

Enlightenment in the Suburbs (Michael Campbell)

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Michael Campbell is emerging as newest member of the Lethbridge School. Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, David Hoffos, and now Campbell have sprung from their incubation in this small southern Alberta city to return magic to the artworld.

Campbell's installation, *MindReader*, at Truck gallery, Calgary (Nov. 2-Dec. 8, 2001), is one part hallucination, one-part pseudo-scientific investigation and five parts concrete free-association. A three times life-sized aluminum lawn chair (sans webbing) has a similar effect on the viewer as the liquid in Lewis Carroll's "drink me bottle" has on poor Alice. We shrink to child-sized proportions. The wall-projected video of slowly falling water and ghostly bodies (footage taken from beneath a white translucent waterslide!) encourages a feeling of falling, floating and weightless pleasures. Resting on top of what appears to be an old radio floor cabinet is an open book. An illustration on one of its pages is illuminated and animated: a strange montage of light bulbs swirl on the page. A few feet away at the end of a black, elongated pyramid shape is a larger book with a similar animated picture. This one is created by a rear-projected video onto a translucent panel inserted into a hollowed-out book. The image is of an underwater scene of people swimming in a river.

The texts that accompany the images are fragments of what appear to be pseudo-scientific records. One offers the account of a six-year-old girl from 30 years ago who, while watching Saturday morning cartoons, has a hallucination that would do both Stephen Hawking and Ken Wilber proud:

She is no longer aware of the room and its distractions. The carpet fibers loom above her, filling the skyline with corded architecture. Gravity releases its hold - the secret knots no longer binding her to the earth. She continues to float and move downward. The carpet riots and surrounds her attention. Fragments of lint and skin particles float by. Microbial scraps dwarf her presence. The flotsam and jetsam move in a chaos of individual orbits. She remains at this level, shifting across the immense microcosm. Her body rotates and alters direction, bereft of any indication of up or down, depth or height.

The other text sets this individual experience within a larger cosmology, as if through by meditating on any part, one could glimpse the whole unfolding of the universe.

The initial thought connects to other variations of itself and begins to grow. As this simple model of an idea expands it moves as a spiral yet makes connections in every direction. As the abstract continues to build upon itself, the furthest points still retain the original seed crystal. It moves past our system and fans out into points we have yet to see or measure. It spreads beyond the earliest televised images that continue to wash over distant planets in obscure regions. It overtakes early radio broadcasts, a young Orson Welles playing *The Shadow* who laughs still, eventually eclipsing earth's very first radiowave tests. Each connection in this idea model acts as a knot in an ever-growing mandala.

This is a strange phenomenology that at once seduces with its promise of a unified theory of science and metaphysics, but ultimately frustrates by only offering shards of that vision. The installation explores the possibility of enlightenment in the suburbs; that great consciousness (like great art) is not contingent on location. There are two voices here: the young girl, a most unlikely adept; and the crackpot, amateur scientist/philosopher who lacks formal training in the area of his intuitions. He (or less-likely, she) is a small-town William Burroughs—but without the drugs—who putters on lo-tech hallucination machines in the garage, hoping to prove his cosmological theories through material means. The third consciousness is the voiceless person who assembled the installation to pass on research or a joke.

I read this work as a serious attempt to reintroduce the metaphysical and the uncanny to an incredulous and canny art world. Given the present state, it must do so through the back door—by presenting the vision through an antiquated voice that could be taken as a joke by skeptics and as a point for departure for the curious.

An ironic reader can choose to see *Mindreader* as an illustration of a crack-pot theory, a desire for meaning beyond material reality. However, while the voice is not conventional it is not necessarily insincere. But the viewer who is sympathetic and tries to turn the page to learn more, will be rewarded with frustration—the book is sealed. They can either feel duped or read this as an encouragement to seek their own, parallel investigations. The installation may be just a prompt, a guide to the visual elements, and a portal to the imaginary.

While fellow artist and Lethbrider, David Hoffos, is interested in popular manifestations of the desire to exceed the mundane through cosmic possibilities (UFO's, alien abduction, and apocalyptic themes), Campbell seems fascinated with how our mundane experience often offers glimpses of a greater reality. These experiences are especially available to children and artists who afford themselves a most precious commodity, time for purposeless reflection and goal-less play. Both artists expand the activities of nerdy, day-dreamy teenagers toiling on secret projects in their rooms to a high art form. Cool contraptions are cobbled together with what's ready-to-hand to create a moment of strange delight. The objects are not trying to imitate the commodified world but take it by surprise.

The language in many of the works by these artists (especially Cardiff and Miller's *Dark Pool* and Campbell's *Mindreader*) is poised between science, fiction and spirituality; as if trying to reactivate the pre-postmodern imaginary of anxious, mid-century sci-fi radio shows and novels that often subverted the dominant discourse through anxious, apocalyptic speculations, conspiracy theories and a mistrust of rationality. These artists seem to be reaching for the repressed narratives of the contemporary world, but with modernist wonder rather than postmodern skepticism and irony.

The secret of the success of the Lethbridge School is that they are not ironic, they are no longer making art about art for artists, nor are they pandering to a commodity culture. They are tapping into the moments of reverie, guile-less observation and magical thinking common to everyone. Campbell magnifies these moments and presents them for our contemplation. *MindReader* is magic.