A watercolor illustration of various botanical specimens, including stems, leaves, and a flower, rendered in soft, blended colors like green, blue, purple, and red. The style is delicate and artistic, with visible brushstrokes and color bleeding.

Science Meets Poetry

Naomi Campbell relies on a loose, gestural approach and the mutable properties of watercolor to suggest both the specific and the ephemeral.

BY JOHN A. PARKS



Naomi Campbell's art is inspired by her love of science and her fascination with modern technology. Faced with a world awash in information—and intrigued by new techniques in genetic engineering and brain research—the artist finds herself meditating on the issues that advancements in science present to us all. Can climate change be controlled? How will genetically modified crops affect food availability? What does it mean to the human brain if we spend vast amounts of time playing video games? “My painting subjects predominantly confront environmental, economic and social issues about which I’ve always felt strongly,” the artist says.

The Need to Expand

To find ways to express her feelings about the world, Campbell has expanded beyond her work as a watercolorist to build art installations designed around various social and scientific issues. “It seems logical to move on to find other things to help express where I am in the world,” she says. “You have to change with the world. For me, that’s what it means to be alive. There are pressing circumstances facing us. How can I be silent? I cannot contain myself just to paint. I feel the need to expand.”

Some of her projects have featured glass, X-ray displays, welded steel, corn kernels and charred incense. As current resident artist in the genetic engineering department at Columbia University in New York, she’s privy to new research not only in genetics but also in neuroscience. But even among these diverse projects and responsibilities, Campbell maintains a bedrock interest in watercolor.



ALL PHOTOS BY JIIN AHN

A Footprint on Paper

In response, she has produced paintings such as *Does Not Accept Words* (on page 00), which uses the actions of the medium to suggest an affinity with microscopic biological structures. By using a free, gestural approach and allowing the watercolor to move, flood and pool in an open manner, Campbell’s work partakes of some of the very forces of nature that power the life forms in which scientists are interested.

While Campbell’s work as a watercolorist led her to experiments in installation art and multimedia presentations, this broadened approach has informed her thinking about the nature of watercolor.



“Watercolor is no longer a medium relegated to subjects of Fragile Flowers or delicate biological renderings. For me, watercolor has evolved into its own distinct language.”

Two mirrors are attached to **Sitting in the Desert Tray** (watercolor on paper, metal, mirror, adhesive, wood and paint, 19x29x13), allowing multiple views of the image that shift as the viewer moves.

On previous pages:

Campbell exploits the natural movement of water and paint to take on almost biological properties in response to her interest in the science of evolution in **Another Side Order of Origin of Species** (watercolor on paper, 8¼x11¼).



Watching for Trees to Fall (triptych; watercolor on paper, 8x27) is a response to the artist's interest in an international seed bank devoted to retaining the genetic diversity of the world's trees.

Pieces of stained glass are suspended above the painting in progress, creating extremely vibrant color in **Praying for Rain** (opposite; C-print, 20x30).

science fare

While Campbell's work is inspired by contemporary advances in science and technology, it's worth comparing her approach to artists of previous generations who also were involved with science. In fact, art and science share a long relationship.

Piero della Francesca (Italian, 1417-1492) was an avid mathematician who published several treatises on the subject. Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519) made extensive observations of the forces of nature and designed a multitude of devices to harness them in various ways. John Constable (English, 1776-1837) became so interested in the structure of cloud formations that he began to contribute papers to the Royal Meteorological Society. Each of these artists engaged the natural world as scientists, exploring and investigating their subjects.

Campbell's work, by contrast, doesn't engage in analysis but instead seeks to express a response to the discoveries of modern science and point to the effects they may have on the world. "I believe my approach to painting can be summed up as this: Every action sets up a series of subactions to affect an endpoint that may possibly exist as an infinity," she says. "This discovery of actions and ideas along the way becomes my painting and art practice."

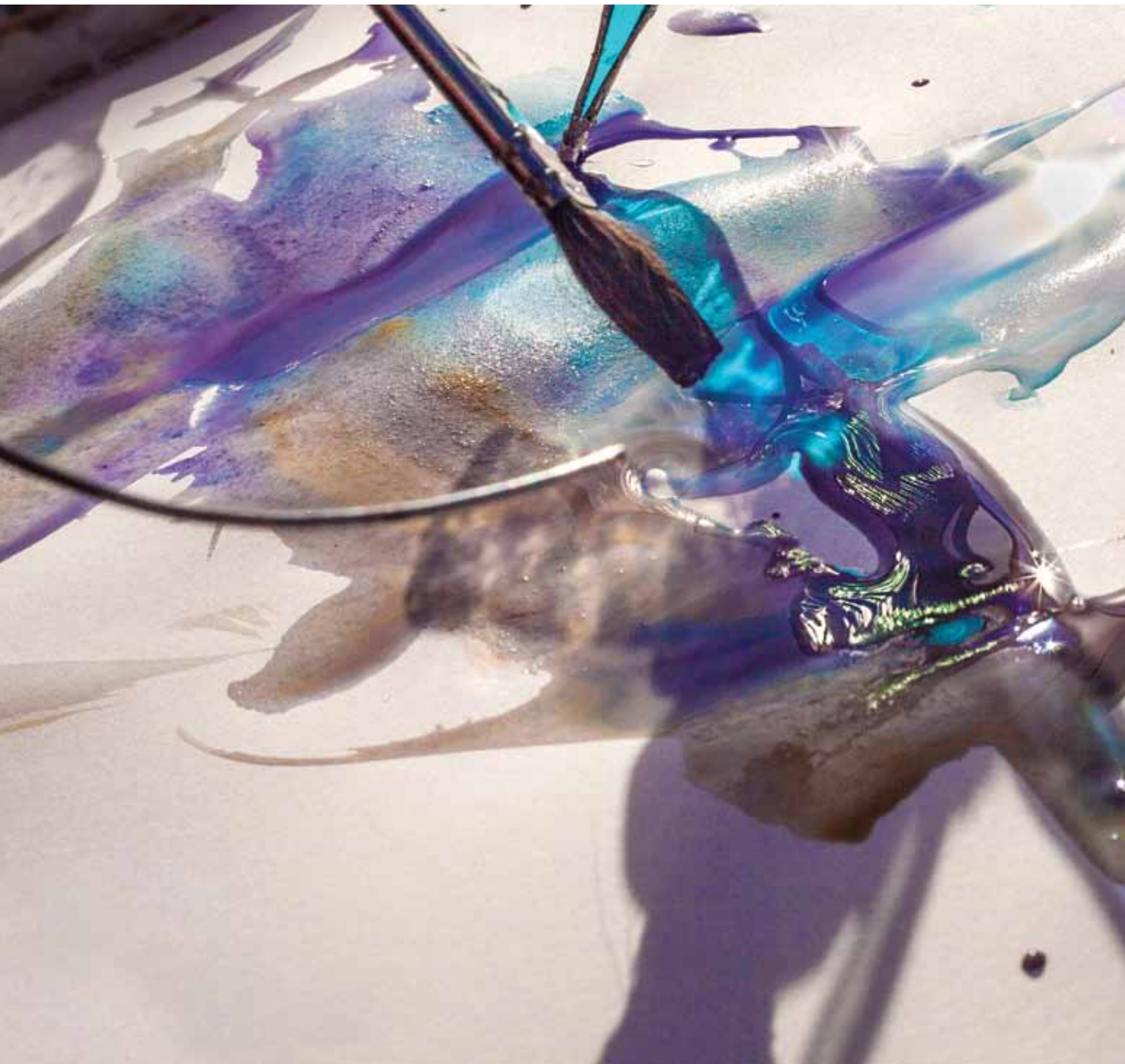
Like most watercolorists, she appreciates the way in which the medium leaves a history of the artist's marks and movements. "Watermedia leaves behind a footprint on the paper's surface that's clearly visible, recording the slightest hesitation in a stroke," Campbell says. "This mapping of paint left for the viewer to scrutinize makes the mark-making process a kind of public expression. This transposes the act of painting to a transitory form of expression that's not necessarily a means to an end. I use this process to open up an inner dialogue between form and memory, and light and time."

The H₂O of Watercolor

Campbell notes that the quality and feel of watercolor are dependent on the properties of water itself. "Philosophers and scientists alike have recognized and explained the essential nature of water," she says. "It exists as one of the sources of life. Water, which is both cataclysmic and life-giving, is often aligned with mystical aspects in cultures and with the world of science.

"The dichotomy of transparent washes always has been compelling to me, capable of both sensitive and unmistakable power," Campbell continues. "Watercolor is no longer a medium relegated to subjects of fragile flowers or delicate biological renderings. For me, watercolor has evolved into its own distinct language."





Poetic Responses

Campbell's watercolors don't impart any information about the subjects in which she's interested. Rather, she sees them as free and poetic responses to a stimulus. She hopes that by presenting them in the context of a body of work inspired by a particular subject, they'll generate discussion and interest about the issues at hand.

The triptych, *Watching for Trees to Fall* (on page 00), for instance, emerges from her interest in seed banks that maintain specimens of rare

plant strains in the interest of protecting biodiversity. While there's a sense that the elements in the painting might be falling over, the work remains essentially abstract and generalized.

If anything, the watercolors seem to hark back to the biomorphism of 20th-century artists ranging from Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866-1944) to Roberto Matta (Chilean, 1911-2002) and Arshile Gorky (Armenian-American, 1904-1948). In these works, paint formations seem to share characteristics with life forms viewed under the microscope.



Blue light is transmitted through glass onto paper buckling with watercolor. The moment is photographed as **Does Not Accept Words** (watercolor on paper, 6x8¼).

Dripping, flooding and spontaneous handling allow the watercolor to take on its most characteristic qualities in **A Game of Warriors** (at left; C-print, 20x30).

Reflection and Refraction

Campbell recently has begun to explore the relationship of watercolor and light in a novel way. To do this, she has incorporated pieces of glass into her work to reflect and refract light and color. Her interest in glass formulated when she was commissioned to make a large stained glass installation for a New York City Subway station in 2003. The East Tremont Avenue stop is situated near the Bronx Zoo, so Campbell made colorful compositions that playfully included references to its animal species and foliage.

During the two years it took her to complete the installation, Campbell worked closely with stained glass technicians and learned that glass and watercolor have a lot in common: Both media deal in transparencies and often present uneven layering and blending of color. “The qualities of watercolor and how it translates into glass as an ephemeral medium are what entice me,” she says. “One is a solid, one is liquid. Both change when you work with them.”

In her new work, Campbell has been painting while using pieces of glass to transmit light



onto the surface. She's interested not only in the transformational properties of this kind of light, but also in capturing the action of paint while it's still wet and in motion. "Process is important to me," she says. "All the different moments that occur when you're working can never be collected as a final result. At the end, you only see the altered state."

A Process in Progress

Campbell's solution to capturing process is to take photos of a painting in progress, showing it illuminated and transfigured by colored glass. The results, showing the rich, wet surfaces and soaked paper, are spectacular and evocative.

In *A Game of Warriors* (on page 00), a photo shows a brush moving paint on a wet, buckled paper surface. Blue light, transmitted by stained glass, is creating an almost supernaturally intense blue, while highlights glisten and reflect from the surface.

In *Praying for Rain* (on page 00), light from several pieces of frosted glass illuminates a section of richly soaked watercolor, creating a sense of depth in the layering that would be impossible to obtain in dry watercolor.

By choosing to exhibit a photo of a watercolor in progress instead of the finished object, Campbell has shifted our sense of what a watercolor might be. "It's similar to what



Yield to Oncoming Traffic (watercolor on paper, 8¼x11¼) reflects the artist's responses to nature and science, which are poetic and evocative rather than descriptive or analytic.

Almost abstract, Campbell's works still manage to suggest natural forms, as in **Overcrowded** (below; watercolor on paper, 8¼x11¼).



happens when you see a performance," she says. "When you walk away from it at the end, it's not necessarily the final moment that you take away. It's the imagery from the whole thing that acts on you and can lead to other things."

Campbell's other experiments on the relationship between glass and watercolor have included using the glass as a mirror. In *Sitting in the Dessert Tray* (on page 00), for instance, two pieces of mirrored glass project from the surface of an abstract watercolor, creating an almost Rorschach Test-like formation.

The artist notes that this work changes its appearance as the viewer moves in front of it, providing multiple perceptions of the same

object. "I'm interested in pushing the limits of perception," she says. "I'm presenting different levels of perception, mathematically or otherwise. As you walk by this piece, you see several different things. It becomes not one piece but several. The piece will evolve. A watercolor is really amazing when you get multiple layers. What you see isn't necessarily what you get." ❧

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