



GRETNA CAMPBELL

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
FINEART



GRETNA CAMPBELL



Small Rosebushes, 1981, oil on canvas, 42 x 48 inches

GRETNA CAMPBELL

Paintings from Great Cranberry Island

AUGUST 17–SEPTEMBER 30, 2016

Essay by Martica Sawin

**COURTHOUSE GALLERY
FINE ART**



Blue Rocks, c.1975, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 inches



Back Shore, Sunset, 1984, oil on canvas, 38 x 42 inches

GRETNA CAMPBELL **Late Paintings**

by Martica Sawin

“My beginnings are in cubism and I’m a landscape painter, which are contradictory strategies.”

— Gretna Campbell

“My beginnings are in cubism and I’m a landscape painter, which are contradictory strategies,” Gretna Campbell wrote at the time of her 1981 show at the Ingber Gallery. This simple statement sheds light on the origin of the force that reverberates through her powerful landscapes. To look at a Campbell landscape is to feel the pulse of nature, a living, breathing amalgam of interacting parts, whether she is representing a cascade of rocks tumbling toward the sea or an impenetrable thicket of undergrowth or a sweeping vista across the reflecting surfaces of tidal pools toward a distant shore. Her ceaseless efforts to reconcile the contradictions between representation and abstract structure keep her paintings charged with an enlivening dynamic. This is not an impact that can be achieved by meticulously copying onto a canvas what the eye sees from a stationary point—it results from the

artist’s insistence on being immersed in the landscape while painting it, exposed to the shifting light, focussing her gaze on one point then another, and sensing the connectedness of the diverse elements in her surroundings. Students and colleagues tell many stories of her fortitude as she painted surrounded by snow and ice or held onto a canvas buffeted by the wind as she wielded her brush. They speak of her tireless energy, the intensity of her observation, and her fierce determination to overcome all obstacles as if the very life of the painting were at stake.

Although she had no particular exposure to the arts while growing up in the East Bronx, Campbell became sufficiently determined on a career in art to apply to and be accepted at tuition-free Cooper Union after graduation from Evander Childs High School. According to her daughter Martha Campbell, “she saw what she wanted



Maine, c.1981, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 inches

to do when she was very young and was optimistic about being able to do it.” In the 1940s the wartime influx of European refugee artists and architects contributed a Bauhaus influence to the Cooper Union curriculum. Campbell studied for four years with a professor who gave her a thorough grounding in cubism. This intensive abstract formation later “went underground,” in her work, but it profoundly influenced the way she looked and painted. “The methods of cubism served as a springboard,” she said, “I learned to look at things in a questioning way. I wanted something new and I saw painting as a means of discovering something of my own.”

After graduating from Cooper her involvement with the Group Theater led to grants from the Clifford Odets Foundation which enabled her to paint for several years. A few summers of painting in Maine led to the discovery of Great Cranberry Island where in 1950 she bought a house. In 1953 a Fulbright grant made it possible for her to work in southern France where her dedication to painting directly from the landscape began. She continued to paint the figure, sharing a model with Philip Pearlstein, and later was part of a life drawing group, but landscape became her central preoccupation.

Although Campbell admired certain artists of the past, she mistrusted convention because of the limits it imposed and she avoided pre-established modes of

painting. She told her students that artists are usually helped by finding a way of sidestepping intention. One student remembers her injunction to “paint as if you don’t know what it is.” For Campbell this meant ignoring preconceptions and keeping the painting process in tune with the seeing process so that each brushstroke would be the direct result of a momentary observation and often a record of a change in the angle of vision or a shift in the light. Light as it hits the surfaces of the subject became the animating as well as the unifying element in her paintings.

There are landscape paintings that keep the viewer on the outside, looking in, others that lure the eye into a far distance, and some that hold the gaze on a tactile surface, activated by flurries of brushstrokes. Campbell held that “there is no one truth for landscape space; the painter is both in it and of it.” Her gaze may have been directed sharply downward at an encounter of rocks and sea, or may have confronted a boulder-strewn path into the darkening depths of a forest, or been directed across a nearby rock pool and tidal flats to a further shore. In each instance she conveyed the sensation of being immersed in her subject, seeing what is underfoot, on either side, and straight ahead, often with access to the distance blocked by tangled growth or fallen rocks. As she confronted the motif her focus would shift so that





Looking Down, 1983, oil on canvas, 46 x 42 inches

the perceived landscape became a composite of multiple viewpoints which the viewer's eye absorbs in stages, a participatory act of looking from near to far, down to up, left to right. "Landscape painting," she said, "Involves taking a walk with the mind's eye, or at least moving the eye from a fixed place."

A good example of such a "walk with the mind's eye" is *Looking Down*, 1983, a glimpsed segment of the juncture of land and sea, linked by an encroaching tidal inlet, edged with foam. There is a vertiginous downward pull, yet the eye is also drawn upward to the patch of light that crowns the cliff and shimmers along the painting's left edge. At the canvas center is the shadowed side of a rocky mass, a looming dark contrast to the translucent sea surface with its reflections of a cloud-filled sky and pale green splashes of light. The tumbling rocks hint at geological history, while the rippling waters of the inlet suggest the pull of the tide; the interaction of solid and fluid conveys the momentum of on-going natural processes.

The Pool, 1980, in a different mood, offers a wide-angle view over a broad stretch of tidal shorefront toward a distant horizon. It is part of an almost landlocked body of water adjacent to the artist's Maine home on Great Cranberry Island. The eye is drawn to a scattering of rocks on a muddy shore, then moves along a zigzagging

track toward a sand spit edged by small eddies of cresting foam, then beyond, across watery reflections of clouds, to the tree-dotted horizontal of the opposite shore below a narrow rim of sky. The repeated horizontals and gentle diagonals of the composition match the tranquility of the Pool's calm waters, while the combination of shorefront detail and the broad reflecting surfaces of the water contribute a sense of harmony and completeness.

It is characteristic of even the most stable Campbell landscapes to imply ongoing change, thanks to her attentiveness to light. Each composition is enlivened and woven together by the play of lighter against darker tones, stimulating constant adjustment of the eye. She would have several canvases going at once, for the changing light at different times of day. Her attention to the nuances of light is especially effective in *Dark Woods* where streaks of light on blue boulders lead toward a dirt path into a shadowy woodland where glinting touches of pale yellow flicker among the tree trunks. The highlights are painted as separate patches and are often interesting as shapes in themselves with strong fully saturated color and subtle tonal variations. Although the paint application appears loose and spontaneous, a close look at a painted rock shows a half dozen color variations as each facet of the rough surface reflects light at a different angle. A long preparation led up to the seeming freedom of her paint

handling; it involved close scrutiny of the motif and making many on-site drawings, even use of a grid to transfer studies to a canvas. From the mid-seventies she painted mainly outside, ignoring the preconceived image and working in response to whatever engaged her eye and directed the hand holding the brush. “I paint directly,” she explained. “The top layer is from the motif, the under part is getting ready. I like to leave edges for last so I can shift the space, then the canvas becomes a single statement.”

Campbell often used the word “painterly,” in relation to her work, defining it as follows: “the form is found in the paint and inseparable from it.” Her husband, artist Louis Finkelstein, used the term in the title of an exhibition, accompanied by an essay, “Painterly Representation,” (Ingber Gallery, 1975). The term is particularly apt for a number of artists of their generation

who aspired to merge aspects of the grand painting tradition with an up to date sensibility, to build on a foundation of abstract art a record of the perceived world.

The sizable canvases in this exhibition were (with one exception from 1976), painted in the last seven years of Campbell’s life. She died of cancer in 1987 at age sixty five, just at a point when her art was reaching its fullest realization. In these last canvases, everything that she had been struggling with seemed to fall into place—emerging in near perfection. “Words limit and restrict,” she said. “the facet of truth revealed by the vision of art is the only truth open to us.”

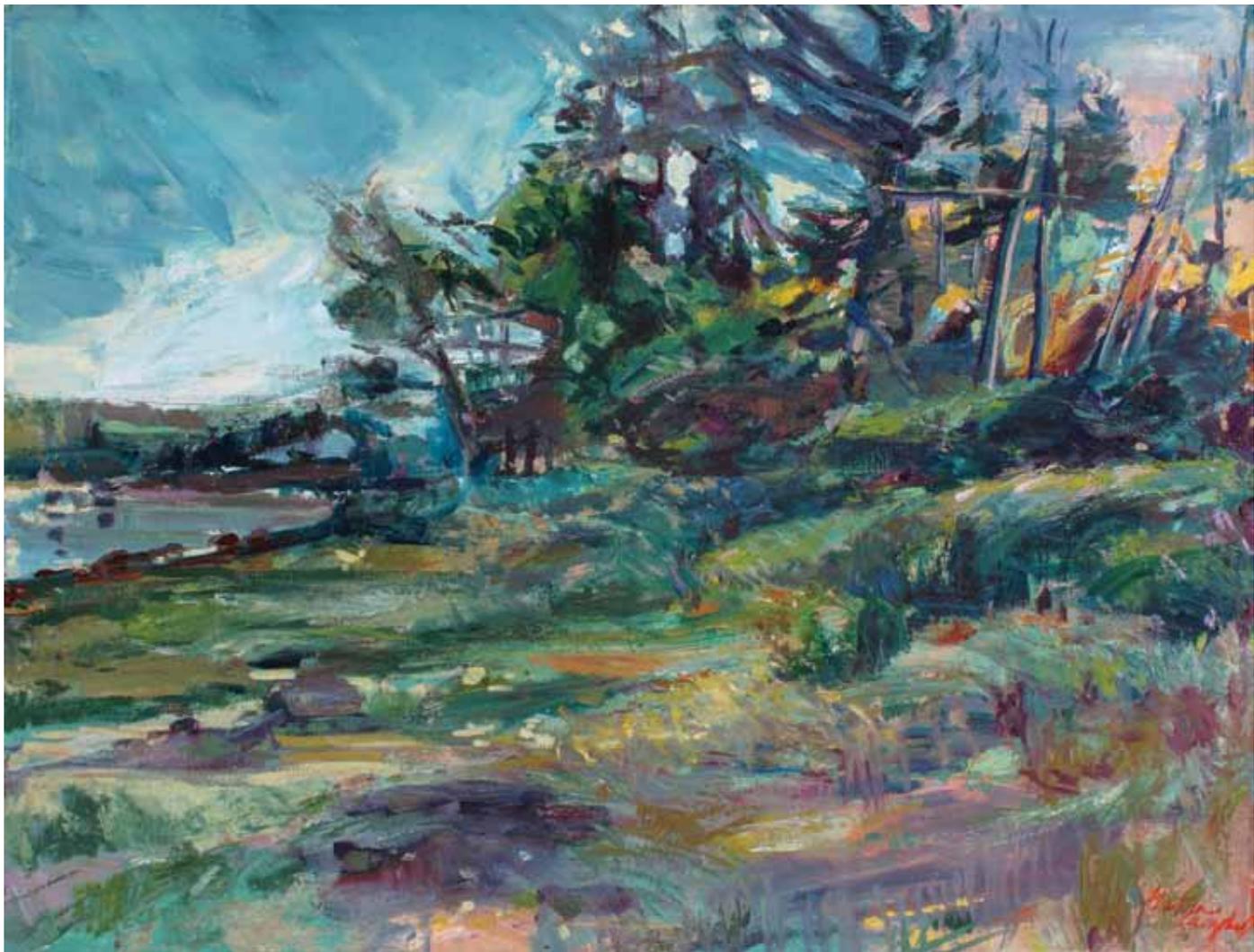
Martica Sawin is a critic and art historian who has published widely on contemporary art since the 1950s, including *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, and *Nell Blaine, Her Art and Life*.



The Pool, 1980, oil on canvas, 40 x 48 inches



Back Shore, 1985, oil on canvas, 42 x 48 inches



Cove at Gina's, 1981, oil on canvas, 38 x 50 inches



Little Head, Sunset, c.1985, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Dark Woods, c. 1982, oil on canvas, 42 x 42 inches



From the Path, Great Head, 1984, oil on canvas, 42 x 42 inches



Looking Down II, 1985, oil on canvas, 28 x 35 inches

GRETNA CAMPBELL

SOLO EXHIBITIONS (selected)

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, *Paintings from Cranberry Island*, Ellsworth, ME 2016
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, NY 1994, 2004
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, *Drawings from the Fifties*, New York, NY 1999
Stein Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 1980, 1999
Contemporary Realist Gallery, San Francisco, CA 1989, 1996
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, *The Early 1970's and into the Early 1980's*,
New York, NY 1996
Yale University School of Art, *Memorial Retrospective*, New Haven, CT 1988
Ingber Gallery, "Last Paintings and Related Works," New York, NY 1987
The New York Studio School, "Gretna Campbell – Early and Late,"
New York, NY 1987
Andrews Gallery, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 1987
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 1986
Swain School of Art, New Bedford, MA 1985
Capricorn Galleries, Bethesda, MD 1983
New York Studio School, New York, NY 1979
Ingber Gallery, New York, NY 1976, '77, '78, '79, 1980, '81, '82, '84, '86
Green Mountain Gallery, New York, NY 1970, 1973, 1975
Maine Coast Artists, Rockport, ME 1969
Balin-Traube Gallery, New York, NY 1963
Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY 1959
Artist's Gallery, New York, NY 1950, 1952
Pyramid Gallery, New York, NY 1947, 1949

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (selected)

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, *10/100 Painting Acadia*, Ellsworth, ME 2016
Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, *Great Cranberry Isle Artists*, Ellsworth, ME 2012
Lohin-Geduld Gallery, *Maine as Muse*, New York, NY 2011
Blue Mountain Gallery, *Evolution of a Gallery*, New York, NY 2010
Portland Museum of Art, *Cranberry Island Artists*, Portland, ME 2009
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, *Abstracted Reality*, New York, NY 1993
Frost Museum, *American Art Today: Contemporary Landscape*, FIU,
Miami, FL 1989
Wyckoff Gallery, Wyckoff, NJ 1989
Contemporary Realist Gallery, *Director's Choice*, San Francisco, CA 1988

Maine Coast Artists Gallery, Rockport, ME 1988
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY 1978,
1983, '84, '87
National Academy of Design, New York, NY 1982, 1987
Fine Arts Gallery, Invitational, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 1987
Colby College Museum of Art, *Abstraction and Landscape*, Waterville, ME 1985
Sordoni Gallery, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA 1985
Allen Priebe Gallery, *Modern Masters of Classical Realism*, University of
Wisconsin, Oshkosh, WI 1984
Ingber Gallery, *Five Figurative Artists*, New York, NY 1984
Philadelphia College of Art, *Selections from the Women Artists Historical
Archives*, Invitational, Philadelphia, PA 1983
Traveling Exhibition, *American Landscape Painters*, 1982–1984
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, *1+1=2*, New York, NY 1984
Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY 1982
One Penn Plaza, *Contemporary Realism*, New York, NY 1982
Cooper Union Alumni, New York, NY 1978
Yale University School of Art, Faculty Show, New Haven, CT 1977
Landmark Gallery, *Ten Maine Painters*, New York, NY 1977
Ingber Gallery, National Travelling Exhibition: *Painterly Representation*,
New York, NY 1975–77
Queens Museum, Travelling Exhibition, Queens, NY 1975 – 1977
Lever House, *Eight Fulbright Artists*, New York, NY 1975
Hobart and William Smith Colleges, *The Eye of Woman*, Geneva, NY 1974
Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC 1974
Maine State Museum, Augusta, ME 1976
Ciba-Geigy Corporation, National Traveling Exhibition: *Women Artists in
the Ciba-Geigy Collection*, New York, NY, 1974
National Traveling Exhibition, *A Sense of Place*, 1973–1974
New York Cultural Center, *Women Choose Women*, New York, NY 1972
American Federation of the Arts, National Traveling Exhibition, 1969–1971
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA 1949, 1967
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA 1962, 1965
Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY 1956, 1958
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY 1954
Riverside Museum, New York, NY 1952
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY 1945
Chicago Art Insitute, *Painting Annual*, Chicago, IL 1944



PUBLIC COLLECTIONS (selected)

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
The William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA
Ciba Geigy Corporation, New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
National Academy of Design, New York, NY
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, Lynchburg, VA
Squibb Corporation, New York, NY
Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA
Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
Yale University, New Haven, CT

HONORS AND AWARDS

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Annual Exhibition and Award in Art, New York, NY 1987
National Academy of Design, Benjamin Altman Prize in Landscape Painting, New York, NY 1987
National Academy of Design, Elected Associate, New York, NY 1987
National Academy of Design, Ranger Fund Purchase Award, New York, NY 1987
Ciba-Geigy Corporation, Purchase Award, New York, NY 1973, 1985, 1986
Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Purchase Prize, New York, NY 1984
Randolph College, Purchase Award, Lynchburg, VA 1973
Longview Foundation, Purchase Award 1963
Fulbright Fellowship, Aix-en-Provence, France 1953–1954
Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship, New York, NY 1952
Pearl Fund Fellowship, sponsored by Clifford Odets 1946–1949

BIBLIOGRAPHY (SELECTED)

Johnson, Ken, "Gretna Campbell; Anna Hostvedt," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2004, (show review).
"Gretna Campbell" Contemporary Realist Gallery Catalog, San Francisco, CA 1996.
Turner, Norman, "Thinking of Gretna Campbell," "The Early 70's Into the Early 80's," Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York 1995, (34pp exhibition catalog).
Henry, Gerrit, "Gretna Campbell at the Tibor de Nagy" *Art in America*, September, 1994, p. 116 (reproduction).
Forge, Andrew, "On Gretna Campbell's Landscapes" Tibor de Nagy Gallery,

New York, NY, 1993, (catalog with reproductions for 1994 solo exhibition).
Perl, Jed, *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, NY, 1991, pp. 107–110, 243.
Turner, Norman, "Thinking of Gretna Campbell," *Transfer*, 1990, no. 5, pp. 17–25.
Perl, Jed, "American Art Today: Contemporary Landscape," Frost Art Museum, Miami, FL, 1989, (catalog with reproductions), FIU Digital Commons.
Baker, Kenneth, "A Fearless But Thoughtful Use of Color," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1989, April 6, p. E4 (reproduction).
"Exhibitions," *Artweek*, April 15, 1989, p. 3 (reproduction).
Steele, Nancy, "Tropical Oils," *Benicia Herald*, April 9, 1989, (reproduction).
Campbell, Lawrence, "Gretna Campbell at Ingber and the New York Studio School," *Art in America*, September, 1988, pp. 187–88 (reproduction).
Perl, Jed, Gretna Campbell, *Art and Architecture Gallery*, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1988, (catalog with reproductions).
Perl, Jed, "Memorial," *The New Criterion*, February, 1988, pp. 46–48.
Finkelstein, Louis, "Gretna Campbell, Early and Late," *The New York Studio School*, New York, NY, 1987, (catalog with reproductions).
Mainardi, Patricia, "Gretna Campbell, 1922–1987: Early and Late Paintings," *Arts Magazine*, 1987, 62 (November): 62–67.

TEACHING

Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT Summer, 1986
Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT 1972–1987
Pratt Institute, 1980–81
New York Studio School, New York, NY 1971–73, 1976–1980
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD 1972–1973
Philadelphia College of Arts, Philadelphia, PA 1963–70, 1971–72
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY 1959–1962

EDUCATION

Art Student's League, New York, NY 1943–44
Cummington School, summer scholarship 1944
Cooper Union, New York, NY 1939–43
WPA Workshop 1939

BORN Bronx, NY 1922
DIED New York, NY 1987

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
FINE ART

6 court street ellsworth, maine 04605 courthousegallery.com 207 667 6611