

CRISTIN TIERNEY

WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Artist peter campus reflects on life of art, life, spirit

By Lynn Felder Winston-Salem Journal
Nov 16, 2019



Peter campus, artist, and Vallerie Hillings, N.C. Museum of Art, are seen on stage at Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art.
Garrett Garms

Tai chi, Hopi Indians, dancer Yvonne Rainer. These are just some of the influences at play in the early 1970s when peter campus was first making his mark on the art world in New York.

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And although many consider him a revolutionary artist, campus doesn't see himself that way.

“Art shouldn't be revolutionary,” he said. “It should take art history and move it into the future just a little bit. ... I love art. I love looking at art. I need to go to museums and look at a lot of art. And I want to get people interested in art.”

An exhibition of his work, “video ergo sum,” is on display at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art through Dec. 29. It includes videos, installations, and photo projections. A companion exhibition is at the Charlotte and Philip Hanes Art Gallery at Wake Forest University through Dec. 8. An affiliated exhibition, “affinities: peter campus and american art,” is at Reynolda House Museum of American Art through Dec. 31.

“Video ergo sum” was organized by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in collaboration with Cristin Tierney Gallery, NYC. Tierney, a Wake Forest alumna, accompanied campus to Winston-Salem last month for a talk at SECCA with Vallerie Hillings, director of the N.C. Museum of Art in Raleigh.

Tierney and campus took some time the next day for a conversation at The Katharine Brasserie in the Kimpton Cardinal Hotel.

Campus and his wife, artist Kathleen Graves, live on Patchogue, Long Island. He said that mornings on their back porch are his favorite times of day.

“When I make her breakfast,” he said.

“Most of the work I'm doing now is just about ships and boats,” campus said, “the places along the edges of Long Island that are part nature and part manmade.”

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He and Tierney talked about his work and the differences in the ways that artists and audiences sometimes perceive that work.

“Since 1979 and 1980, my work has really been about landscape. I was really focusing in on my own crises in the ’70s, and I just got sick of doing that,” campus said, “I started looking *out*, and I turned to nature, and for me, nature has helped my spirit quite a bit.

“But I wasn’t doing it like 19th-century photographers who would go on month-long trips. I drove from the city in my Chevy Malibu, stood in traffic getting across the George Washington Bridge, and driving to Harriman State Park. Then I had nature for six to eight hours, and, still, it was amazing.”

Campus creates installations that provide interactive experiences. From his early closed-circuit video installations to more recent landscape work, campus’ art deals with perception, vision and spirituality.

“I like a lightness in the work, but I think that’s a spiritual issue,” he said. “And you have to remember I come from minimalism, which, in the first videos was almost like watching paint dry.”

Tierney said, “It is interesting, though, how when you watch other people engage with the work, I feel like people are either very serious and intense or they quickly descend into giggles and a sort of lighter approach or engagement with it.”

Campus said, “I made it, and I made it for myself in a way, but when I turn it over to other people, they’re going to do what they are going to do, and I like that.

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“The pieces at SECCA are the accumulation of everything that goes on in front of them. People can dance around, or people can be serious and try to find the moment where everything coincides.

“So, I like that. I like the feeling that it’s no longer mine. Don’t you think Titian felt that, too?”

Tierney said, “Mozart has a feeling of ‘done.’ With your work, there’s a feeling of ‘done.’ You are on to the next. Every artist, when you ask them what’s their favorite work of art, it’s the one they are working on.”

Campus: “In the first gallery you were in — I call it the Wake Forest group — we were sitting around this big beautiful table, and I said, ‘When I finish the work, I’m done with it,’ and they gasped.”

“Artists feel that way about their work,” Tierney said. “But the audience doesn’t. As you are starting to let go, the audience is just getting attached.”

Campus makes frequent references to spirituality and often quotes what Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was a curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for many years, said about art.

“He built the Asian collection,” campus said. “He was talking about a sculpture called ‘The Dance of Siva,’ and he said that great art has to have four qualities — mental, spiritual, physical and emotional — and that they had to be in balance like the Siva was in balance.

“And so I try to do that.”