



19 Questions for "Electronic" Artist Jim Campbell

by Ashton Cooper 31/03/14 10:08 AM EDT

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"Jim Campbell: Rhythms of Perception," at the Museum of the Moving Image, is the artist's first solo museum exhibition in New York.

(Courtesy of Charles Villyard / San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

Name: [Jim Campbell](#)

Age: 58

Occupation: Artist

City/Neighborhood: San Francisco

Your recently opened show at the Museum of the Moving Image is your first solo show at a New York museum. For that you are showing a never-exhibited new work — a digital self-portrait. What is that work like?

The title is "Self-Portrait in Positive Light." It's a bit hard to describe. I started with a black and white photographic self-portrait, just a standard close up self-portrait. I carved that image based on the photograph into a three-dimensional block of resin. So what you end up with is a relief, if you will, of my face. This is the tricky part that is hard to describe — the relief represents the light variations in the photograph, it doesn't represent the three-dimensional image of my face. In other words, my eyebrows, for example — if it was a natural relief of my face, my eyebrows would be on the surface of the relief coming out a little further. However, in this work, because the 3D-ness of it is based on light, the eyebrows go in because they're darker. Darker things in the photograph are pulled into the relief, and brighter things come out. You end up with this odd, interesting face that is slightly confusing because of the direction things are going, but it's really a portrait of the light. And then this resin is animated from behind. This resin also has one of my low-resolution LED panels behind it that has an image presented through it because the resin is translucent.

Your show of new works at Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery features your sculptural light installations. Do you take any inspiration from minimalism or light and space?

Perhaps in the way that the viewer interacts with the sculpture or the light?

Yes, absolutely. To be really honest that hasn't been a conscious inspiration, generally speaking. But I started, really, with information. I started reducing the amount of information I use to represent something to the viewers. As that information gets less and less, I would almost call it "informational minimalism." I have been inspired both consciously and unconsciously by, for example, James Turrell's work.

You are often described as a New Media artist. What does that term mean to you?

It doesn't mean anything to me, to be really honest. Part of me still thinks of slide projectors as being new media. For me, I call myself an electronic artist. I work with electronics. Mostly, more recently, I work with light. New Media is too broad because technology is so out there that to call anything that uses technology New Media has no meaning anymore. I guess what it means is that it's not old media. It's not painting and static sculpture.

What project are you working on now?

I just finished Bryce's show in New York and now I'm kind of catching up on things. I just finished a five-year-long project, a public art project at the San Diego Airport. It's a 700-foot long sculpture in the concourse of terminal 2 there. It consumed me for a number of years so it's nice to be doing smaller, more intimate work again. I have another gallery show at my gallery, Hosfelt Gallery, in San Francisco coming up in September. I'm also working on a couple public art projects.

Do you prefer to do public art? Do you get a lot of people asking you to do it?

I prefer to do both. I feel like public art has different demands that I don't always like, but I think they keep me from getting too involved with my own thing. With public art you have to think about how people are going to respond to it, and the general public. It's a nice way of not becoming too elitist or too self-referential. On the other hand, it does have all these limitations because of that. I certainly wouldn't give up doing the other work. I really like the balance.

What's the last show that you saw?

The last show I traveled to see, and maybe the last show I saw period, was James Turrell's work at LACMA.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

I think his show surprised me even though I knew what I was getting into, because I saw works that I hadn't seen before. In particular, the larger scale, completely engulfing works that typically can't show except in major museums. It was the first time I'd seen a large show of his. Let me put it this way: the experience was unique as it is sometimes in his works. Kind of a unique life experience, you're never in those circumstances in any other moments, and so it was a unique experience. I'm not sure I'd call it a surprise.

Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.

I get up, I typically — except before a show — make breakfast for my daughter and drive her to school. I make her lunch, again if it's not before a show. I have a studio converted garage in my backyard and walk to that and I do work in that, kind of private more solo work. Then I drive over to my larger studio that is about two miles away and I check in with my four, five, or six constantly changing employees to see what they're working on, give guidance, have some arguments about how things are going. I talk to my studio manager and basically manage. When I need to get work done I come back to my garage studio. Typically there are two things that happen in regard to creating work and they both happen in my backyard studio. One is electronic design because I design all the electronics in my work myself. My background is electrical engineering so I'm constantly designing new circuitry to do new things. And then the second part of that is, I guess I would put towards content. I work on content. I'll go film something or we'll set up a film shoot, go shoot something to put into one of my low-resolution displays. So it's split kind of back and forth between the hard-core electronic design and then the creation of the final work where I merge the imagery that I'm thinking about into the display

device, the custom electronics.

Do you make a living off your art?

I do. I have since about 10 years, maybe a bit more.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

Well, I shouldn't say computer. Let's see. It's probably — other than my computer — it's what's called an oscilloscope, which is a way of measuring electronic circuitry to figure out how to make it work the way you want it to work.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

I don't always like this but typically there are two aspects to my work that I just described. There's the structural form and then there's what goes within that structural form. And if you've looked at some of my work you've seen the low-resolution displays. Sometimes I'll have ideas for this new way of displaying an image and then I'll have to look for the image that will go with that. That's a common way that I work. Sometimes it works the other way where I'll have something in my head for a long time, content, and it will finally make sense with a medium. That's actually what the new work at Museum of the Moving Image is. I've been wanting to do this kind of emerging face for many years and I've finally figured out a way to do it. My ideas build up. Some of the works I've done recently have actually been in my head for like six years or 10 years, maybe. So I basically have this constant backlog. So my ideas recently are just going into that backlog and progressing from where I was. If you look at Bryce's show, there are a couple things in that show that I would say are part of that progression. Mostly, generally speaking, I've been a 2D person, but for the last couple years and then really in Bryce's show, I've been going really more towards 3D.

And the other thing in Bryce's show that I've been thinking about — and for me is the strongest work in the show — is color. Historically, 99 percent of the stuff I've done has been in black and white just because I feel like I understand it well and typically I like it more. So I'm exploring color and that's fascinating for me.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

That is a good story. I never had a show, I couldn't get a show at any gallery in San Francisco. I tried for years unsuccessfully. I did a show myself with a friend. We rented a space in the poorest part of San Francisco called the Tenderloin, and we put up a show ourselves. And the curator from the Museum of Modern Art here came to the show. Bob Riley. He put me in his next show at the museum and the most important collector, Don Fisher, who started the Gap — recently passed away — who has probably the most important collection in San Francisco, bought that first work that I showed at the museum.

What year was that?

The show in the Tenderloin was 1988, the show at the museum was 1990. On the other hand, I tried for three years. I tried for a long time to get shows in galleries and they didn't show my work until I showed in the museum. So the museum at that point was willing to take more of a risk, if you will, than the galleries.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

In New York it seems to be Bottino, but I'm not sure it's my favorite. It's just where we end up going a lot in Chelsea. In San Francisco, there is a bar called Blooms in Potrero Hill.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

No, I'm afraid not. I'm a workaholic.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

I can't tell you the name of it but it's an Alan Rath piece. Alan Rath was an electronic artist. It uses a CRT, cathode ray tube, from an old TV set and a diffusing kind of fogged up mirror. It's gorgeous.

What would you do to get it?

I don't collect. I would like to live with it, but I'm not a passionate collector.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

I've been to Venice but never for the Biennale. I think that would be fun.

Who's your favorite living artist?

Maybe it's James Turrell.

What are your hobbies?

My hobbies... I don't have any hobbies and I say that because I'm either working or with my daughter, my family, and so I kind of go back and forth between those two things.



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