

ARTFORUM

PHILADELPHIA

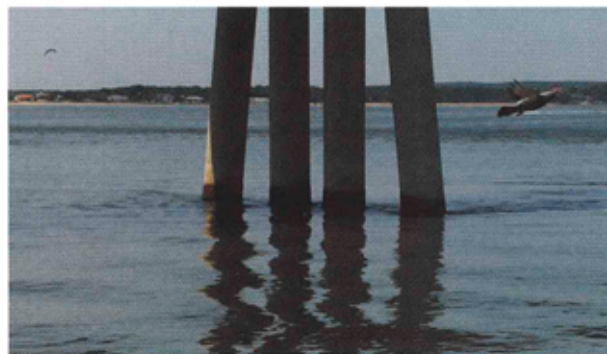
Peter Campus

LOCKS GALLERY

From afar, the six new works exhibited by Peter Campus in “the earth is nowhere” at Locks Gallery look more like diagrams than landscapes. Five of them are digital videos of sites in, on, or near Long Island Sound played in six-minute loops on their own flat-screen monitors. A formalist critic might see in the austere geometry of these views a contemporary equivalent to Manet’s paintings of the Normandy coast, where masts and piers vie with flat areas of intense blue to submit the order of reality to the order of the picture plane.

To replicate Manet’s conflation of figure and field, Campus creates maddeningly uneventful, startlingly abstracted scenes. The atmosphere is melancholic; human activity is practically nonexistent, the sound mere ambient noise. Set in a spare, spacious, dimly lit gallery, the sextet here formed a series in real space whose formal rigor matched that of each scene. In such a near-vacuum, the single man-made object that is the focal center of each piece assumes added pictorial weight. From left to right, these objects are: a tower, a bridge, a bridge support, a boat, a buoy, a pole.

But how does one reconcile this matter-of-fact list of nouns with the works’ evocative titles, some of which are taken from literary sources such as the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke and Robert Louis Stevenson, others of which are of his own invention: *so real a presence*, *bridge of clouds*, *predominance of our constructs*, *the land of the counterpane*, *the earth is nowhere*, and *alignment of the spheres* (each 2007)? It is important to note that Campus’s medium is video, which, in contrast to painting, incorporates new technology and extended duration into its very being. Thus, if one gets close to the works and stares at them long enough, subtle movements and subdued sounds begin to sabotage the seamless merging of image and space: the flap of a butterfly’s or a seagull’s wings, the rumble of a passing truck, a jet-ski or speedboat’s foamy wake, some hands on deck, and, occasionally, a phasing in of a new scene indicating the completion of the loop. Brimming just under the surface of abstract order, Campus seems to say, is the languid stream of lived experience. What Proust found in a madeleine, Campus finds at the shore—and we find at the gallery, as long as the floodgates of involuntary memory remain fully open.



Peter Campus, *predominance of our constructs*, 2007, still from a color video, 7 minutes, 20 seconds.

On the wall opposite the new work were two projections from 1977, *Head of a Misanthropic Man* and *Head of Sad Young Woman*. Each is a close-up of a human face, one male, the other female. Unlike Bill Viola’s diptychs, they do not ask us to agonize over every wrinkle, pore, and twitch, as if we were witnesses to Christ’s passion. Instead, we anxiously await the inevitable blinking of the eye. Though fully anticipated, this simple movement nonetheless sends shudders down the spine. Campus’s latest videos likewise disrupt dilated time, but now as gentle ripples.

—Paul Galvez

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