

ART REVIEW: Whirling Visual Activity in Beth Campbell Mind-Maps at Aldrich

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"My Potential Future Past" (installation view) by Beth Campbell, 2017. The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

At first glance, "Beth Campbell: My Potential Future Past," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, seems quiet. The artist's large abstract drawings, mostly black and white, are visible through the graceful patterns of mobiles that move almost imperceptibly in the expansive gallery.

Closer scrutiny reveals a whirl of visual activity. The drawings are elaborate mind-maps with hundreds of forking lines, each labeled with progressing bits of handwritten text. The mobiles mimic the drawings, using wire instead of pencil and ink to create intricate structures that branch and branch and branch.

There is obsession here. There is an unnerving immersion into the endless alternatives and dizzying amounts of information that are inescapable in contemporary living. The show is a brilliant frenzy.

The exhibition showcases three bodies of work, displayed together for the first time. The earliest is "My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances," initiated in 1999. There are 11 from this series in the show, consisting mainly of pencil drawings on white paper. Each starts with one or several short written descriptions of situations in Campbell's life - "Looking for better Job than Picture framing," "Living in loft with 6 people," "Blood Pressure too low" - then explodes up, down or across the page, tracing unfolding trajectories of if-this-then-thats.

Campbell's investigations are personal, revealing, and often laugh-out-loud funny. A line that begins with "Dating Peter" makes its way to assorted conclusions, including "Move into the hills, become a nun."

Along with her love life, Campbell addresses topics ranging from banalities, like buying a vacuum cleaner, to motherhood, to her identity as an artist. A drawing from 2006 starts at the top with "Asked to propose a Window Design at Bergdorf Goodman for a New Museum Event," and descends into a flurry of options, among them "My hair + skin are dry + discolored," "I am a role model to many young women" and "We pay \$1000 for an old lady to watch us have sex."

Amy Smith-Stewart, the Aldrich's curator, described Campbell as a Neo-Conceptualist "with a feminist impulse." She explained that the "My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances" drawings were created organically, from brain to paper. Likening Campbell's process to Surrealism, she said, "She is allowing her stream-of-conscious interior monologues to flow out."

And flow they do. The compositions, some denser than others, evoke immense root systems or lattice-like algae pulled by underwater currents. Reading the pieces, museumgoers can lose themselves in worlds of unexpected outcomes: affirmations and humiliations, desires and disappointments, fantasies and nightmares.

The second, more recent body of work is titled "Future Past." This series also features diverging lines and handwritten text to illustrate myriad associations, but the works are quite different. For these drawings, Campbell used predominantly white ink on black paper, and the written fragments reference the historical, scientific and cultural contexts of particular objects.

Mirrors are the focus of four of the five "Future Past" drawings on view, including three from 2017, produced for the exhibition. In "Future Past (mirror-superstition)," the image begins on the left with the phrases "Primordial Oceans" and "Reflecting Pools," with arcing lines leading through the ages to words on the right such as "Panopticon," "Funhouse" and "Da Vinci mirror writing" (written backwards). Another piece, titled "Future Past (mirror)," incorporates small cartoon-like illustrations: a star, a parabolic mirror, a tiny figure holding a selfie stick.

Smith-Stewart noted that to make the "Future Past" drawings, Campbell does extensive research. "She writes the results on little pieces of paper and pins them to the wall," she said. With this series, rather than working intuitively, she plans the layout in advance.

Where "My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances" turns inward and projects forward, "Future Past" embraces the trajectory from the deep past to now, from sludge pools to Kim Kardashian. The drawings, Smith-Stewart said, "make swooping statements about how we perceive objects, how we use them and how their meanings shift through time."

Campbell's "Mobiles," the third body of work in the show, are wordless physical manifestations of the ever-bifurcating paths in her drawings. There are eight of them, made of varying thicknesses of wire, some with touches of color. They hang amid the drawings like bare upside-down tree limbs, casting faint shadows on the floor.

While perusing the drawings, visitors might sense a mobile hovering nearby. "They edge up

to your shoulder," Smith-Stewart said. "We wanted there to be a feeling of intimacy, but also of discomfort and encroachment."

Certainly the mobiles converse with the drawings, and Smith-Stewart suggested that their human attributes were heightened by the drawings' presence. A delicate red one, titled "There's no such thing as a good decision (phile)," appears cheery; the black "You've really fucked up this time" seems to droop in despair. The largest, the eight-foot-tall "My mother's house," exudes security and solidity.

"They have their own personalities," Smith-Stewart said. "It's as if an emotive expression from one of the drawings popped out into the room."

"My Potential Future Past" is the first museum survey for the Brooklyn-based Campbell. Threading through the exhibition is a profound curiosity about the near-misses and what-ifs, and the mysterious ways that one thing leads to another. "It's about how life is made up of all sorts of encounters," Smith-Stewart said. "In the end, it's about being-ness."