of the works in this exhibition have been “edited”—there are no “cuts” in the traditional filmic sense—Campus engages with the movement and duration of his image-sequences so that visual and temporal abstraction is employed to draw out further levels of meaning and potential. He is interested in observing what is already there and amplifying it. In the post-production phase of this work, Campus engages in a careful and considered processing and adjusting of the elements of his recordings. Images are “simplified” and transformed in numerous ways. Pixels are increased in size, colour gradations are smoothed, saturation is intensified and the visual perspective is rendered into layers.

Peter Campus’ approach to his subject matter is initially physical, emotional and spiritual. Through his work he seeks ways to contrast and compare that with the function and operation of his camera and by extension, the post-production processes that he uses to complete and refine the work:

*The camera takes a sliver of the landscape, a small bit of time, a restricted field of view. The images imply what is outside, but must express what is in its boundary. The camera is foveal, set within the larger field. It is selective and simplified. <sup>ii</sup>*

Campus does not perceive his camera as an extension of his eye, but as a tool that provides him with ways to complement his vision and to distance himself from his own subjective experience. He enjoys and celebrates this difference and understands his relationship to the images it produces as an opportunity for new insight.

Whilst it would clearly be reductive to understand his approach to colour and surface purely in terms of its relationship to painting, artists working in this medium have certainly been influential and important to Campus. Acknowledging

the impact of works by French and Flemish landscape painters such as Jean-Baptiste Corot (1796-1875), Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878) and Aelbert Jacobsz Cuyp (1620-1691). He also admires the sketches and drawings of John Constable (1776-1837). Although this historical European influence is significant and he draws on and extends its heritage, Campus has also been inspired by the American landscape tradition in painting and photography, including the work of Californian photographer Carleton Watkins (1829-1916) and early 20<sup>th</sup> century American painters such as Marsden Hartley (1877-1943).<sup>iii</sup> This acknowledgment of the importance of the history and legacy of painting and its influence is crucial to an appreciation of Campus' video work. It is also important to acknowledge that he combines this perspective with an attention to the materiality of digital photography and video, to the technological processes of mediated experience; the video screen is not a transparent window onto the world, but a method of representation.

The works in *Dredgers* have been made using a large, tripod-mounted video camera, but they may well be the last to be produced using this particular approach. Campus has recently acquired a new, lighter and more compact camera that can be hand-held, to which he has fitted his favoured Leica lenses. Given his awareness of the significance and influence of tools and techniques, this current work, characterised by continuous recordings without any apparent "loop" to signify repetition or a break in continuity, may well give way to a new set of possibilities and ideas to explore and investigate.

It was the potential of computer image processing and the creative control it provided that eventually lured Campus to return to video, having worked with photography since the early 1980s. The two sides of working with this digital medium are complementary within Campus' approach—the camera with its fixed and passive gaze collecting "a chunk of durational space,"<sup>iv</sup> and the computer manipulations back in his studio providing him with precise control over his recordings of light, colour, perspective, horizon, movement and sound. Each of these elements enable Campus to extract and forge new harmonies and elegant

symmetries between the visual world of appearances and interior human perceptions.

Chris Meigh-Andrews



i Peter Campus, “notes on landscape,” <http://www.petercampus.net>.

ii Campus, Ibid.

iii In conversation with the author, February, 17, 2014.

iv Campus, Ibid.