

Transparency and presence

by Trine Ross, art historian and art critic

In her art works, Ruth Campau manages to bring forth a new form of unity between traditional antipoles like line and color, standstill and motion, body and intellect. For this reason, there are always at least two ways of relating to her works, corresponding precisely with the manner in which the works themselves are incessantly unfolding themselves and redoubling. On the one side, we have the linear course, rigorous and most often monochrome, on the other, we have the tactile, present and surprising.

The orderly movement of the line, which is so characteristic of Campau's efforts, has a long history, both in her own output and in art history. But even though the straight lines might, at first glance, trigger associations with the minimalism of the 1960s, there is something else and something more going on in Campau's pieces. The brushstroke is, as a matter of fact, far from being mechanical – quite the contrary. Each and every stroke has been painted by hand and thus becomes a trail of the body's movement and reach without necessarily giving rise, on this account, to a situation of expressionism as we know it from, among others, the American abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock (1912-1956).

Still, Campau does have something in common with Pollock when it comes to the actual execution of the work. For Campau also lays her work flat on the floor during the process of working with the piece, a process that requires total concentration because there's no chance to correct or change anything afterwards. Moreover, for both Campau and Pollock, the performative execution of the work takes on the character of a ritual, an encapsulated state, where everything has to do with movement that is being frozen in every single stroke. Campau herself says that working on the piece has to feel like breathing, rhythmic, natural, focused – but at the same time something that you do without

even thinking about it.

The result is a painting that is at once unique and can be repeated, redoubled and multiplied, endlessly. And even when you look at a section of this endless painting, you can sense its potential for incessant expansion, almost as if we were dealing with fractals. But what we have here is not a matter of mathematics, for in the repetition of the stroke, there are always small displacements that are transpiring, as is always the case whenever there's something that has to do with human beings. In this way, repetition brings forth change and even though the painting can be continued indefinitely, this pertains exclusively, in the purely physical sense, to the work's breadth since its height is determined by the artist's body and, with this, by her reach.

It is this reach and the movement dictated by this reach that we recognize – altogether instinctively – when standing in front of Campau's works, which entails that we are being met by something that, theoretically speaking, should not be possible: a non-figurative work that describes our own body. In some of her works, Campau activates the body even more, as can be seen in “Naphthol Red Light 419” from 2001, where the red paint has actually been applied to the back side of the acrylic plates in such a way that the surface remains glossy and reflective – and thus reflects both the space and the viewer. With its almost overwhelming presence, this piece lies in exquisite and innovative extension of Pollock's friend and colleague Barnett Newman's series, “Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue”, from the 1960s.

But Campau does not stop there. Instead, she further ripens her mode of expression by drawing on traditions from both collage and ready-mades, which she, in turn, goes about working with in her very own way – and with fabulous results. She starts out by cutting the painted acrylic sheets into pieces, only to put them together as distinctive crystals, as can be seen in her work, “Pearl”, from

2011, which simultaneously heralds yet another grasp on the part of the artist, namely the use of corners. And precisely by allowing the work to sidle its way into and around such a corner, Campau is adding yet another layer of mirroring, inasmuch as the work has now come to reflect not only the space and the viewer, but also itself.

The dissolution of the space is emphasized in the floor piece, “Carpet” (2010), while the wall surfaces, the corners and the floor are all involved, activated and joyfully displaced in both “Linear Connection” (2010) and the gigantic “You Too Can Be a Superhero” (2010). What is happening at the same time is that the work has left the wall from which we’re so used to seeing it hanging and has gone off and moved its way in several different directions. It’s already very exciting, on its terms, to experience this but once again Campau has even more to offer, for when a vertical wall section of a work converges with a portion that extends across the floor, what arises is a straight horizon line – right there, where they meet – that evokes a surprising reference to landscape painting.

In addition, if we take Campau’s movement of the line into consideration, a course of movement that comes, in the twinkling of an eye, close to engendering a sense of perspective, as well as the fact that the mirrorings are constantly undergoing changes, it can rightly be said that she has managed to activate all four dimensions – and to activate the viewer, who is set in motion. For not only are all the reflections obviously being altered, all according to the angle from which one contemplates them. There is also something that is going on with the colors that depends on the angle of viewing. This entails that the viewer ends up constructing something that resembles a dance performed in front of the work, simply to get hold of it all, and, in doing so, comes to call to mind nothing short of Jackson Pollock himself, who actually looked like he was dancing when he was busy executing his pieces.

What can also be captured as mirroring in Campau's works is the limitless outdoor space, as can be seen in "Satellite" (2012), which was exhibited at the National Museum of Denmark. Once again, familiar elements are being collocated and juxtaposed here in ways that incite the viewer to see them anew while, at the same time, the mirror surfaces appear to be trying to intercept bits of information from outer space. In this way, "Satellite" points back to its source of inspiration: The National Museum's viking ship, which in its own time was the implement for meeting the strangers, the new materials and the future. Today, archaeologists often make use of satellites when they need to examine our past. Accordingly, Campau's work not only establishes a point of departure for an aesthetic experience but also for an extensive array of intellectual reflections.

The same can be said about Campau's ongoing examination of the relationship between transparency and color, between presence and transformation, which finds its powerful manifestation in those works where she fills diverse forms of glass containers with colored liquids. Campau has an unusually keen eye for the aesthetic aspect, which turns the still-life arrangements into a veritable delight for the senses. At the same time, these arrangements reciprocally throw the glass's and the fluids' characteristics into relief. Both the various glass surfaces and the various fluids are, to be sure, translucent, albeit in markedly different guises; on the other hand, the containers remain essentially unchanged while the liquids evaporate and become transformed from a liquid state to colored dust.

And thus one can regard these works as a distinctive updating of the 1600s' "Memento Mori" or *Vanitas* works, which are supposed to remind all of us about everything's inevitable transitoriness and mortality. However, they are just as much a probing of the interaction between time and object, on a more tangible level, seeing as Campau, in these works, is working actively and innovatively with transparency as expression and material. And as is so characteristic of Ruth

Campau, the result is all at once aesthetic yet thought-provoking, present yet undergoing transformation flux, unique yet a part of a larger artistic project.

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN