



Rain, volcanoes, mist-shrouded islands: Seattle artist Jennifer Campbell focuses on a number of key Northwest icons in her current exhibition of landscape-based video and photography. Not content to merely observe, Campbell literally inserts herself into the natural setting, and the results are both engaging and surprising.

Volcanoes, gentle rain, rugged chains of evergreen islands – the lure of our region’s environment is why many of settled here in the first place. The Northwest landscape is a powerful daily presence in our lives, but responding to it presents artists with a dilemma. Those who focus entirely on unspoiled nature can seem willfully oblivious of pollution, development, and urban sprawl; those who highlight the corrosive presence of man can overlook the still-considerable power of the Cascadian landscape to overwhelm, impress, and inspire.

Jennifer Campbell pursues a third path. Though all of the five pieces in her small but stellar current exhibition feature dramatic landscape settings, the artist herself is the real subject of her work. An extension of earlier projects which used her own body as a way to explore physical and metaphoric boundaries, the current show features Ms. Campbell inserting herself into the natural environment as a participant, rather than an observer or intruder.

In each piece in the show, Campbell records her attempt to literally become a part of the landscape she occupies; her struggle to become one with nature is both epic and silly by turns, and sometimes, both at once. It helps that she’s a trained gymnast, as each work hinges on a central physical (as well as metaphorical) performance, jumping over the camera in the photograph where her puffy slippers become part of a group of clouds; launching herself from a table to blur somehow into a still-image rainbow.

Ms. Campbell knows how to not wear out her welcome; the three video works in the show neatly sidestep the self-indulgence and bloated timing that are often associated with the genre. Her video works are modest in their technique, engagingly presented, and not a moment too long.

Each of the three videos is also strikingly different in mood and overall affect. Eruption is comic, Precipitate lyrical, and Point No Point elegiac; if there were musical sound tracks (which, fortunately, there are not), one could imagine the accompaniment being Alt Rock, Debussy, and Barber, respectively.

Eruption, the “funny” video, takes place in a sunny, summery meadow in Mt. Rainier National Park, with the Mountain itself looming large in the background. The sequence is, on one level, a sort

of send-up of disaster movies and their ever- more-sophisticated special effects. From a fixed-camera positioned some distance away, we see the tank-topped artist hauling various pieces of equipment from an off-stage cache, including what look like several small motors and a floppy length of silvery flexible ventilation hose. The artist does not acknowledge our presence, but is frowningly focused on various mundane tasks, like hooking up an extension cord, or taping together lengths of the silver hose. The effect is that of peeking backstage just before the performance begins.

Finally the camera pans past the artist and zooms in on Mt. Rainier; the next moment the artist's bare, muscle-straining arm appears in the foreground, supporting the thick hose as it begins to belch thick white smoke precisely in alignment with the summit. We watch the faux-eruption as it waxes and wanes, the wind blowing the smoke first one way, then the other.

Campbell amusingly dramatizes the contrast between her crude attempts at simulation and the implacable power of the mountain, existing at another level of time and space. She also spoofs our desire to domesticate that which we cannot possibly control.

The video *Precipitate* is the shortest and the most original of the group. Here the artist again appears center-stage, but this time suspended in the air in the midst of a grove of trees, spouting water in the form of a human fountain. As in *Eruption*, the tools are simple – she wears a full-body wet suit with a lawn sprinkler somehow attached - but the effect is spectacular. In one sequence she stands upright on a tall tree stump, her image digitally doubled, right to left, while water seems to spout from her head. In a second short sequence, she swings from a rope supported precariously by her feet on the left and her hands on the right, while with her free limbs she directs another lawn sprinkler towards the ground. These shots are played out in slow motion, with one half running backwards, so the curling tendrils of water are sucked into the sprinkler in one view, sprayed outwards in the other.

One's first impression is of a mysterious, black piñata having sprung many leaks, and even after the image comes into better focus we can't shake off the sense of something terribly odd, almost sacrificial, about this woodland event. The artist's body seems passive, entrapped, like a vehicle for something else; perhaps this is a metaphor for the body as a vessel, endowed with a life energy that passes through us and ultimately shatters us, while the energy itself continues to cycle through the natural world.

*Point No Point* is both the last video we encounter, and an appropriate summation of the exhibition as a whole. Here the artist makes her strongest case for the power of art as a source – like nature – of spiritual uplift and self-knowledge.

Somewhere on the Northwest coast it is a grey and misty day. The artist appears with a wet suit and backpack, wading out into increasingly deep waters, finally reaching nearly to her shoulders. At that point Campbell locates what must be a submerged rock, tall enough that she can climb atop it and have the water at her feet. We watch her fumble with her pack, and remove something bright and flashing. Finally, she arranges the lamp above her– a white version of the blinking light atop emergency vehicles – striking a classic, symmetrical pose with the lamp poised on her head, secured by her two arms like matching brackets. The camera slowly draws back, leaving her solitary figure alone on its rock, the water below her lighting up and then darkening as the rotating bulb flashes and extinguishes. We are witnessing here a transformation from Performer to Symbol. The rich associations we have with lanterns, statues, and female personifications of wisdom, allows for many possible interpretations, while the sense of abandoning Campbell on her solitary rock leaves us in a wistful, almost mournful mood.

Earlier videos posted by Campbell on her website flirt with being hermetic and overly self-involved. These new works, opened out by her engagement with the landscape, offer us a bracing encounter with someone whose lyrical vision can meet the intimidating spectacle of the Northwest landscape on its own terms, with a result that enriches our perception of both.

Gary Faigin