

Repeat Performance

by Jerry Saltz

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A maniacally choreographed dance of everyday life: Beth Campbell's three-channel video piece, *Same as Me* (2002)

(photo: Robin Holland)

Beth Campbell's art is normal on the outside and batty on the inside—which makes it a little like most of us. That is, its form is ordinary while the amount of self-observation that goes into every work is incredible, if not slightly scary. For her debut show at Roebling Hall in 2000, Campbell made two exact, and I mean exact, renditions of a woman's bedroom. From trash in baskets to clothes piled in corners to butts in ashtrays, everything was arranged precisely the same in both rooms. It was an ego-atomizing, walk-in episode of *The Twilight Zone* by way of Robert Rauschenberg's duplicate 1957 paintings *Factum I* and *Factum II*—an obsessive-compulsive's own private nightmare.

Although flawed by being a bit thin and shoddy-looking, Campbell's second show is as good as her first, maybe better because odder. "Same as Me," as this exhibition is called, has one mesmerizing 15-minute video of the same title starring Campbell, five photographs that are pretty bland, and one of her lucidly cuckoo diagrams. Like all of her previous chart drawings, this one is titled *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances*, and looks like an elaborate root system with every capillary captioned. This one tracks the various paths Campbell imagines her life taking after "discovering that I have a few gray hairs." She boomerangs between "Feeling like I am no longer responsible to live up to sexual expectations," "Telling my boyfriend what I need," "Our sex life grows and grows," and "Go into hiding."

Campbell's art is a fizzy cocktail of self-awareness and racing thoughts laced with truth serum and the penetrating narcissism of Sean Landers. Unlike a number of conceptual indexers, Campbell doesn't just list things—she connects them together, thinks them through, and gets to the bottom of her thoughts, no matter how neurotic. Like Landers, she makes art out of the way we think. As obsessive and flighty as her work makes her seem, she's startlingly conscious, which saves her from being just another diarist who chronicles her insecurity or ticks off the contents of her purse. In an earlier chart, Campbell traced her projections after a studio visit, ranging from "recognition" to "broken marriage" to "bad body image" to "inability to reach orgasm." These responses may be eccentric but they're not abnormal. Conan O'Brien recently described his reactions to laughs dying down: "The crowd's a little quiet tonight. I think they're not really into me. My best years are behind me. I'm going to die. Alone." I wish Campbell had included a few more of these strange drawings in her new show, and explored visual alternatives to the formulaic, hard-to-read pencil-on-paper format.

The video, in spite of being choppy and redundant (cuts are crude; there's a lot of aimless walking), is perversely effective. In three side-by-side projections we see Campbell going through identical motions. Dressed in different clothes and seen in different locations (studio, office, national park, the streets of a German town), she wakes up, rubs her eyes, rolls over, looks at the clock, gets out of bed, showers, eats, gets in a car, goes to work, walks around, and so forth until the end of the day. Rather than the endless variation of her drawings, *Same as Me* echoes the mind-boggling replication of the bedrooms, presenting a world with no variation whatsoever.

We all have habits, specific ways we like to do things, and we all become conscious of the sameness of these movements, and might even take pleasure in that sameness. In *Same as Me* Campbell pushes her habits into an unbendingly disciplined, maniacally choreographed dance of everyday life. In the process, she all but disappears as an individual. Writing about systemic art, Lucy Lippard suggested that "aggressive vacuity can establish tremendous intimacy." This is the vacuous drama Campbell goes for and gets so well. She seems hollow and mechanical, but the exactness of her motions lets us know she's in every move, which glues us to her all the more.

The press release seems to allude to Cindy Sherman, noting that in the video Campbell assumes archetypal roles such as traveler, artist, office worker, and suburban housewife. But these roles are empty and shed no interesting light on either the characters, the art, or the artist. As an actress, Campbell is removed and stiff, yet somehow she wins our affection. Like other contemporary artists who dress up and make pictures of themselves (e.g., Nikki Lee or Mariko Mori), Campbell takes Sherman out of the studio and into the streets. She adds the zaniness of the *Duck Soup* mirror scene, in which Harpo and Groucho Marx mimic each other's movements, then throws in the giddy eeriness of the repeating wake-up sequence in *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray is trapped in a time warp.

Campbell's work is maniacal and dark, but it's also funny and riveting. On the subject of regimentation and the self, Yvonne Rainer, one of the leading figures in '60s experimental dance, wrote, "Repetition offers an alternative way of ordering material, of making it easier to see." When Rainer danced or acted in this regimented way, she says she was "more involved in experiencing a lion's share of ecstasy and madness than in being myself." Whether Campbell is experiencing ecstasy or madness, or even if she's being herself, is anyone's guess. For now, she really whets the appetite.