

***The Art of Drawing with Text***  
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My Potential Future Past (installation view), 2017; Courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery, New York

Earlier this summer, I stumbled into the Kate Werble Gallery in Manhattan for a publishing event and became interested in the gallery's current exhibition of work by artist Beth Campbell. I remembered Campbell's word drawings from my graduate art school days, and it was a pleasure to see this work in person, as well as a newer abstract mobile sculpture series she had begun based on the structures of her drawings.

Campbell works in many mediums, including video and installation, in addition to sculpture, but two of her drawing series might be especially interesting to writers: a series she began in 1999, entitled *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* (referred to as *Potential Future* for short, and sometimes referred to as flow charts by Campbell), and her subsequent series *Future Past*, begun in 2014. As described on Campbell's website, the former is a "text-based drawing series" that "makes use of a flowchart to explore the far-reaching map of possible futures arising out of everyday encounters." The drawings, an early precursor of which Campbell titled "Web Drawing of Me," are composed of handwritten text and start at a single point (i.e., "Me"), then branch off into many possible outcomes from that starting point, which could be seen as a possible parallel to the seemingly endless directions a story could go when a writer first sits down to begin new work. In one drawing from 2004, possible futures are as different as "Still waiting tables in a Diner when I am 42" and "Hired to write for FOX."

I had the pleasure of sitting down to chat with Campbell about her projects at a café in the

Brooklyn Navy Yard, where she has her studio. At the time, her work was in exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

**Catherine LaSota: Let's start with your *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* series. What was the genesis for this series and your use of words in your art making?**

**BC:** When I entered grad school, I was a painting major, but with a really large interest in installation, and about a month in I just threw myself into installation without any training in sculpture. I had seen this show in Chicago that was full of installation, and it really blew me away. I didn't really know anything like that was possible. A month into grad school I stopped painting to pursue installation, and just threw myself into materials. What was very important to me in installation was the phenomena, the actual, quite theatrical experience of the thing.

**CL: Are you referring to the experience of making it, or the experience of the viewer?**

**BC:** The experience of the viewer in the space. For me, that was and continues to be an important part of when I do installation work. So instead of the work being about stuff—it's not like, "this is about" and pick a theme—it's about the phenomenon of the experience. This gets into psychology and perception. I'm interested in more than just a topic. As a human you are many things, and you're interested in many things, and you're influenced by many things. As an artist I was making my position: I made a mind map with the word "everything" in the middle to try to outline my position. My first web drawing was the word "everything" and things around it, and concepts, and it evolved into a basic drawing of me, with me in the middle and the different roles I performed.

**CL: Did that web drawing start off as just words, or were there drawings within the web?**

**BC:** They're text-based drawings. The one that had "everything" had some blobs and stuff, but when it became the word "me" in the middle (of a web drawing), it was just words. It was really exploring all the different roles I perform. You're not singular, you know—you're a mom, you're a writer, you're a private person.

**CL: Right.**

**BC:** So I finished grad school, and I moved to New York. For a year I was just adapting to New York and trying to figure out how to be creative here, and life stuff happened. I met my now-husband, and I'd moved here with another guy, and I thought, oh I should do a drawing about my future. I had already made a map of "me," so then...

**CL: The map of you that you had done before was the present you, in the now?**

**BC:** Yeah, it was the 25 year old me (laughs). But it wasn't about a future or anything. What I liked about it was that in the middle it was "me," some personal thing—just you and the roles that you play—but the end became things like coffee and things that I liked. They were like a cockaburr to someone else's edges. When I finished grad school I did an installation of two identical bedrooms at Roebing Hall, my first show in New York. My idea was that if someone develops themselves through stuff in their room, and this is all stuff in the world that there are multiples of, then there is a possibility that you would reoccur. Like you are creating a person

out of this stuff. Then I have this drawing that goes from something seemingly singular ("me") to this edge that is various bits of all of us.



"Web Drawing of Me" by Beth Campbell. Photo courtesy the artist

**CL:** It's interesting how you talk about these drawings, where when you get to the edge of them, it could also be the edge of somebody else—it's a bit like choosing a POV when writing a story: the main character's life touches on all the other characters' lives, but the reader only sees the edges of those other characters' lives. Your description of these early drawings also sounds to me like the way atoms come together in molecules. Have you thought about that?

**BC:** Not so directly, but that's a good comparison.

**CL:** Sometimes we get together with people and it's like a solid, sometimes it's liquid. Sometimes relationships are a gas!

**BC:** (laughs) Well, totally. It's like there are some people you can be around where you feel...

**CL:** ...grounded?

**BC:** Yeah, or strengthened. And there are others, they make you feel horrible.

**CL:** We learn to shed people who make us feel horrible from our lives, hopefully?

**BC:** Yeah, I'm still learning that.

**CL:** You're always meeting new people, too.

**BC:** Yeah. It's funny, when I was getting the work together for the Aldrich show, this idea appeared multiple times in my sketchbook. It's funny how something comes in and out and

then finally you act on it. I felt like when I acted on, I thought the idea was new at that stage.

**CL: Wait, what was repeatedly coming to your sketchbook at that stage?**

**BC:** Doing a drawing about my future. It was this life thing of one guy to the next, choosing one over the other, that made me finally do the drawing of *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances*. I held off on it for three weeks just thinking about it, because I didn't want to make a text-based piece that nobody would read, you know? There are a lot of text-based works that you never get through.

**CL: Why do you think that is? Do you think it's the sheer amount of text?**

**BC:** Probably, because the format of a huge wall text means maybe you are supposed to stand there with your head cricked back. Maybe it's just me, but if I'm reading something like that, I just like to sit. (laughs)

**CL: So when you make a text based work, are you thinking somebody is going to read the entire thing?**

**BC:** For many of them, that's the expectation. But when I was thinking about the *Potential Future* drawings in those three weeks I wanted to make sure you didn't have to read all of it to understand what the point was. I was surprised at how much people actually read, because you didn't have to read all of the text to understand that this was about the future.

**CL: I think that people are drawn to text, you know? You see people going straight to the explanatory plaques in museums, for instance,—I mean, it's a different thing, but...**

**BC:** Oh, yeah.

**CL: ...perhaps words are a way in to art for some people, because they know what a word means, for example.**

**BC:** Yeah, because it's the familiar mode. Can I add one more thing about the *Future Present* drawings?

**CL: Of course!**

**BC:** I felt like they were like installations, in that people's paths through them are very different, unlike when you're reading through a book. It's more like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* type of book. People go through it at different points and move around in very different paths.

**CL: So it's more Choose Your Own Adventure than novel, is that what you mean?**

**BC:** Yeah, definitely. There's a lot of movement in it. Or, each person's movement through it is different.

**CL: This brings up the question for me of time spent with an artwork. With a novel, or even a short story, there is a certain number of hours that a reader is spending in a space,**

**based on the number of words on a page, and the time period that is being covered. A lot of your work is time-based in a way, too, because it is experience-based. So is the idea of time something that you think about? There's a finite set of time, also, when you read a story, and then it's over.**

**BC:** Right, You start it and then you stop. One thing I've come to learn with the *Potential Future* drawings is that the people who live with them, love them continually, because they're the kind of thing that you can pass by and glimpse another portion of it. It keeps having a newness. They access different points, so over time, it's always refreshing. You don't have to take all of it in—you get more time with it, you keep getting bits and pieces.

**CL: That sounds a bit like re-reading a story at different points in your life and getting something new out of the story each time. For example, if you read *Catcher in the Rye* as a teenager and then again as a forty year old, you're going to see it differently, you know?**

**BC:** Right.

**CL: What are you reading now?**

**BC:** My reading these days is all nonfiction and philosophy and things like that. In college, I was really trying to understand Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. I was so committed to trying to understand it, and it is really curious looking back, because I don't even know how I got the book—there was nothing in my area that was saying, oh you should read this. I don't even know how I came to it. I mean, it was prominent back then.

**CL: Yeah, I remember it being around, I remember it being in the house.**

**BC:** Now I've been reading a lot of books on the new neurology and decision making and psychology and philosophy stuff.

**CL: Are there particular philosophers that you are looking to, or is it more general theories that interest you?**

**BC:** I feel like I'm always trying to learn, so I'm always a student of it. The last few years, I've been consuming a lot of object-oriented ontology stuff like Graham Harman, or things on materiality and thingness theory. What I want to do right now is understand Latour.

**CL: Latour?**

**BC:** Yeah, Bruno Latour. Don't ask me to explain, though! One book is *We Have Never Been Modern*. I do like to read a lot. And when I am working on the mobiles, I'll listen to people talking. I had to stop listening to music in the studio.

**CL: You listen to words in the studio?**

**BC:** All the time. I've gotten really into Krista Tippett. She's a contributor to NPR, she has her own program based out of Minneapolis. Last year I got into going to estate sales on Long Island. I get up really early and drive at 7am on Sundays for shows (and listen to Tippett's *On*

*Being*). I guess because it's like church time, the show is intellectual-spiritual, but she interviews physicists and psychologists and brain surgeons and Buddhists and artists and writers, too. Like I learned about Mary Oliver on her program. Supposedly she doesn't get interviewed much. That was amazing.

**CL: I should check that out.**

**BC:** It's like church for people who don't believe in god. So I'll listen to her, and when I was working on the mobiles I'd listen to a lot of panel discussions on parallel universes and quantum physics. I'm deep into words.

**CL: Do you absorb the words when you're working in the studio? Does it ever become background noise, or do you really hear it?**

**BC:** Well, I'm sure it goes in and out. I'll re-watch or re-listen to the same thing.

**CL: It sounds like words are always present as you are working.**

**BC:** In my sketchbook, it's mostly words. I mean, there are the text-based drawings, and I do a lot of other work, but it's like there are these ideas that are in word form first that I kind of get enamoured with. I'll even make my husband write stuff down—I was going to bed a few weeks ago, and I was too lazy to get back up, and I said, can you write down "everything is an accident?" He's like, ok.



Beth Campbell in her studio. Photo by Catherine LaSota.

**CL: You were talking about how you started with text-based drawings as a 25 year old with "Me" in the middle and then you wanted to draw one that was the future, and then**

**eventually there was the transition to your *Future Past* series.**

**BC:** I did My *Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* drawings fairly steadily from my mid 20s for ten years plus, but the plus was really painful and not appropriate. I had made so many, and when I first made them, they were really necessary and liberating and kind of crazy, and I embodied crazy. Those drawings get associated with decision making and they get associated with the future, and there is a lot of association with choice—that's why I started calling most of the mobiles, *There's No Such Thing as a Good Decision*. (laughs)

For me, those drawings were sort of a self portrait of what it's like to be at that age, which is full of anxiety and not knowing—if I do this, this will happen. What I say now is, really everything is an accident. You know, some decisions we make—it seems like we make, I should say.

**CL: So is the idea that you think you can control things when you are younger?**

**BC:** I wouldn't say that you can't control things but just that—this is now in hindsight, too—it's more anxiety in general, and letting it just completely flood out of you. And it helped, because sometimes I would worry about something, and I'd say, oh, I'll just save that for the drawing, I'll put that worry in the drawing. It was like recategorizing it—instead of on your own turning it into a present.

Now I like to read about rational thinking, authors like Daniel Kahneman on thinking fast and thinking slow, and Dan Ariely about the irrational mind, and just how much everything around us is constantly nudging us and the concept of this self that we think is stable and is always in flux and influenced greatly by various simple things.

So those drawings weren't just about "if I do this, this will happen." They're more in a spirit of anxiety. I did them for a good solid 10 years, and as with anything that someone does in life, it was really essential. Then it got to be imitating myself, and it just wasn't that same voice anymore, because I got older and...

**CL: ...you didn't have the same anxiety?**

**BC:** Or not to the same degree. I am afraid of saying just anxiety, it's so many things. I did them for a long time, but then I started feeling like, this isn't my voice anymore. Although I loved them! And maybe in time I may do them in that same way.

**CL: That happens to writers, too, where they get to a point of being really good at a certain thing and can get stuck.**

**BC:** Yeah, I just couldn't. I would chew all my fingernails off. It became really stressful, because I wasn't in the process anymore. I was outside making it. Then I had a kid, and I was thinking, it's not the same anymore, it's not just me, I have a child, so I'm not just going to... I know that someone could and would be the person who would keep writing those, and their child would be endlessly hit by a cab or ending up in drug rehab.

**CL: You are saying there would be more anxiety in the pieces with a child in the picture?**

**BC:** No—that it would be about *him*, PTA meetings, and taking off for family trips...

**CL:** So it's no longer just you as the nucleus.

**BC:** And I'd kill me and my boyfriend/husband all the time, but I don't want to do that to my son, I just don't want to entertain it. Anyway, I couldn't do these drawings in the same way. I didn't feel like I was that voice anymore, because I couldn't do something that came from that time period, that kind of person, younger.

I have to be careful, because it's not like as you get older there is no future for you (laughs), but I was also looking back on my life. In your 40s, there is regret—why didn't I do this? I also didn't want to just have me be the center anymore. In those drawings, even though I was the center, or—what would you use in writing? the protagonist?—everyone related to it. People would say to me all the time, it's just like me, it's just like me.

**CL:** People do that with books, too.

**BC:** Yeah, well, it very quickly was not me; it was a universal. I just didn't want to be thinking about the world through me in the same way, so I started trying to figure out how to do it through other ways. It started as events, like a moment that had a future and a past, and it was a painful evolution into finding what's the future past in the space.

I like to say it's about mirror-ness. There is one drawing at the Aldrich on mirror-ness that is focused on psychology and narcissism, and another one is focused on superstition and technology and they're kind of related in a way in terms of these crazy fantastic ideas. In early times people claimed to see the past, present, and future in mirrors, and now we're using mirrors and telescopes to actually look at the past. There's a coincidence of superstition and technology.

**CL:** One piece in your show at the Kate Werble Gallery actually has bits of mirror installed here and there between scraps of paper with text on them. I found it very interesting, because as I moved along it, I could literally see glimpses of myself within the piece.

**BC:** If that happens, that's awesome. I did imagine that from a distance they kind of blend into the drawing, so you might be surprised by the mirror. But I know where they are, so it's very obvious to me.

**CL:** Do you ever feel like you install a piece and then hear people's reaction to it, and it causes you to think differently about your work?

**BC:** That's the awesome part about it.

**CL:** That's something that is said a lot about literature, that it's not done until somebody reads it.

**BC:** Right. I think a lot about the viewer, even in the mobiles. For some of them, there's a real fizzy visual thing that happens in them, the viewing that's beginning to perform on your brain, and there's a tension between perception and all that.