1. UNCOMMON WHITE

I have an otiose relationship with some books, almost profoundly so. I have been trying to read *Moby Dick* for about twenty years now. It’s the same with *Ulysses* and *Middlemarch*, and a few of those other large and canonical works. Periodically, some faint guilt for Dorothea, Molly or the Whale makes one of these titles appear at the surface of a pile and I feel that I am being asked to read a bit more. I dutifully do and, in doing, so try to denature something in the rather resentful and uncuddled gaze that bids me back. It is all quite the task, emotionally fraught and petty whilst, also, unfortunately, sometimes rewarding, sometimes very much so, and not always in an entirely medicinal way, either. Unlike many other books that I have started then, I continue to attend to the needs of these. I continue, rather than persevere, which is too mean-minded a virtue, one too filled by a relentless superiority to be a form of care. You can possibly detect this: I am not fully happy either with my obligation to these texts or its continuance. And neither, I think, are they. Part of this likely mutual unhappiness is to do with the fact that there is something (in ordinarily common supply) that these books don’t offer and which is quite simple: a plausible excuse for my having had done with them. That, or perhaps a view in which I can imagine them having an end, being ended, closed. So, by their neat insufficiency here — or is it a manipulative reticence on their part? — these are books, or better, structures, that refuse abandonment. There is no defeat or failure in them, no dejection, just delay.

And, review. For these are unarguably tricky books. There aren’t two ways about that — not for me, in any case, and I doubt that I am alone in this. Their languages are, at once, modern and historically idiomatic, cast in major themes and those of inscrutable minorities. They are durable, subjectively, and I don’t know why that is, though there is something in a particular conjunction of the terms modern
and literature that they decoratively broach and which holds together something that is irresistibly, endlessly enigmatic. They structure the possibility of answers to allusively posed questions articulated by the world view of their heroines: only the possibility, and not more than that. These are books that seem to bathe wantonly, narcissistically in the energies expended in the decoding of their obduracy. Regarding this, one thing that these novels certainly do represent to me is an unremarkable history of changes in my own capacities as a reader, and whatever I have been prepared, at whatever time, to take as a theory. Every time I return to the last, dog-eared page, I become aware that I am no longer the person who made that fold. There is both measurement and morbidity in this realization, which is, given my age, in equal parts likely, appropriate and saccharine. There is a grander sense of historical location involved, too. The fact that I came into their world after them doesn’t mean that I am necessarily capable of reading these books past modernity. Rather the opposite. In fact, it is their wake of insistent anachrony that I find difficult to discard. Their revenants and now relict-like contemporariness (the character of their being with their time) still compel and are demanding enough to keep me coming back to them, if only for brief and intense periods, without constancy or regularity, though always with epiphany. There is something — I suppose the word is, touching — about that notion of reprising modernities that prompts a sense of future pasts or futures unachieved, the characterisation of which I too feel rather reticent about.

*Moby Dick* is special to this kind of maudlin sensibility. Melville’s prosody is difficult to bump rapidly along with and can be obtuse. His hale vernacular and abrupt shifts in mode make his complex portrait of the meaning of white, its malevolence and indifference, a thing that requires a type of askesis, which is to say, a commitment to learning.
It requires a kind of education (or, otherwise, is itself that education) and a discipline, a kind of determination to recognize and adhere to a set of remarks and proffered readerly procedures, ways of going about things regarding aesthetic expectations, nudged recollections and other philosophical habits of unfolding. It is an enterprise at once dustily parsimonious and enormously seductive. So, like this, in its way, reading Melville is a civilised activity, and may even be civilizing. It is based on knowing some things in common and how to move them about and press on nuances, but also knowing that these things aren’t quite knowable, or ownable. These things — the meaning of Jonah, the idea of the whale, the curiousness of ambergris, white — are stakes in a conversation about unsaying; it is not not exactly a refusal, on Melville’s part, of the fixity of matters concerning the redemptions of a life at sea, but something like a continuing, allegorical repositioning that never ends, which, despite and because of the nimbus of various episodes cradling these things, can’t end. The peculiarities of this hosting of the components of narrative art-making gives something like Melville’s Whale its enigmatic condition as, at once, both an object of attention and a form of attention.

I can hardly be called an expert on Arabella Campbell’s work or the things in it, and still less one on the other-than-global contexts of its making. I have only known it, and then just some of it, for a couple of years. So, it is probably a bit precipitate, even rude of me to suggest that a Melvillian optic is the only, best, or even a productive way of perceiving the achievement of her most recent exhibition at Catriona Jeffries. Certainly, like Melville’s, Campbell’s is a civilizing œuvre. They have other moments in common as well. Her casting of poetic images in a framework of knowledges about earlier-wrought figures of modern, critical arting, is something she shares with him. There’s that, and there’s her concern with animating the muscular
shyness of white, too. There is her occasional dwelling on fragments of maritime life and lore and there is a shared attempt to narrate a sense of the productive fallibility that robust and driven self-reliance tries to hide from. Portable and temporary constructions figure here as well — and travel, although not quite travelling. Rather perhaps, the emotional vestments of travel and the uneven development of desires to stay and go. Both, although in dramatically different ways, have an interest in the pastoral mysticisms of the ocean’s coast.

But, these are not the real reasons for arranging Melville as a kind of repoussoir to Campbell. Those reasons concern an arresting capacity, articulated by Campbell’s works, to sensitively consult the pathos of the tropes and theorems of critical visual art practice. In her attendance to these sombre, frequently complaining, now uniformly antique devices — the critical frame, the performative canvas, the metonymic colour-type, the reflective series — and from the condition of their only recently neglected modernity, Campbell has constructed a poetic re-determination of the sustaining details of an artistic conversation that was carried blithely on by Gerhard Richter, Terry Atkinson, Donald Judd, Eva Hesse and many others for several decades, and which now, perhaps, seeks the comforts of an ending.

When she summons these devices however, it is not in the older, heroic order of upset and discontent in which they were first forged, no matter how wryly. It is, instead, to let them play or make play, delighted at the liberation allowed in the recognition of the grave, appalling and awesome indifference they now have to a world: the world which has also stopped paying attention to them. The point is that when these mute devices return from near retirement, foul-humoured, scratching their ribs and asking why no one calls anymore, they return, at Campbell’s invitation,
to rather different worlds. Their authority blunted and no longer the appurtenances of wheezing cultural reproof, no longer as globally ambitious as they were, though still self-sure, they appear suddenly almost as garlanded kittens, filled by conflicting sentiments, or as the objects of near comic allusion, or the subjects of alien artistic systems and processes, or as anecdotes in a rewriting of the character of the history of global and regional art-making. Happily reciting and re-siting such figures in the cartography of her (shared and familiar) artistic education, what makes Campbell’s gestures in this practice all the more relieving is that they are carried through with an almost agonizingly polite and conscientious sense of hospitality. There is no cursing, no meanness, and it seems as if there can be no offence intended in her introduction of these devices to their new homes, new landscapes and new histories of suggestiveness. For me, as an art historian of a specific, critical/remedial type, then, Campbell’s lucid and liberationary methodologies themselves require some attention. And, as with all works of art, hers ask further complication rather than simple unpackaging.

2. TEMPOARY SHELTER

The special Northwest coastal variant of Campbell’s pastoral view appears in her work as a powerful motive. Never absent, it is something to return to. For now though, look at A Catalog of its Own Content (2011). This is a work comprised in a series of unprimed canvases with a white pentalateral shape repeated on each one. There is a wall full of these canvases, not a specific number. Already something of Serialism’s affair with determinants is quoted and questioned, and the work seems contingently conditioned by the informalities of its conversation with the building that it finds itself in. Each element of A Catalog of its Own Content is made by painting this five-sided shape onto the canvases, which are of equal size, although they are minutely and naturally differentiated.
in terms of colour and texture. Then the shape is painted again over that, and again and again, over and over, in white, until the nap raised by the paint is subdued.

In a well-behaved, 1960s Systems manner, Campbell ordinarily keeps account of the number of coats of paint it takes to achieve this memorial suppression. But, not this time — and, with this other kind of insufficiency, we are given a glimpse of a fugitive from a desire to be controlled by its own rules: a glimpse that is further charged by the knowledge, first, that the individual paintings should be regarded as portraits of one and other, and that Campbell has now forgotten which one is a portrait of which: second, that she sanded back the paint on some of the canvases, in the process reducing the nap, interfering externally in an internal physical order. The introduction of this seemingly slight irreverence to the probities of Systems-painting method is exciting. It is an artistic gesture of freedom from constraint where the mutuality of the nature of the freedom and the kind of constraint remain necessary components of the remark.

Campbell supplied a historical pretext, too. This white shape reprises throughout the exhibition. Here, then there, an archaeology of the form is expressed: in a set of eight prints (Studies for an Incomplete Work, 2011), in a newsprint cut-out (A Volume of a Sculpture, 2011) and, in the same work, in a framed photocopy of a page from a book (which itself appears as an untitled work in the show). The photocopy shows an image of an excavation work by artist Michael Heizer from 1967. With that reference, land art appears in the conversation, bringing with it all the concerns land art practices have had with the ownership of the land and the landscape, concerns that are played out across Canada, but in such exquisitely raw, savage and academically rehearsed ways in British Columbia.
This image of Heizer’s work is photographic and that is important. The form repeated in *A Catalog of its Own Content* is only available as the result of a photograph and its reproduction. So, the portraits that make up *A Catalog of its Own Content* might not be of each other. What might be more significant is the way that the photograph first supplies and then dashes away any originary source for the portraits at all, leaving an instability that is demanding (in vain) of correction. In the context of ideas about modern art and land rights, this denial of lineage and authority has a special dignity, which might amount to a politics, but which might not. It is a threshold.

What *A Catalog of its Own Content* does seem to present though, and which is characteristic of Campbell’s work, is a density. It is a density that articulates a logic (not so much eccentric as increasingly a-centric) and it does this through recognized painterly procedures: adhering to them here, and not there. In that light, it stands as an essay in necessary inconsistency. One thing, for instance, that can’t be avoided is the impression of a washing-line that this piece makes. No sooner than one dismisses that frivolity than the memory of Kandinsky’s 1905 paintings of laundry drying in a healthy breeze steps in to make the recollection more factual. The shape is the same, and with that another entry is made against the catalogue of its occurrence. Well, my catalogue anyway. In any case, and there will be lots, inconsistency becomes a gerund of fact-making here.

But this density and recurrence in Campbell’s strategy signifies something more than a merely burdensome familiarity with known artistic tics. Reprising the gestures of earlier artists doesn’t serve here simply as a guarantee, as the evidence of a well-structured apprenticeship. Rather, it suggests the desire to form some kind of informal milieu or notional community of interpretative audacities. Allied
to a continual process of the suggestion and then the evacuation of discrete anecdotal meaning, the reprises of the pentagonal form staged in *A Catalog of its Own Content* produce a sense of forms coming together as unsettling narrative vectors in the making of the history of a shape. It isn’t an enquiry concerned with some Euclidian treasure hunt for an ineffable ideal, but it is a chance for things that might look alike, but don’t belong together, to come together. So, it is in this sensitive context that a general tenor of polite reticence and the making of an otherwise seemingly uncommunicative, unremarkable, even reluctant-looking art is absolutely required.

Some cultural historians have an incapacitating suspicion of things that look alike, and that seems fair. Sometimes they are the same historians that have a delight in legitimate categorizations, and that’s good too. Often, though, disregarding unlikely similarities results in a lost opportunity to take those unlikelihoods seriously and, in all earnestness, to elaborate a singular subjective view on why such things might be joined. When Arabella Campbell brings together different instants in the troping of modern art, she does so in a manner that stages their unruly variousness over their ability to take on their role or place, recasting their common-ness as a question, and doing so in ways that play out in myriad complexities.

*Study for an Object that Appears* (2011), for instance, indicates a structure for the hosting of this variousness. A piece of white painted drywall, cut from her studio, was grafted into the drywall of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery. You can feel Eva Hesse and Le Corbusier quarrelling over this scrap of white. You might also think of Lord Elgin. But, you may also see a small allegorical remark being made about the tiny difference in the colour consistency of the two whites and how that difference might further stand as a cipher for the different territorial claims for the meaning
of artworks that galleries and studios have. You then may dream of those conversations and informally negotiated treaties that give structure and substance to that difference, and wonder to what extent this historical act of transplantation has broader cultural resonance in Canada.

On another wall, the work continues. An elaborately framed print of an image of the hole left in Campbell’s studio by her excavation invites further apparatuses of attention. This time, yes, it is Gordon Matta-Clark and Jan Dibetts who line up their claims: skilled engineers peering into a hole and giving legend to the exercise in narrative framing that this work starts out as. But, this second, learned and ornamenting clause in Campbell’s suite also has the capacity to usher one away from such Pantheonic draughtiness. For turning, it is difficult to avoid the way that the spatial drama of the work is repeated in the architecture of the gallery itself. The interpretative thresholds, the frames animated by the piece reprise themselves in the building. The arch that leads into the second room in the gallery frames behind it a mysterious white-painted door. Step forward to look at that more carefully and a kind of vertiginous narrative space opens as We Have Pictures Because We Have Walls (2011) reveals itself. The doorway (it turns out to be a service entry) is drawn into another kind of conversation with an artwork that is as mute and undecidable as is possible. Looking, in one glimpse, like an Art & Language diatribe and, in another, like the bouncing pigtails of Pippi Longstocking or Tove Jansson’s Sophia, the duckrabbit state of We Have Pictures Because We Have Walls sheds a pool of fragmented ambiguity around itself and its neighbours, presenting itself as a structure of questions concerning its place, existence, purpose — yet, not to the extent of raising doubt about its condition as an utterance regarding the ability of art to inveigle. If there is a determining footnote in this exhibition it is in the tussle staged just here between the masculinized, increasingly
trivial pissing around the material elements of painting, on one hand, and a feminized dismissal of that and any other authority denied and reclaimed by it.

It is worth pursuing the concrete, spatial choreography that Campbell exercises here. The device of turning back on yourself, reviewing one’s progress and the conditions of arrival is significant not only in Campbell’s work. It has been adopted as a mode of critique by architectural historian Beatriz Colomina, for instance, in her review of the apparent hermeticism of modern architectural space. That turn, educated in this case by the context of its making, presents a pedagogy. Campbell has spoken of a moment, a telling experience of walking through the vast architectural essay dreamed by Donald Judd’s exhibition space at Marfa. Walking, absorbed, suddenly turning to look at what she had just come through, she realized that the impression she had to that point formed was not supported by what she saw when she looked again. A sequential reverie of appropriate successive absorptions had led her somewhere intellectually, but evaporated under the scrutiny that those absorptions themselves made possible, like stairs falling away behind her. Gradation (2011), also seen as one turns in the gallery, figures in that sense of intellectual retraction whilst, as well, figuring the luscious condition of proper, well-combed memories in their relationship to a desire, or rather a wish, for other memories of arrival, other’s memories. Partly, it is the sudden entry of both vivid and delicate colour in a photograph of blackberries in different states of ripeness that arrests and marks a point in turning. What also presents itself is a kind of stewardship of a European artistic pedagogy. Here it is the mysticism of Hannes Itten’s shading exercises and how they seem designed to evade specific meaning in a theological manner, whilst simultaneously appearing technically pragmatic, utterly utilitarian. At the same time the berries are able to act as a mediator to another kind of rich mundanity: a small
narrative of finding oneself wind-bound on a beach with a friend, a canoe, a bit of rice and a bottle of beer. It is familiar sociability and, here at least, it is ordinary enough, maybe, to go and find some berries to flavour a bit of rice, and at the same time find a pertinence to arting in that.

E. E. Cummings once put this as the “trick of finding what you didn’t lose”. In many senses, it is this strategy of finding the forms of modern art in the troubled tropes of the cultural landscape of this part of the Pacific Northwest coast that electrifies Campbell’s practice. Sometimes, this uncovering manifests in finding an implausible but irresistible equivalent to a picture frame in the shape of a fishing boundary sign. Sometimes it is in finding a coincidence between the grey and noble ubiquity of a polypropylene tarp and the odd dignity that is loaned to a gallery wall by the imperious monumentality of an abstract diptych. At still other times it is, as in A Frame For the Gathering of a Concrete Object and an Abstract Object (2011), an observation of the way the cargo container of a truck, looking abandoned, though likely not, in a bit of forest can remind us of the shape and deportment of a Donald Judd sculpture in a way so affecting that it doesn’t appear as a reminder at all. Truck and sculpture stand in the same place, allowing no room for comedy, only a state of unsettling, mutually haunting coordination.

Campbell’s action of unsettling art works in their re-sighted newness plays an important part in raising a critique of the commodified components of artistic language. We know that art works need to be possessed of some kind of resiliently enigmatic physiology that is capable of wresting valuable undecidability from consensus. We know that we
should figure out how to allow artworks, some at least, to open up greater distances between us and themselves, and not to draw them too deceptively close to us, if only to preserve the capacity for re-invention in that space. What Campbell has shown with this exhibition is the necessity to explore both the common connotations in a repertoire of artistic devices alongside their, what has been called, ‘objet petit a-hood’, which is to say the massively, psychically overdetermined unicity that belongs not so much to them as to those who choose to engage with them. If, like Melville, Campbell has a Whale, one that is made at once, as it were, of revenge and dispassion, then it is something made of more than fooling with the recent artistic past and telling architectural one-liners. Her Whale is the body of artistic commodities, a questioning of their terms, their confidence and diffidence, the nature of their regard for us and our regard of them, and, perhaps too, a fundamental diffusion of the “us” that such universalizing views of art depend upon.

A friend, who is owed a lot here, nudged me once and reminded me of Wordsworth and a passage in The Prelude where he describes himself (“led by her”) stealing a shepherd’s small boat, striking out on Ullswater lake at night, and the image of, from nowhere, a mountain looming.

... I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the grim Shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with a purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living Thing,
Strode after me.
Arabella Campbell, *A catalog of its own content*
Catriona Jeffries, 2011
Arabella Campbell, *Gradation*, 2011