

Dennis Campay

Mixed-media artist, Dennis Campay, invites his viewers inside an undulating universe of personal, mutable symbols and tones. Known for lush, large-scale canvases as well as smaller works on paper, Campay orchestrates familiar forms into elegant, enigmatic, and questioning compositions.

Blending interior and exterior views, we are led through porticos and archways, beyond slatted shutters and columns, to find chairs perched patiently on piers, beached and worn fishing boats in silvery bodies of water. Spiral stairways rise from the river's edge and disappear into decaying doorways. Lights and lanterns sparkle, strung across bridges and tilting poles rising out of the marsh, white-washed churches in the distance.

Chairs, books, pianos, architectural fragments - these emblems are Campay's notes, the jubilant and haunting elements of his music. Throughout his career, they have appeared, evolved, meandered, and rearranged themselves in compositions of black and white, in vibrant hues, and in muted earth tones. Color, texture, and lavish brushstroke juxtaposed with the draftsman's jots and lines create an exhilarating and mesmerizing effect. We want to enter, to inhabit these scenes.

Why are these paintings so seductive? What draws us in, and holds us?

Whatever emotions are evoked on canvas, Campay cannot *help* but create beauty. He combines richly layered applications of paint in slightly abstracted form with markings in pencil and crayon, scratched through the surface of his canvases. Through its contrasts, this juxtaposition yields unexpected harmonies. Brooding or festive, the result is always a powerful and elegant statement of being, the artist's vision of our interior worlds, natural surroundings, and man-made constructions, fused and intermixed.

Deepening the magnetism of these scenes is an underlying intelligence, keys to an evolving story Campay leaves to us to interpret – a journey of joy and struggle, and the individual's search for spirituality.

While it is rare to find a human figure in his work, signs of life, flourishing, are everywhere. Campay's blended landscapes explore the mind's passion for learning, the sensual pleasures of everyday life, and belief in powers we cannot see. Books are stacked on seats and shelves. Bowls of fruit and bottles of wine are plentiful, left in unexpected places. Chairs welcome us, invite us to stop, rest, and linger. Baby grand pianos rise out of reeds and grasses, sit staunchly on a balcony, or by a winding staircase.

Both his pianos and his chairs possess a subtle human character, often depicted in overscale proportions on top, yet able to stand on surprisingly delicate legs. Is this the artist's metaphor for the importance of the mind, of man's creativity, the endurance of human spirit even in our fragile vessels of flesh and bone?

Drawing upon his early schooling in architecture and drafting, as well as the influences of a childhood spent in Europe and the Southeast, Campay's devotion to craft is an essential ingredient in his work. Likening his approach to that of a jazz player, each new painting begins with a *sense* of what is coming, and then a kind of improvisational letting go, masterfully combined with technical skill.

Campay describes his process as beginning with a sketch on canvas. Then, he lays plaster, sees how the light reflects against it, the contrast of thickness and flatness, draws, folds in color, and lets the imagery evolve as he considers form, shape, and value. He prefers to leave original lines visible so that the viewer is more intimately involved in the process.

"I approach the canvas with a sense of total creativity," says Campay. "With an idea, and my understanding of the materials. Eventually things evolve. I'm not afraid of

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accidents. In fact, I welcome them. That means I am painting more subconsciously than consciously. To me, that's the most exciting work I produce."

The result of this spontaneity and mastery of craft is the unleashing of a full spectrum of moods, in a signature style that is immediately recognizable - luminous blacks and whites, the energetic and confident markings of architectural draftsmanship, bold sections of rich color, and compositions that simultaneously lead us inward to contemplate, as the eye is led skyward, or across unexpected expanses.

While art historians and critics laud the beauty of Campay's work, they also remark on its mix of distinctly southern influence and pan-European elements, creating an atmosphere of reminiscence and mythology, a link to each viewer's memory, echoed in the artist's own subconscious remembrances.

Ultimately, Campay's music reaches far beyond beauty. It grapples with the questions of connection, and therein lies the emotional power of the work. Bridges, sources of light, views without conventional boundaries – the unabashed hopefulness even in the most stark and solitary of his compositions *shines through* in the strength of the spindly-legged chair, the reading lamp angled over its arm. Man does more than survive; he thrives. Nature continues to flourish. Signs of spirit are everywhere.

If Dennis Campay leaves his city streets unpopulated, chairs vacant, boats without fisherman, luxuriant meals waiting to be savored, pianoforte without musician's hands to play it - perhaps the viewer is left to feel the inherent isolation that is a part of the human condition. But we are also reminded *not* to remain spectator. We are encouraged to join the artist in his improvisation, his experiencing of human capacity, our bold and tender uncertainties. We are asked to enter the scene, to inhabit the spaces we encounter - to live, to search, to listen inside the silence, and to *feel everything*.

Dennis Campay received his B.F.A. from the Atlanta College of Art in 1992, received an award for work on paper in the prestigious 2001 Florence Biennale, and has been featured in *Art & Antiques* magazine as well as *New American Paintings*. He is the subject of noted art historian John T. Spike's book, *Campay: New Paintings* (2002). His work hangs in private and public collections throughout the U.S., including the Harn Museum, the Morris Museum of Art, and the Telfair Museum of Art. He is currently represented by Mason Murer Fine Art, in Atlanta, Georgia.



Avenues (mixed media on paper)



Rust (mixed media on canvas)



Wounded (mixed media on paper)