
Joyce Campbell: Te Taniwha/Crown Coach at Pitzer Art Galleries

At the Pitzer College Art Galleries, Joyce Cambell presents two distinct bodies of work that inform and support each other. *Te Taniwha* comprises photographs and a film that tell a story of allusive mythology and sacred landscapes in her native New Zealand. The *Crown Coach* photographs were taken in Los Angeles (which was the artist's home for a decade) on a factory brownfield. Campbell selected native and non-native plants for her project in LA, weed-like vegetation that is also bountiful; variously hallucinogenic, medicinal and nutritional. Both projects were undertaken using 19th Century photographic techniques.



Joyce Campbell, *Castor* (2008/2012)

Fiber-based silver gelatin hand-printed photograph (from ambrotypes)

33.5" x 25.2"

Ed. 3 of 5

Courtesy the artist and Pitzer Art Galleries

While looking at *Wild Oats*, from the *Crown Coach* series (2008/2012) 33.5" x 25.2" (Fiber-based silver gelatin hand-printed photograph – from ambrotypes), as well as others from the series, I think that there is something about the way it is photographed that separates the plant sample from its environment, also that the plants, or the photographs themselves, appear to hold and give light in a Lovecraftian display of spectral luminescence. Each print has two borders – a black within a white one, and both borders feel like functions of photography as much as aesthetic choices of the artist. Focus is generally lacking in the pictures, yet resolves itself in each in brief, exultant passages of startling clarity, and I suspect that this variety of focus can be attributed to the artist's use of old fashion equipment.

Presented as they are, one close to the next in a horizontal band, these pictures have little to do with the plants being photographed and much to do with photographic technology, and with Photography: for all the detail they show – tiny hairs on a stem, a crisp edge where a leaf crosses a flower, etc., they are not "good" in the sense that they illustrate typical features of the plant types – rather, Campbell's pictures feel like ikons, objects that have mystery and are created to stand for something beyond the image, perhaps a sacred spirit or an idea or a political sensibility.

My reference above to the writing of H.P. Lovecraft is purposeful, for his antiquarian affectations toward art came at an early Twentieth Century moment when modernity was overstating its claim on the future and the early vigor of industrialization had given way to a middle age that was variously spreading woe and benefits on all it touched. The tales of mystery that Lovecraft crafted – employing repurposed and invented old styles – showed that communication is an expansive field, that perhaps old gods had not been swept away, and that language which calls attention to itself as a tool makes us question our suppositions. I sense this questioning in Joyce Campbell's work.



Joyce Campbell, *Toru-rau-iri* (2010)

16 mm film

8 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Pitzer Art Galleries

On the remaining wall of the gallery Campbell has made good use of the height of the room, installing large prints from the *Te Taniwha* series (these prints are fiber-based silver gelatin hand-printed photographs, 48" x 67" and 42" x 60") fixed to the wall in a wandering salon style. I must look up, and this affect of distance gives the photographs power. The prints abut each other and in some cases they overlap, bringing to mind another act of representation – this time narrative. The images begin at the top left with *Whakapunake – The Sacred Mountain* and continue through fifteen prints, among them *The falls where the Taniwha Hinekōrako resides*, *The spring*, *The dry valley*, *where the river ran before Rua-mano created the falls*, and *Sometimes she resides where the two rivers meet*. Three joined prints make up a portrait of the eel Taniwha herself. This arrangement felt to me as I

looked like a ‘stations of the cross’ experience. The images are powerful and work like symbols, being specific yet generic. They feel like history and also they hold me in the moment of my looking – the eel, the mountain, and the falls work in my mind the way I imagine Hiroshige’s *Views of Edo* might have worked when they were new – so real as to make the viewer feel present with the viewed.

In a small anteroom, a film installation of an eel in water repeats in a loop. (*Toro-rau-iri*, 2010, 16 mm film, 8 minutes) The film doesn’t quite eat itself and neither does it regenerate, it presents stasis – as though the eel, or what it represents, always has been, is, and will always be. That the mechanical looping isn’t perfect and requires a human hand to operate feels nice, if possibly beside Campbell’s point.

Climbing the stairs to a landing I find *The roto*, a large picture of a waterfall and grotto which is hung at my own height; instead of looking up I am faced with it. In the photograph I see rain drops as they happen, some bounce off the pond, and the light seems to filter through clouds at my back; the focus of the picture is at the level of my chest – my heart – and further out, where my gaze is hazy, it seems natural that it be so. On this landing I first confronted the idea of the present in this work, where previously all had seemed antiquarian. My insight of “a viewer being present with the viewed” had its roots in second thoughts on my own observations. Returning downstairs, I also noticed that Campbell’s use of loosely hung sheets of paper in her *Te Taniwha* prints invite a viewer’s immediate entry and resist idealization; the soft, matte finish of their surfaces underline the effect. These are images without quotation marks.

Upstairs, a series of Daguerreotypes require almost an obeisance of looking. A low shelf holds prints which lie flat on a box-like surface, the image is invisible in the Daguerreotype and is reflected for viewing in a vertical mirror-finish plate of glass. This arrangement is fascinating and charming without being very pleasant. While ducking and weaving to catch an image in the reflective plate I felt an enforcement of the artist’s will that went beyond a feeling that “I *can* find mystery here” to “I *must* find mystery here” – the artist has highlighted her intent so. The objects embody mythology even as they represent it in Campbell’s project.



Joyce Campbell, Sometimes she resides where two rivers meet (2010)

Daguerrotype, 5" x 7"

Unique

Courtesy the artist and Pitzer Art Galleries

Campbell’s use of ambrotype and Daguerrotype tools for making pictures (her use of the looping film projector is another example) at first put my back up, and I delayed for several weeks my writing on the show. Every time I look at such photographs and films, I think that they are cursed by the specificity of their making and exhibition; I feel the weight of history, and little else. Sitting down this morning to write, I thought of my love of weird Lovecraft. This saved me. I think Campbell is using these old methods of making and exhibiting precisely *because* they make the viewer uncomfortable, they take one out of oneself, and they make one aware of looking. I imagine the practice of making does something similar for her – I think how self-aware she must be

humping a large old-fashioned glass-plate camera across an abandoned industrial field, how thoughtful of her choices. (If at first I am lulled into disfavor by the preciousness of her project, as I look and think I am caught short by the callowness of my response. Campbell's work does as much to invite criticism as it does to inspire thought - and this is one kind of success.)

Finally, because these technologies date to the 1850's, the period that began one of Los Angeles' early growth spurts, and which began Britain's aggressive actions in New Zealand, this exhibition makes me think of the relation between the history of photography and the history of the sites; the show makes me think of several types of immigration: of plants into a place, brought by people to use for food, for medicine, for ceremony; of people into place, as colonists, for employment and to escape; and yes, I think also of the diaspora of technology.

Overall, Joyce Campbell's of 19th Century technology makes me think "Damn! This person means it." And so, by virtue of her effort, I'm forced to consider the sacred status of photography and of images in our culture. I'm invited to wonder whether such a religion of images is wise, or even interesting. I am encouraged to consider the chemically reactive nature of the artist's craft and to think about its effect on the environment, then and especially - considering the poisons associated with contemporary, digital technology - now.

When Campbell pairs the *Crown Coach* series of images with *Te Taniwha* she reinforces my spiritual appreciation for the land, and for the land in the city. Campbell reminds us in her *Taniwha* series that the origins of her "ancient water deity precede (the) structures of atomization, quantification and exploitation that come from wedding capitalism to science in the form of technology." The, or a spirit breaks through, and offers an "outside to capital structures." (Quoting from an interview between Joyce Campbell and Pitzer Art Galleries Director/Curator Ciara Ennis, which is available in the gallery.) This act of *breaking through* correlates to the plants the artist photographed in Los Angeles. Nature - the primordial - the spiritual succeed in these challenged places.

"I don't regard the primordial as having gone away, or as being truly in the past. Rather, modernity lies on top of it, smothering it, while it continues to break through." (ibid.)

Campbell's work tells me that technological civilization without spirit - or (using my terms) without faith - is irrational because we are *of this world*, and these spirits precede us in this place. I would add that these seemingly irrational, spiritual things accompany and inform our every act. I imagine that Campbell and I agree that we lose track of them at our peril.

<http://www.pitzer.edu/galleries/>

The exhibition *Joyce Campbell:Te Taniwha/Crown Coach* is on view at Pitzer Art Galleries through December 7, 2012.

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