

PETER CAMPUS *Dredgers*

by Robert Berlind

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A cursory glance at Peter Campus's exhibition shows large, elegantly composed harbor and seaside images of sailboats, dredgers, cranes, fishing boats, and trawlers at dockside. Look longer and Campus's surfaces come alive, showing varying degrees of visual activity. Some objects move slightly: a boat slowly making its way on the horizon, an automobile entering at a picture's bottom and passing quickly out of sight, gulls flying by. The entire surface of each image is a pixelated field that enhances the picture's representational illusion while, incongruously it would seem, also making an abstraction of animated, quasi-modular geometry. These pictures are, in fact, large, flat, 55-inch video monitors. The camera in each case has been stationary, recording whatever movement, usually limited, is in its view, hence the look of still photographs, greatly enhanced by digital effects transforming aquatic and atmospheric shimmer.

An artist who has had decisive influence on video and digital art since the 1970s, Campus challenges the common notion that technological forward motion is inevitable. An encapsulated notion of a historical imperative might suggest that painting yielded to photography, which was in turn superseded by video, each producing in turn an increased degree of realism and pertinence to its historical moment. While not relinquishing the time-based nature of his medium, although he did just that to concentrate on photography from 1979 to 1995, Campus's paradigm here is, above all, painting. His personal relation to the shore of eastern Long Island, where he has lived and worked for 16 years, infuses and, in part, motivates his current work. Like any number of American painters and photographers, he is attracted to the workaday life, as distinguished from the leisure life of harbors. Also in the



Peter Campus, "Solstice, Out of Montauk," 2013.

current work are correspondences to Seurat's classicism, analytic cubism, and post-cubist abstraction. Nicolas de Stael's bright slabs of color based on observed reality also come to mind.

Although paintings themselves are physically static, it can be argued that painting per se is a time-based medium, never adequately disclosed by an instantaneous glance. Viewing over time is requisite to truly seeing even work as seemingly straightforward as a Myron Stout or a Barnett Newman. The slow and intriguing scintillation and shifts within Campus's surfaces do not eliminate the sense that these images are a sort of painting. To be sure, the flat screen monitors lack physical surfaces of applied paint, but they are enlivened by the way an area within the image has a double identity as a depicted element and a daub of flat color made during a painterly process. The way in which a given area toggles back and forth between description and abstraction relates directly to much modernist painting. The actual movements initially recorded by the video camera mesh optically with those produced through digital effects.

"solstice, out of montauk"(2013) contrasts its constituent parts through digital treatments. The eponymous boat's slight fluctuations within its white hull and its complex rigging suggest it is rocking slightly even though it can be seen to be stationary. The area across the bottom of the picture reads like moving water until you focus on the un-water-like rectangles in motion there. The fluctuation of rectangles on the dock by and behind the boat indicates men at work, although their abstracted forms can be discerned only momentarily. The hazy, milky sky with soft clouds is left as a naturalistic, painterly passage through which a somewhat abstracted gull occasionally flies. Two American flags at the picture's right edge and one on the left, flap in the breeze with only slight manipulation. Ambient, muffled sounds of water, wind, work on dock, and the occasional birdcall are processed in a way equivalent to the visual information. The piece's duration, a bit under four minutes, is without a narrative arc, all movement subordinated to the sense of protracted observation. "Solstice, out of montauk" is the most "realist" of this show. Others works, such as "providence"(2012),are on the side of geometric abstraction.

A way to think of this dialogue between representation and abstraction, beyond its relevance to modern painting, is in phenomenological terms. The mind may find itself engaging two modes of consideration: contemplating a given scene, with its local interest, metaphorical associations, and innate visual pleasure at one extreme and, conversely, contemplating one poet's insight: "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare." Without compromise, Campus straddles realism and abstraction as well as the disciplines of painting, photography, and video. A salient strength of the work is that it does not simply demonstrate a thesis about technologies or claim a priority over other forms of representation. Rather, Campus seems to aver that such complexity is intrinsic to art itself.