

# JESSICA CAMPBELL

## *who dis*

Western Exhibitions  
April 13 to May 26, 2018

Interview by Amy Lockhart

Amy Lockhart: I know you as a hilarious performance artist, comic artist and political illustrator as well as gallery artist. How do these different mediums intersect and inform each other?

Jessica Campbell: There are a few consistent threads that run throughout all of it: humour, drawing, feminism, adolescence, autobiography. While I was in grad school, I had an advisor insist that I needed to find a way of connecting the comics and the studio works, which I tried to accomplish by stripping the colour out of my drawings so that it had more of a relationship to underground/independent black-and-white comics (as well as my own work). I ultimately decided that I was fine with the heterogeneity of my work. People are complex and have heterogeneous/contradictory characteristics, and a diverse body of work can reflect that. Letting go of that idea allowed me to notice that my voice and my hand, both of which leave a particular kind of mark, can act as unifying principles.

Comics and paintings communicate differently. A painting (which is how I think of my carpet pieces) is a singular piece meant to be looked at. There is room to think about the artist's hand, your own body, and the significance of the image but ultimately the work should be able to hold multiple meanings and interpretations and should function on a few levels (intellectual, emotional, visceral). Comics are meant to be read. There can be directness in comics that would be tedious or didactic in a painting. For instance, I just finished a book, [XTC69](#), where the characters basically kill all men. This is, of course, a "metaphor," but there is little ambiguity in what I'm trying to say. Both painting and comics are vital forms of communication.

How did you start using carpet as a painting medium?

Right after grad school, I made a piece called *Teen Bedroom* that was a kind of home stage of my fictitious teenage bedroom. There was a big poster of a naked man reading a book and two magazines called *Ladies Humour Journal* sitting atop a rug with a brick wall pattern. I had been thinking a lot about stand up comedy, which I see as a bizarre and contradictory expression of vulnerability and control: the comedian is alone on a stage with nothing but a mic and her body, but holds the attention of the audience and is in control of what she exposes or keeps hidden, which felt related to the vulnerability and control of adolescence. Bricks, in part, act as shorthand for this experience, referencing the exposed brick comedy club wall. Putting this motif on the ground created a space for "lie down comedy," the experience of being depressed and prostrate on the floor, and writing jokes as a coping mechanism. That's a universal experience, right?? Gulp.

Why carpet? Why apply it to canvasses that resemble paintings? (i.e. reference codes/conventions of painting)

After a year or so of making carpets that went on the floor, I was messing around in the studio and had the idea of making a more complex image. I made some abs out of carpet, and then a face (based on this terrifying mask I got at Goodwill that sends electrical shocks in to your face to, um ... keep it youthful?). I had an exhibition coming up where I had initially proposed putting works on the floor, but they had flooding problems so I needed to re-think the work. I come from a painting background consider the carpets as paintings (indeed, many of them include glimpses of the painted surface underneath) and they also are inextricably linked to latch hook weavings. I love making art in this era because I feel very able to pull from whatever disparate areas I'd like and, while those references remain evident (technology, craft traditions, autobiography); the blurring of high/low art does not need to be the subject of the work, because those divisions are no longer relevant or current.

What is your interest in the history of art? Does this cause you to want to "interrogate" hahaha... I mean subvert, or use the paradigm of Western painting in your art practice?

I love art history! Part of the privilege of living in Chicago and working at the School of the Art Institute is that I'm able to go to the museum whenever I would like to. I was one credit shy of an Art History minor for my undergraduate degree, and the bulk of the courses that I took there were in postcolonial/indigenous art and art history, which I find very fascinating and vital. Moving to the United States from Canada has increased my knowledge of art history immensely and shifted my perspective. Going to grad school at SAIC, a lot of the discussions seemed to lead back to either American Abstraction Expressionism or the Imagists/Hairy Who, which was, of course, quite different from the Canadian discussions of art history (more focused on the landscape and indigenous art).

During the mid twentieth century, Clement Greenberg and other critics put in a lot of effort to contextualize abstract expressionism as a unique American art form, and particularly one that exemplified good taste and intellectualism (as opposed to working class kitsch). Yet there were similar movements cropping up elsewhere, like in Quebec, where there was a group called "Les Automatistes." While their cited influences are surrealism/automatism, the work is very similar to what is called abstract expressionism here. What makes them different is that they wrote a manifesto called *Le Refus global* (global refusal) that argued for freedom of expression and was deeply critical of the government of Quebec and the Catholic Church's control of the province. This, in part, led to the "Quiet Revolution," a moment in Quebec that completely upended the political structure of the province and took the power from a protestant/anglo/managerial class minority and redistributed it to the working class/franco/catholic majority.

So, where Greenberg lauded Ab Ex as intellectual and derided kitsch for being “working class,” the abstract expressionist painters of Quebec literally wrote a book that shifted the power from the elite to the working class. Visually similar, but the values are opposite. This is fascinating.

How does craft function in your practice? The use of shag carpet collage makes me recall of the work of artists such as Allyson Mitchell and Michael Mahalchick. These artists have ties to maximalism, feminism, and filth. Do you? If so how so? If not how not? More specifically I am thinking of how they attack the pretenses of good taste – especially in relation to institutionalized racism and classism (i.e. Chromophobia). Also the visceral nature of the carpet, the visceral nature of humour (makes your body laugh – makes your body move) makes me think of Mahalchick’s work and how it is body centric in our culture that seems to want to deny the body (it’s realness, ugliness, humanness).

Yes, Allyson Mitchell is a huge influence, for sure. I saw her show at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto in 2006, which was full of this giant lesbian yeti creatures made out of fur, and a room lined with carpeted walls and crocheted blankets, and latch hook weavings. It all felt like it had been unearthed from some forgotten 70s basement family room and had a kind of filthy feeling to it. I had a similar experience after I moved to Chicago and visited The House on the Rock during a trip to Wisconsin and touched a burgundy carpeted wall that was, for some reason, soaking wet. It was a bit thrilling, but also disgusting, and very visceral.

Per what I mentioned about Clement Greenberg, I similarly think minimalism, cleanliness and restricted or refined colour have become signifiers of intelligence or good taste. From working in the art world I have seen people who will only engage with work that is clearly in the camp of good taste, like a grey monochrome grid painting or something, and often this indicates to me an attempt to appear intellectual: people say this kind of painting is smart so if I like it or put it above my couch, they will think I am smart, also. It is so inoffensive (at least at this point), that it can fade in to the background of your dinner parties and subliminally imply your good taste and intellect without infringing on your conversation about donating money to the Republican Party, or whatever rich people do. On the other hand, if you put one of Allyson Mitchell’s big pornographic lesbian yeti fake fur tapestries above your couch, it has a much more aggressive impact. My tastes leans a little bit more toward the trashy, the de-skilled, bright colours, et cetera, though I still love painters like Agnes Martin/the grey grid “good taste” artists.

The politics of artists using craft tend more towards the radical than in the painting world. This is because there is a historical hierarchy in art that mirrored and reinforced class, racial and gender hierarchies in society, so artists who are occupying territory historically deemed working class or femme or non-European have been forced to advocate for their work in a way that a painter or a marble sculptor has not.

**You inhabit High Art/Low Art with your gallery works and printed matter. Both of these worlds (“comix” and “high art”) have different approaches to humour, dissemination and economy. Any thoughts?**

Dissemination is another significant facet of the conversation on the ways how comics and painting function are different. Since comics are a medium that exists in reproduction, they are able to have a much broader reach than a single work of art. At least until I drop it in the bath, my copy of [My New York Diary](#) by Julie Doucet is the same as every other copy out there. It’s a very democratic medium. And while there are original drawings for comics, they are not the final product; the book is. Recently I had a conversation with a drawing teacher who has a comics student in their class, and they were chastising the student a bit because the originals did not look good, they weren’t pristine like Chris Ware’s. But that is not the important part! Lynda Barry’s originals, for instance, are drawn on yellow legal paper and buckled with watercolour, they’re collaged on to and covered in glitter, nowhere near the pristine originals of Chris Ware. Yet both are equally phenomenal cartoonists and their final products—the printed books—are equally groundbreaking and moving.

Painting (which I’ll use as a stand-in for High Art) is different because there is a singular original, and though you may encounter it through reproduction, I do believe in Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura,” and that the original contains something absent in reproduction. Yet the life of the painting is not located in the original or in the reproduction, but somewhere in between. When I think of the Mona Lisa, I remember seeing it in person when I was 12, and I remember seeing a forgery that hung in the Louvre for a few years when it travelled to my hometown, I remember reading about it in books, I remember watching [The Da Vinci Code](#). This all becomes a part of the life of a painting. While this is true for comics and writing as well, like Barthes discusses in [The Death of the Author](#), cartoonists and writers have more control over the interpretation of their work and, in some ways, how it circulates.

**Humour is ever present in your paintings and comics. How does humour function for you personally and in your work? What kind of humour do you like?**

Humour is huge for me — it’s the lens through which I see the world, my coping mechanism, my way of interacting with others. I have been so depressed about politics in this country and current events that I’ve been getting a lot of my news from satire programmes like *The Daily Show*, en lieu of newspapers and radio programmes that I read and listened to prior the 2016 election. I understand that this is a foolish in many ways, but when I listen to Rachel Maddow, the tone is so alarmist that I start to feel incapable of coping with the world or my life. Humour functions as a scrim that allows me to process what is happening in the world.

This same logic applies to a lot of my work. There’s a piece in this show depicting a cabbie watching porn on his phone while he’s driving, which is something my friend Emily once experienced. It’s gross and dangerous and a little bit threatening at the same time, but also, very funny. Making an image of it through the lens of humour redistributes the power. In light of the #MeToo movement, I’ve been reconsidering past events in my life that were traumatic that I’ve now mentally recast as funny. Humour can make some trauma bearable.

Lynda Barry gives a lecture where she tells a joke, and then asks who owns it. Who does own jokes? Not, like, a joke that was obviously written by a specific comedian, but a knock-knock joke. They act as kind of collectively authored and communally owned form of

entertainment. Jokes are anticapitalist in nature, and anti-authoritarian. Dictators are notoriously opposed to satire at their expense, to the point that many executed offending writers and artists. And what does your boss hate more than a joke made at his expense? The egalitarian nature of jokes and humour generally are deeply appealing to me and perhaps more reflective of my political values than any other form of expression.

In our conversations, you also mentioned the physical component of laughter, and the appeal of momentarily controlling someone else's body. This a fascinating way of looking at humour, that through the mind, you're physically controlling another person's body. I recently had the experience of bringing one of my books to class and watching a student read it and laugh, and it was deeply satisfying to me. Yet this is something that I can only achieve verbally, either through performance, writing or comics. I would be deeply surprised to see someone have a physical laughter response to one of my paintings. I like Rachel Harrison's work, for instance, and will look at it and think "Oh, she put some fake fruit on this otherwise very respectable sculpture. That's funny." but I could never imagine laughing about that.

Your work also expands into the research and publication of artist books, history of comics, etc. Who do you read? What informs you? I want to know the dirt!! From all the high-class theory you hide under your bed to the low-class crime magazines that you keep by the toilet!

I teach the history of comics, so most of the theory I read is about comics. I am currently enjoying Trina Robbins' book [Last Girl Standing](#) because she's led a very fascinating life, but I find the writing somewhat lackluster. I do love true crime with a deep and un-abiding passion. My mom watched a lot of crime television when I was growing up and, save for a brief period during my teens and early twenties when I would proudly tell anyone who would listen that I "didn't own a television" and was instead reading and misunderstanding Sartre and De Beauvoir, this has been a constant interest of mine. At a certain point when I was growing up, I realized that this was a class signifier and I wanted to ultimately belong to a more intellectual/creative class, but as I got older, the classism of only engaging with High Art or theory started to grate at me. Continental philosophy and *Forensic Files* can both be seen as valid points of reference and that the best work blurs the lines between these. Contemporary writers seem much more comfortable with this idea than earlier generations. One of my favourite essays about comics is Umberto Eco's *The Myth of Superman*, in which he discusses how time functions in Superman comics (in a very circuitous way, basically). This is vital to me: that we can and should think deeply and critically about the ubiquitous and seemingly shallow facets of our culture.

Finally, your work, in all its mediums, seems character and story based. Many of the pieces I have seen tell stories of your past, of people in your life, such as the show *Bria* at "The Sub-Mission", a memorial to a friend who has died. How does art function for you in terms of character study and storytelling? How does character study and storytelling function for you in terms of dealing with and understanding your life?

The work that I am most attracted to is always related to narrative, even when it appears not to be. One of my favourite paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago is Joan Mitchell's *City Landscape*. I love so much about this painting: the small brush strokes that have been used to make the colourful center plane of the painting; the neutral toned surrounding areas; the composition; but a major part of what I like about the work is related to narrative. The title is evocative, and forces me to try to locate the city within its abstract marks. The brush strokes remind me that Joan Mitchell once stood in the position where I stand, facing the surface of the painting, touching it with her brush, and that touch allows me to feel a kind of communion through time that is unparalleled in other media, and allows me to consider the narrative of her life. An art teacher of mine and I were looking at the painting and he told me about how she came to give a lecture at the School in the 1960s (I think) and was totally drunk the whole time, which I also love.

The carpet works are more pointedly narrative than this Joan Mitchell painting. The most natural way for me to generate an image is to think about a story and draw the most representative moment of that story. For the current show, I gave myself a theme of "cell phones," because I only just got a cell phone in 2013 and have been contending with how that has changed my life and how it has changed the way our society functions. The images I'm using for this exhibition are all related to this idea, though they're manifested as specific narratives, like the cabbie watching porn while he drives or a bikini selfie on a broken phone screen.

**AMY LOCKHART** is a filmmaker, animator and artist. Her animations have screened at festivals internationally, including the Whitney, NY, N.Y. Anthology Film Archives, Ann Arbor Film Festival, The Ottawa International Animation Festival, and Hiroshima International Animation Festival. Lockhart has received fellowship at the National Film Board of Canada and support from the Canada Council for the Arts. Her drawings, comics and paintings have been published by Drawn & Quarterly (*Dirty Dishes*, 2009), and by Colour Code (*Looking Inward*, 2016).

**JESSICA CAMPBELL** is a Canadian artist and humourist based in Chicago, working in comics, fibres, painting, drawing and performance. Her book "Hot or Not: 20th Century Male Artists" was published by Koyama Press in 2016. She's had solo and two-person in Chicago at Roots & Culture and Sub-Mission and at La Galerie Laroche/Joncas in Montreal; and has been included in group shows throughout the Midwest and Quebec, including moniquemeloche in Chicago. Her new graphic novel, [XTC69](#), is available for pre-order on Amazon and will be released in May 2018. Western Exhibitions will host a book release party on May 26 where Campbell will do a short reading and will be available for book signing. This is her first show at Western Exhibitions.

**WESTERN EXHIBITIONS** 1709 W Chicago Ave., Chicago IL 60622 USA  
(312) 480-8390 | [westernexhibitions.com](http://westernexhibitions.com) | [scott@westernexhibitions.com](mailto:scott@westernexhibitions.com)