

TRENDsetters

Maximizing Her Potential

In installations, videos, and drawings, Beth Campbell explores alternative identities and possible futures

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Beth Campbell, *Potential Store Fronts*, 2007, installation.

“Back in 5,” read the message scribbled on a sheet of paper from a spiral notebook and taped to the window of a store at 125 Maiden Lane in Lower Manhattan. For a passerby who stopped to read it, a casual glance became a confounding experience. The message that appeared to be addressing prospecting customers was revealed to be a description of the window’s contents: what looked like an odd series of receding reflections was in fact the shop’s facade replicated five times, from the potted plant and the pink neon sign in the window to gum marks on the floor near the entrance. The storefront, it turned out, contained only imitations of itself.

Exploring multiple realities is the bailiwick of 36-year-old Beth Campbell, who says she modeled last spring’s temporary installation—it was called *Potential Store Fronts*—on nondescript variety shops in her Brooklyn neighborhood. Campbell, who is represented by New York’s Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, pursues her explorations in a range of mediums, including installation, sculpture, video, and works on paper. The series of drawings for which she is perhaps best known, “My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances” (2005), features elaborate flowcharts describing possible courses of action stemming from mundane occurrences. The discovery of a few gray hairs, for instance, branches out into a thicket of hypothetical outcomes, ranging from the banal (become a health nut) to the absurd (go into hiding).

Campbell traces her fascination with contemplating alternative events and identifies in part to growing up in a small town near Chicago. “The football players were also in the marching band. Everyone had lots of roles,” she says. “I always want to be in between, to make everything available.” As the youngest of seven children of working-class parents, she was offered little guidance and limited options. “I was expected to continue working at the truck stop,” she says. But a surprisingly strong high-school art program inspired her to enroll in Missouri’s Truman State University, where she majored in painting and dabbled in philosophy.

She went on to pursue a master’s degree at Ohio University, where she quickly gave up painting for installation art after being encouraged by guest artist Charles Ray to explore the shifting space. As a send-off, she covered her entire studio and everything in it with peach paint. “It was great to paint my paintbrushes,” she says, “to turn them into props.”



Beth Campbell, *Crashing tables (moments crashing... I underestimated the consequences)*, 2005. Balsa tables, pine table, china, glue, silverware, napkins. Dimensions variable

After a summer residency at Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Campbell moved to New York, where she continued to investigate relationships between psychological and physical space (she lists Vito Acconci, Fischli & Weiss, sci-fi writer William Gibson, and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman among her influences). For her first solo show, at Roebing Hall in Brooklyn in 2000, she re-created her thesis project, *House (A Standardized Affection for Telepresence)*, a young woman's bedroom meticulously duplicated, down to the crumpled sheets and scattered dirty laundry, and separated from its twin by a small hallway. In this exercise in visual memory, Campbell endows sloppiness with precision, uniqueness with uniformity. In *Same As Me* (2002), three synchronized video loops show Campbell in different roles (artist, housewife, tourist) and locales (Manhattan, Utah, Germany), acting out the rituals and events of a day, from waking to sleeping, her gestures identical and in perfect unison in all three loops. We are left with a sense of the slipperiness of identity. Campbell's is not the typical self-portrait but an inquiry: what is it—our bodies, our actions, our decisions, a moment in time—that makes us ourselves?