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## ART / OTTAWA

# Late video artist's captivating characters showing at the CUAG

by EMMA BROWN on Jan 17, 2012 • 1:27 pm

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The characters in Colin Campbell's *People Like Us* video exhibition displaying at the Carleton University Art Gallery until Jan. 29 are so captivating they seem real.

Campbell, who died at the age of 59, brings richly captivating and believable characters to his work.

"I think YouTube and forums like that are really challenging artists to be as interesting as what everyday life can be in video," said Jon Davies, curator of the retrospective exhibition.

Campbell is one of the pioneers of video art both in Canada and internationally. He has a huge legacy of artists who were influenced by the techniques he used, said CUAG education and outreach assistant Fiona Wright.

His work can be used to trace the development of video art from its beginnings in the '70s onward, Davies said.

Davies said Campbell was a huge part of the different movements within video art. Campbell started off by using the camera as a mirror and then began creating characters and playing with narrative conventions, he said.

Campbell used a variety of different storytelling techniques in his videos. He experimented with this new form of art from the 1970s until his death in 2001, Davies said.

Although the characters depicted in Campbell's work are fictional they are deeply compelling. *The People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* exhibition shows people — wounded and struggling to figure out life amidst the chaos.

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The exhibition is laid out in a large room with television screens scattering the walls. Everywhere you look there is another face, another story.

"[His characters] were cobbled together from his observations of real people," Davies said. "Somehow he was able to take all of these observations and put them together into these extremely memorable characters."

The strength of these characters compelled Davies to present the videos on screens the size of people so that "when you walk into the room it would be like observing a roomful of different people having conversations with each other," he said.

Campbell performs most of the characters himself, frequently taking on female roles. He does so with a neutral voice, careful to keep it from becoming tacky. Davies said he doesn't see it as drag because Campbell performs the roles so effortlessly.

One of Campbell's most famous characters, and Davie's favourite, is "The Woman from Malibu," a broken woman struggling to hide her confusion in 1970s Southern California. She hides her identity behind her strange and absurd ramblings.

"I would like to find a pony skeleton," she said in one of the videos. She goes on to explain that other skeletons are too small for her to assemble, but she thinks she would be able to assemble the pony skeleton. Her desire to assemble bones reflects her tragic struggle to "assemble" her own identity. She comes across as stiff and dull, but this absurdity shows she is much more complex.

"She's not the most fun or likeable character but she is incredibly compelling to watch," Davies said.

Campbell's talent is in creating characters who "[take] on lives of their own," who we can all identify with and whose struggles are authentic, he said.

— Photo provided

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