

The body's mirror

by Andrea Rygg Karberg, art historian

Ruth Campau's pieces are among those that gain and gather upon closer acquaintance. This, of course, is a positive attribute. You can grow and advance in synch with them; you can enter into a process with them. At a first accidental sighting, they might appear to be monotonic, but actually they are living and breathing inside a limitless field of new variation possibilities. They are intimately connected with the artist's body and intellectual powers of concentration – and consequently with our own. What we have before us is a distinctly hand-held and immensely sensitive form of minimalism.

Ruth Campau is true to the convictions of her personally defined language or form repertoire, which she also knows how to develop further. Her characteristic parallel color lines of acrylic on acrylic are not generated by any machine but are color trails left behind by large coarse brushes fastened onto long shafts, laboriously drawn across the plates. Campau's art calls for nothing less than her absolute immersion, for meditative composure and for a concentrated performance alone in her studio. It is imperative that the hand must not quiver during the process and the smallest disturbance can destroy the work. Campau's works stand as the antitheses to all the stress in our day. From the moment of their unfolding, time and bodily movement in space are embedded in the works; both these aspects are transmitted further to the viewer when he/she follows the lines with his/her gaze and moves with his/her own body in front of the works.

Campau's art works frequently involve several acrylic plates and several different colors – which are combined in different ways, by her or by the viewer, directly or indirectly. Some of Campau's early works consist of three spray-painted acrylic plates superimposed on top of each other and framed together as a case, thus fashioning an enigmatic painting. The forms make their appearance in either a sharp or a blurry manner, depending on whether they have been painted onto the anterior or the posterior plate. It takes a little while before you come to understand how the special depth effect has arisen.

Later on, Campau exhibited shelves containing a number of painted plates, which the viewer could actually push in front of and behind each other, by means of which the linear play was altered and the colors were optically combined: interactive works of art, in which the viewer – with a gentle and considerate hand – could participate directly. Other works constitute entire installations in space within which the viewer can move around.

Generally speaking, it's difficult to classify Campau's works. They amalgamate elements of painting, sculpture, installation, design and architecture; they lie in the cross field situated among these disciplines. Campau is both examining and establishing spaces.

While Campau's paintings can be said to be architectural, they nonetheless are always simultaneously related to a human scale. The stripes are always "cropped by the picture frame," as though, spatially speaking, they were, beforehand, already headed toward and also continuing beyond (or we could also say, before and after) the acrylic plate in question. What we are seeing, then, is only a segment of something that is greater than ourselves: an order and a system that continue interminably. The stripes are parallel. And they never extend beyond three meters, which happens to be Ruth Campau's maximum reach, as she pushes a long-shafted broomstick away from her own body.

Campau works on a horizontal support. The painted plates remain lying flat on the ground until they are eventually raised to an upright position and, as the case may arise, cropped and/or pieced together, according to the artist's plans. Until recently, with few exceptions, the lines were exhibited as vertical stripes, miming the viewer's own vertical axis and the fullest extent of his/her reach. At the same time, the works have been allowed to spread themselves out on either side of the viewer, to extend themselves into colossal works that insert a narrative element into a tale that cannot all be taken in at one survey glance. The art is non-figurative and does not depict anything other than itself. However, there are a great many things happening on a plane situated beyond words.

Ruth Campau's body is her most important painting tool: it determines scale, rhythm and constancy. However, this body enters into a combination with other implements. Her work is not a matter of expressive

gestural painting: there are no casual smearings and daubings and there are no impetuously violent emotional discharges. The connection between body and work of art is mediated by the painting tools and their structure. The hairs on the brush or the bristles on the broom employed define the lines' form as well as the pressure exerted, the amount of paint applied to the surface and the paint's degree of thinning.

Typically, Campau coats each plate with its own color – or to put it more precisely, with its own color pigment – in different variations. A color is an abstract concept, a linguistic notion. In reality, one and the same color pigment can give rise to widely divergent color effects. The color layer's thickness is crucial to the "color's" or the paint's appearance and to the degree of plasticity. How concentrated is the pigment? Is the paint thick-flowing and viscous or is it a thinned-out and running liquid? How is the color/paint affected visually by its neighboring "colors"? Gauguin once said that 1 kilogram of green is greener than 100 grams of the same green. He's right about that. The larger the painted field and the more paint applied, the more you feel that the color surrounds and overwhelms you. In Campau's "pictures," you cannot stand just there and study the color with your gaze at a safe distance, as if it were one field within one framed painting. No, Campau's works and colors simply have to be perceived and experienced with the whole body. You could drown inside her colors.

In one of Campau's important works, *The Well*, from 2006, the viewer or the person taking part in a meeting is surrounded and stimulated by the all-encompassing yellow color. This site specific installation was created for the *Salen* [The Hall] inside Kunsthallen Gl. Strand (in Copenhagen), a room which a changing roster of artists were invited, in turn, to try their hands at converting into a total art work. Ruth Campau conceived her work as a conference room. And indeed, sitting there and brainstorming right in the center of this room would be truly inspiring and energy generating, in the midst of all the warmth and all the tactile and optical lusciousness. You edged your way along the wall surrounding the circular-shaped shell, where the lines – for one time's sake in the context of Campau's production – were running horizontal and seemingly formed circles. Then you found an opening in the imagined circle that revealed itself, rather, to be the beginning of a spiral and you stepped forward, with a sense of being profoundly welcome, into a concentrated space of yellowish light, with fine yellow leather upholstering a bench running all the way around the circumference of the space, a circular table and, hanging down from the stucco rosette in the ceiling (which must originally have been intended for holding a crystal chandelier in place) one more circular plate with a number of glasses and carafes at the top, filled with clear-colored liquids. The light played on as the body and the mind were soothed.

Campau takes delight in examining what effects particular colors can have on us. As we consider different people in turn, colors can take effect in different individual ways, of course. That being said, when positioned in the Nordic region, *The Well* presumably always fulfills a latent need for sun and warmth, if only through the use of yellow – yellow in generous quantities, in different materials and giving rise to different sensory impressions of something fluid, something translucent, something immaterial and something firm. It was always for me hard to leave this installation, this well-designed frame around people's lives. I have to say that I still miss it.

In her latest works, something new has been activated. In a work like *TWINKLER*, from 2008, which is now part of ARKEN's collection, thanks to a donation from The New Carlsberg Foundation, the painted acrylic plate has been sliced up into a number of tapering, triangular-shaped acrylic plates. These have then been assembled into a dynamic star-like form that is half lying on the floor and half raised up against the wall. The composition or installation establishes an absorbing vanishing point right there where the wall meets the floor. It's as though the scrupulously constructed system is being shattered. For many years, Campau has been raising her already-painted plates up in order to show us the vertical stripes in the horizontal extension. Campau's play of lines has always mirrored the body's primary axes of orientation – parallel to and running crosswise with respect to the vector of the planet's gravitational pull, which holds sway over us at all times. But now, all at once, the whole affair becomes far more complicated. Our sensory impulses are almost exploding. Everyone who is familiar with Campau's works is being set into a tizzy. The room and the energy are cast out in all directions: The Big Bang.

Campau's art works are like mirrors. For one thing, the acrylic plates' smooth surfaces reflect the light, the surroundings and sometimes even the viewer's body as it moves around them, in front of them, alongside them, inside them and right through them. For another, the works reflect something deep inside the viewer and the human being. They awaken and they clarify our sense about those fundamental perceptual- and comprehension-implements that guide our perception and our conceptualization: namely, time and space.

Movement unifies time and space in all the vectors and forces that we perceive around and within us. Campau's works materialize the movement of the artist's body. They mirror and they activate the viewer's body. They reflect the very bodily coordinates. And couldn't it be that the mental area, which is sometimes regarded as non-physical, is also deeply connected with these coordinates and actually has its source in time and space? Time and space accordingly constitute the point of origin for any and all sensing, experiencing, thinking and feeling.

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN