

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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TONY LEWIS:

PALL

(5) SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Jacob Fabricius You are working on three solo exhibitions at the moment. The spaces and contexts are quite different, so could you say a few words about the works?

Tony Lewis There are several drawing projects that happen in the studio separately, but they have a proximal rhythm in relation to each other. They tend to feed off each other, but also have enough presence to stand alone. Because of this, I always have several ideas for future exhibitions. Recently I've been interested in using drawings to describe other drawings as a way to contextualize or create a pointed narrative. It's definitely a reflection of an organizational technique in the studio, but also a consideration of how an exhibition layers narratives and different forms of labor that can contradict each other or coalesce. For me, the context between institution and gallery is different, but I still enjoy approaching both with this playful and curious attitude.

JF How do the exhibitions differ from one another?

TL I would like to christen Shane Campbell's new gallery space with a large-scale, graphite monochrome, site-specific floor drawing. It feels like a natural mark to begin with to give a sense of the space itself. The exhibition builds from there.

JF You have done several large-scale floor drawings recently. What is the process?

TL The floor drawings began as a memorial for the first iteration of the kind of studio that I currently occupy. I fell into this environment in graduate school— which proved to be a challenge for the department and for the structure of art education. The graphite couldn't be contained in my studio and crept out into the communal space, which threatened the safety of my peers, and could have potentially affected the air quality. After a meeting with the painting department and janitorial services, it was decided that the studio be cleaned and all the graphite wiped away. This was probably the right decision, but that doesn't mean they weren't killing a living workspace and a method that is a foundation for making drawings.

This took a toll on me, and as a result I began recreating the studio floor in exhibitions as a sort of commemoration for a sense of abrupt loss. Essentially we place paper across the floor of the entire gallery, so as to protect it from the material. We seal the paper with tape and a few thin coats of paint. After it dries, we throw an abhorrent amount of graphite powder down, and begin to rub. It's quite a laborious process, but it has a quick, makeshift quality that makes

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SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

it seem faster. Prior to the exhibition, we sweep and then we vacuum. We let the dust settle, and then we sweep again.

This is to make sure the space is palatable for viewers. There are also shoe covers, and respirators present at the time of the exhibition. One positive outcome I learned from the premature sterilization of my graduate school studio: I realize I prefer a certain level of consideration for the audience—even if it makes them aware of their own neuroses and fear of an omnipresent, slippery, dark, contaminating powder. Given the circumstances, it might be reasonable.

JF How do these floor drawings wear, tear and age?

TL At this point, I'm primarily concerned with them as living things. I'd like to see all of them with a distinct travel log and exhibition history. The erosion involved from the use of makeshift packaging, and the development of various modes of display, has a lasting effect on the drawings and keeps them vigorous and moving until the end of their days. For now I'm interested in the work being born, living, and dying with an exhibition format that feels more like a natural death.

JF On your studio wall you have penciled these words: Power, Movement, Pressure, Free, Weight, and Nomenclature. I believe they are connected to the stenographic body of work. Why did you select these words and how do they relate to your upcoming exhibitions?

TL Language organization in relation to object organization is one way to consider drawings individually, and in relationship to each other. Each drawing is a word, but every word (and every non-word) is a potential drawing—it's just a question of how to harness that potential energy. Instead of appropriating the grammatical system of a sentence, or using a recognizable phrase to organize the work/words,

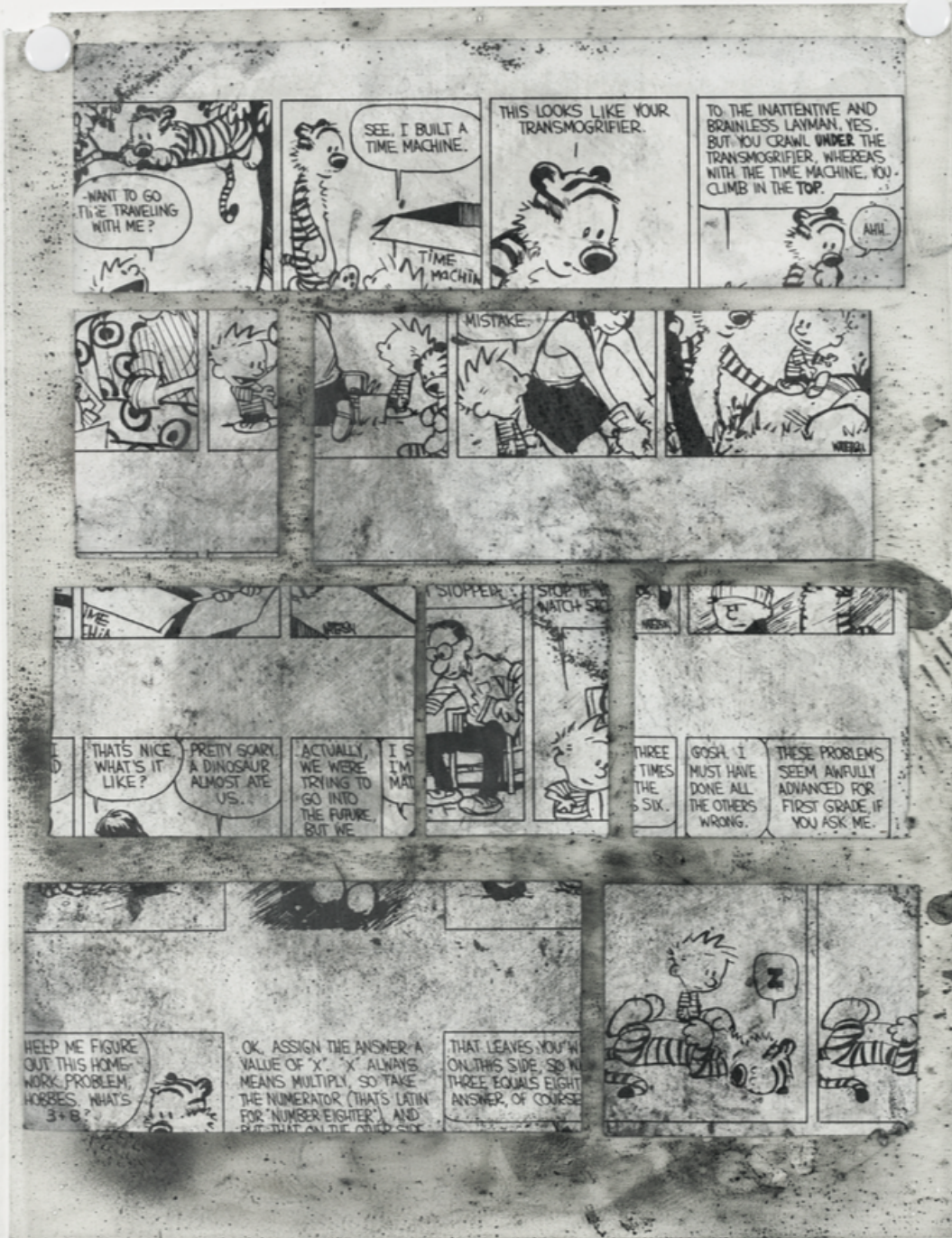
I wanted to gravitate towards a group of nouns/verbs that are independent, have no sequential relationship to each other (as with a linguistic binomial/trinomial), and provide a layered description of studio methods. It's akin to a list or word association more than anything else. Together they actually create the title of a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, which I'm preparing for at the moment. Each of the six words migrated from the studio wall to paper and will be part of a larger exhibition of drawings. All of this considers the making of the drawings from a solely linguistic foundation. However, the work is equally approached through a direct engagement with the surface of the paper where micro-decisions of figure/ground are paramount. A loose hand can reduce drawings to a slurring of words, and language becomes secondary or tertiary.

JF Your approach to language is important. How do books generally influence your works?

TL *Life's Little Instruction Book*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *How to Clean Everything*, and *Gregg Shorthand Manual Simplified* are a few examples of books I use in life, and in the studio. I've always thought of it as less

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SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY



5. Tony Lewis, *Want To Go Time Traveling With Me?* (detail), 2014. Courtesy: the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; and Massimo De Carlo, London/Milan

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of a “taking from” and more of an “adding to.” The drawings often feel like large, scuffed pages that can’t fit inside the book for which they’re intended.

JF *Life’s Little Instruction Book* appears both directly and indirectly throughout your work. What does the book mean to you? How did you come across it, and in what ways have you used it?

TL I found *Life’s Little Instruction Book* in my mother’s bathroom several years ago. It’s a self-help book filled with innocuous inspirational reminders to live a happier life. Initially I had mixed feelings about it. There’s language which I completely agree with and have worked hard to do all my life, but there is also language I find offensive, myopic, staunchly American positivist, and biased towards gender, class, and race. It’s a ridiculous book. This private tension, compounded by the fact that it’s a *New York Times* bestseller translated into 35 different languages, is what I was initially interested in. H. Jackson Brown Jr.’s language is posited as a father coaching his son as he goes off to college, but I think that context quickly dissipates when the book enters my home. Even in a small, non-threatening, plaid-bound pocket book, the language has an overwhelming authority. For one particular drawing project, the format and font of the language within the book is appropriated and represented with loose graphite powder, nails, and rubber bands in a large-scale installation. The presence of the drawing, with its physical aggression, literal tension, and superiority in scale, is the first attempt at getting as close as I can to exploiting the absolute power and aggressive

authority inherent in the language as it lives in the book.

The content in the book also presents confluences of private and public authority; personally developed codes of ethics and ubiquitous, conventional American wisdom; self-governed restraint and imposed societal restraint. The crucial moments are when private and public authoritative languages blend together or feel the same, when there is no authorship over the authority of the declaration, when public authority can dictate a private language, or, more pointedly, when private language can dictate public authority.

JF Could you tell me about the large-scale drawing with nails and rubber bands that will be shown in Basel, Chicago, and Cleveland this summer?

TL The nail and rubber-band drawings are one of four different drawing projects based on *Life’s Little Instruction Book*. Initially it became a way for me to connect studio labor to the illustration of labor, as it relates to a slippery public belief in H. Jackson Brown Jr.’s anthology. The performance of hammering, smudging, and sweating to reach a three-dimensional presence of appropriated language confuses my relationship to it. I have to ask myself, “Wait, do I believe in this?” As I mentioned, for me the illustration of manual labor manifesting as authoritative linguistic aggression is maybe working or maybe failing to equal the inherent authority that already exists in the book.

JF How do you place yourself in relation to Kerry James Marshall, who is also Chicago-

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SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

based, and other strong, political African-American voices?

TL Kerry James Marshall is a monumental artist and teacher. Although he was never directly my teacher, I've been lucky enough to learn from a distance just by watching him do what he does. I'll continue to do that for as long as I can. I feel confident in the maturation of my own mind and heart to make room for an urgent, critical, loving, sadistic, humorous, political, and ultimately dynamic voice. Building from great artists and wonderful people, I hope I ask myself the same questions, more complicated ones, and much easier ones. If you want to discuss identity, or blackness, or effective political voices, we might define them in relationship to broader circumstances and current events. For example, it's hard for me to separate my understanding of blackness from brown-skinned families in Kathmandu, the closing of 49 Chicago public schools, or my education history in Chicago as a student and teacher. These things are as real as the graphite powder and paper in the studio. In 2013, I initially appropriated the language of reminder #112 from *Life's Little Instruction Book* to unpack Rodney King and the L.A. riots as a six-year old and as a twenty-six year old. I inadvertently also had to consider the catalysts for the unrest in Baltimore, Cleveland, and Ferguson through death. This is blackness, sure. But this is systemic reality. Either way, I can't pretend to not worry about things and feel utterly inept as one person. But I do feel that there is agency in doing something or building something that is not completely lost to the wind. There is value in doing even a trivial thing well, and I think that value will always make room.

(Tony Lewis interviewed by Jacob Fabricius. This interview is a shorter excerpt from a book published by Pork Salad Press in August 2015)

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