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People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell

Colin Campbell *Modern Love* 1978 Video still

In an age where social networking sites like Facebook have made it possible for users to craft nuanced online personalities and receive near-instantaneous status updates on their friends and acquaintances, it is refreshing to look back to an era when community news travelled through the slower and more intimate means of face-to-face storytelling and old-fashioned gossip. A landmark retrospective of the work of late Toronto-based video artist Colin Campbell at Oakville Galleries does just that, reflecting on the roles of adopted personas and collegial narratives in Toronto's artistic community through the 1970s and 1980s.

Curated by Jon Davies, "People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell" offers a comprehensive overview of the artist's prolific 30-year career as video-maker, mentor, teacher and friend. Campbell was one of the first artists to use video as a narrative medium in the 1970s, creating short and feature-length productions using real and invented characters that disclosed their secrets to the viewer in a variety of costumes and settings. Blurring the lines between truth and falsity, Campbell's personas (Art Star, Woman from Malibu and Robin among his more famous) disrupted conventional cinematic narratives by making their act of "passing" as another identity abundantly clear. As Davies's exhibition text suggests, a similarly slippery relationship between truth and fiction underscores practices of gossiping: "Gossip is the traffic in unofficial information, a form of makeshift knowledge about people in one's social world and what they get up to."

Outside of his videos, Campbell had an equally active role in the gossip of Toronto's art community. As a founding member of Vtape, the Canadian representative at the 1980 Venice Biennale and an instructor at both the Ontario College of Art and the University of Toronto, Campbell not only collaborated with fellow artists John Greyson, Lisa Steele, and Johanna Householder in the burgeoning mediums of video and performance, but also inspired a subsequent generation of artists that are now moving into the spotlight to tell stories of their own. The work of one such former student, New York-based Gareth Long, who transforms video into physical objects called *Video Solids*, is being shown concurrently at the galleries' Gairloch Gardens location in the solo show "Second, Third, Fourth."

Accompanied by a special symposium on the performance of gender in contemporary art organized through the University of Toronto, a DVD box set of Campbell's work being published by Vtape and plans to tour the exhibition nationally, "People Like Us" promises to bring renewed interest to the pioneer video-maker whose gossip still manages to turn heads in the 21st century. (120 Navy St, Oakville ON)

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