

Electronics artist Campbell turns his eye toward mass protests, echoing Futurists

Kenneth Baker *Galleries*

The work of Bay Area electronics artist Jim Campbell progresses at a startling pace, especially considering how often he shows it.

Campbell's latest exhibition at Hosfelt Gallery includes new static pieces — aggregate high-resolution images presented as back-lighted transparencies — and animated works that probe the degree of image definition needed to sustain narrative.

The transparency “Political Protest New York 2004 II” (2005), like others in the series, looks like a multiple exposure. But it combines unnumbered digital photographs with striking clarity. Each picture in the mix records a view of the mass protests occasioned by the 2004 Republican National Convention in Manhattan. The eye can discern numerous angry placards along with faces, architecture and glimmers of daylight and weather.

Campbell leaves us to wonder what motivated his choice of mass protest as subject matter. Perhaps the street actions merely promised — and delivered — a visual richness hard to find otherwise. Did he wish simply to align himself with the protesters, he might have wanted to avoid the extraordinary reminiscences of Italian Futurism his pieces evoke.

Although several of the Futurists espoused socialism or anarchism, their loudest and most prolific spokesman, F. T.

Marinetti, gloried in the violence promised by a mechanized world.

Anyone who knows the prismatic city visions of Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, or certain early works by Franz Marc, will think of them here. Campbell creates the very sense of energy, space and matter interpenetrating that the Futurists sought with licks borrowed from Cubism and Post-impressionism. But Campbell's work has a razor-edged clarity the Futurists could never attain.

Campbell's kinetic pieces put video into sparse grids of LEDs — light-emitting diodes — coarsening the pixilation until it turns imagery to unrecognizable patterns of pulsation.

He has taken to putting his LED arrays behind sheets of Plexiglas or blocks of resin that both coalesce and becloud the granular imagery. The Plexiglas sheets typically hang detached in front of the pulsing lights, permitting us to glimpse both the illusionary imagery and its make-up.

Yet the two most effective pieces on view show us the LEDs naked. “Running Falling Apart” (2005) replays one of his first pieces of this type: an array of red LEDs on a black ground. The original footage shows a man trudging through an ill-defined landscape, occasionally falling and picking himself up again to continue.

In the new version, Campbell has reprogrammed the LEDs so that their intensities vary willy-nilly within the pattern of firing that produces the moving image. The medium loses and regains fidelity as it delivers the Beckett-esque narrative.

But in the show's true standout work, Campbell adds a new element: sound. The “Self-Portrait of Paul DeMarinis” (2003), another unmasked grid of LEDs, composes itself pixel by pixel as a live microphone registers a sequence of tones from a nearby speaker. Campbell derived the tones from a recording of DeMarinis' voice. He programmed the LEDs to produce a recognizable

likeness of the Bay Area composer and sound artist, provided that the microphone picks up no ambient sound, which it nearly always does.

The system factors in ambient sound, breaking the correspondence between tones and light intensities that yields the likeness. So the presence of viewers almost guarantees that they will see an abstract, or disfigured and ever-varying, portrait.

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Jim Campbell:
New Work. Backlit
transparencies and
electronic images.
Through March 5.



“Political Protest New York 2004 (II)” (2005); angry faces and placards are discernable in the mix.