

# DIAZ CONTEMPORARY

Neil Campbell and Nicole Ondre  
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Text by Christina Ritchie

## Neil and Nicole

In the middle ages it was common for paintings to be touched and, in some instances, even kissed. In the absence of corrective lenses, electric light or other visual enhancements it is not so surprising that the sense of touch would outrank others. But sight is privileged as the dominant sense in our own age, although the demand for a direct sensory engagement with the work of art remains, or at least so in the cases of Neil Campbell and Nicole Ondre. These two artists start at very different points in their artistic process, proceed by very different methods and techniques, have different perspectives and agendas, but they have in common a reliance on the embodied experience of the viewer for the impact of their work.<sup>i</sup>

A frequent starting point for Nicole Ondre is her choice of materials. For *The Pliable Plane* she chose materials that she has been recently exploring in the studio, Tyvek and asphalt: Tyvek because it is lightweight, strong and pliable; asphalt for its history as an art material<sup>ii</sup> and because it is light sensitive and therefore mutable, subject to change through time and exposure. Much of Ondre's work is created in situ and she will often adopt a feature of the exhibition space to impose an arbitrary limit on the execution of the work. But in this instance she was executing the work in her studio. Conceived to hang in the small gallery at Diaz Contemporary, she prepared the Tyvek ground for the work to match the dimensions of one end wall of the gallery. In a way, the repetition of these dimensions represents a displacement of the gallery to the studio. Folded and transported from her studio in Berlin to the gallery in Toronto, the grid of folds marks its further displacement from the studio back to the gallery. These steps are apparent in the work itself or, put another way, the work depends on the visual information it contains to impart its conceptually-based, process-driven structure. Once hung in place on the wall adjacent to the one whose dimensions it repeats, the black surface of the painting seems to exceed the dimensions of the adjacent wall, expanding to fill one's field of vision with painterly incident, highlighting the viscous and crusty characteristics of the asphalt.

The effect of *The Pliable Plane* is enhanced and complicated by *Plumb (shoreline)*, Neil Campbell's work on the adjacent wall. Using the particular features of the installation site to determine the characteristics of the work is the usual starting point for Campbell. Taking the wall as the ground for the work, the figuration of *shoreline* consists of two horizontal bands of matte black paint somewhat below the visual centre of the white wall. Its companion piece, *Plumb (interval)*, is located at the opposite end of the room and is composed of two vertical bands of matte black paint on the white ground of the wall. These two works, the most graphically reduced works that Campbell has produced to date, are calibrated to direct attention to the white wall, to the ground rather than the figure. The effect is to confound perception of all of their constituent proportions. Nevertheless, they manage to fully occupy that extraordinary

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territory between neuroscience and cultural anthropology that Campbell has carved out for his work.

If it's possible to limit the perception of these two works to strictly sensory phenomena, what seems to happen is that the white band between the two black bands appears to dilate and brighten, causing the wall, in the horizontal instance, to float upward and expand laterally or, in the vertical instance, to recede and contract. While these effects may sound like fun-house tricks, the impression they give is actually quite subtle. Even so, it's a good thing both works are not visible at the same time because they distort the room in a queasy sort of way, playing on the lag between firing neurons and the cognitive operation that tries to make sense of what is seen. Making sense or meaning out of what is seen is, of course, dependent on habituation and learning, a combination of expectation and experience that is culturally constructed.

Given how the two *Plumb* works alter one's perception of the room's proportions, it is understandable how perception of *The Pliable Plane's* relation to the dimensions of the wall may be altered as well. At the same time the flatness of the *Plumb* paintings serves to accentuate the surface undulations of *The Pliable Plane*. As I was preparing the show I tried to keep the artists informed about each other's thoughts and propositions, invoking a "call-response" mechanism in order to elicit the affinities between their respective practices and to exacerbate the tensions. The first piece confirmed for this room was Ondre's; Campbell's was decided just a matter of days before the installation was to begin. While *Plumb* is not a direct response to *The Pliable Plane*, their juxtaposition brings forth a striking parallel between their use of a flat two-dimensional black plane to invade three-dimensional space.

A different process guided the works in the front gallery. Here, Campbell's *Popeye* was identified and positioned from the outset. On the sky-lit, fourteen-foot walls of the northeast corner, it boldly dominates the room. Two parallel red rectangles bracket the corner at a sixty degree angle, connected from the lower end of one to the higher end of the other by a steeply pitched matte black parallelogram straddling the corner. Ondre, on the other hand, deferred most of her decisions for this space until she arrived for the installation, except to work on the floor with two rolls of standard backdrop paper, one four and a half feet, the other nine feet wide. Her process was slow, observant, reactive and, ultimately quite assertive. She established the space of the work by drawing out the wider paper from the roll positioned at the approximate middle of the west wall to the south east corner, then partially folding it back on itself. She then drew out the narrower paper from the room's central column to the south wall, then partially folding it back on itself. Thus she both figuratively and literally occupied the entire south half of the gallery space, impeding the entrance except for a narrow pass below the fold of the narrower roll of paper. At this point Campbell arrived and started fashioning life-size maquettes for his work using tar paper, chosen for its sturdy construction and matte black finish. In an impromptu move, Ondre appropriated sections of Campbell's tar paper, saturating them with copious amounts of linseed oil and pigment and inserting them between the folds of paper already laid out on the floor. The oil and pigment migrated from the tar paper to the paper, and then the tar paper was shifted, creating serried layers of monoprints on and between the various layers of paper. The effect was to expand the space of the work vertically, physically occupying the floor but imaginatively occupying the subterranean realm that yields the asphalt from which the tar paper is made. The work was titled *Double Bind*.

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Because the entrance to the gallery is partially blocked, the viewer is forced to walk around the work in order to enter the space. This movement not only provides two hundred and seventy degrees of angles from which to view *Double Bind*; it also activates the viewing of *Popeye* which, as one passes in front of it, causing one's perception of the entire space to yaw and slide, yet again inducing a queasy fascination with the disconnect from one's perceptual apparatus. The walls heave as one's knowledge of simple geometry is called into question. Again the works complicate and enhance the effects of each other. Both works require the viewer to move through the space and in doing so to open up the spatial and temporal dimensions of visual perception.

I had been fussing about a title for the show. In a comic aside as the three of us contemplated the results of our efforts just as they were completed, Neil observed that the shape of *Popeye* and the shape of *Double Bind* both formed a distorted letter "N" and that perhaps we could call the show Neil and Nicole. I suppose that is where I started, with the idea of putting the two of them together and seeing what happened. Their differences and complementarity draw a compelling arc through the processes of vision but I am reluctant to name it.

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<sup>i</sup> I first recognized this affinity between Campbell and Ondre in *After Finitude*, a group show curated by Eli Bornowsky at Or Gallery in Vancouver in 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Most notably, asphalt was used as a painting material by Gericault in *The Raft of the Medusa*. In the oldest surviving camera photograph, Nicéphore Niépce coated a platinum plate with asphalt to register the image.