

Toying with boundaries of reality and fiction; Idea of gossip explored in retrospective of the late Canadian artist Colin Campbell's work

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Colin Campbell shared this instinct and the response to it. It's in every role assumed by the great Canadian video artist - he died in 2001 after losing his battle with cancer - in "People Like Us The Gossip of Colin Campbell," a retrospective at the Oakville Galleries. It's there in the way Campbell's role-playing inevitably lets the viewer in on the irony and satire.

The idea of gossip also suggests Campbell's centrality within Toronto's artistic community - "gossip is what coheres an art scene," [Jon Davies] notes. Like Milk, Campbell knew how to make alliances. For years, his partner was Lisa Steele, another video pioneer. Gossip is the "form and the content of Campbell's work," Davies goes on. "Gossip is also tinged by the ambivalence of not knowing where it is true or false - it is both - and this playful disregard for the boundaries of reality and fiction was key to Campbell's art."

FULL TEXT

Early on in the film Milk, San Francisco gay activist Harvey Milk (Sean Penn) wins over a crowd of burly, hostile-looking union guys when he says, "I left my high heels at home."

In this somewhat understated scene, director Gus Van Sant shows how Milk's openness, wit and humanity instinctively led him to believe the same in others and that they would respond to him in similar fashion.

Colin Campbell shared this instinct and the response to it. It's in every role assumed by the great Canadian video artist - he died in 2001 after losing his battle with cancer - in "People Like Us The Gossip of Colin Campbell," a retrospective at the Oakville Galleries. It's there in the way Campbell's role-playing inevitably lets the viewer in on the irony and satire.

The Oakville screenings reiterate much from an earlier retrospective, "Colin Campbell Media Works 1972-1990," organized in 1990 by the National Gallery of Canada and the Winnipeg Art Gallery (the artist was born in Reston, Man., in 1942), which included the Power Plant here in 1991 as one of its stops.

But this notion of a show-within-a-show reflects Campbell's own awareness of the role within any role he played. This is evident in Dishevelled Destiny (2000), one of his last works, which replays portions of Sackville, I'm Yours (1972). Shot while Campbell was teaching at Mount Allison University in Sackville N.B., Sackville, I'm Yours is one of the groundbreaking works in Canadian video and filmmaking.

(An aside Campbell has to also be credited with one of the niftier throw-away lines in Canadian film when his frightfully be-wigged Woman from Malibu character in Hollywood and Vine (1977) says in passing, "I almost ran over Liza Minnelli today." Like many of the best video artists, Campbell was a terrific writer.)

Sackville marks the debut of Campbell's role as Art Star, a devilishly handsome, well-connected artist - "Art Bank, of course, is a good friend of mine," Star says - who simply can't say enough fabulous things about the hick town he left behind. Why, Sackville has "a great dump."

Dishevelled Destiny finds Campbell back in Sackville - now being shaken by some mysterious tremor - only this time as snooty, beret-wearing Serious Artist, which should be taken as a dig at Alex Colville, a one-time Sackville resident. Then there's his Colleeta Sackville West, a fluttering art-spinster. In both figures we find an older,

increasingly droll Campbell "playing a fantasized version" of himself, writes Oakville retrospective curator Jon Davies in an email.

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In Snip Snip (1981), Campbell "plays" Mary Brown, one-time Ontario film censor who, backed by a snack-nibbling female jury, watches Lesbian Picnic, a torrid European sex flick that we never do get to see. For Campbell, it would have been a snap to diminish Brown. Yet through his suggestion that she was getting turned on by what she was snipping only served to humanize the censor.

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WHAT "People Like Us The Gossip of Colin Campbell"

WHERE Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, 120 Navy St., Oakville

WHEN To Feb. 22

Credit: SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Illustration

Caption: Colin Campbell in a production still from the video, The Temperature in Lima (1976). Gossip is the "form and the content of Campbell's work," says Oakville retrospective curator Jon Davies.

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