

# Art attack

With Harry Styles and Alexa Chung as fans, Tomo Campbell is one of the hottest artists of the moment.

Ahead of his new exhibition, **Phoebe McDowell** meets him in his Essex pigsty turned studio

Photographs **Kasia Bobula**

“We play football together, we go to exhibitions together and we have dinners together. He’s really interested in creativity and I’m into the same sort of things,” says Tomo Campbell of his friendship with Harry Styles. The two first met through Campbell’s sister-in-law, who was One Direction’s hair and make-up artist. Now the singer has a piece or two of Campbell’s work, as do Alexa Chung and a whole host of other stylish types.

Indeed, Campbell has been an insider favourite in both the art and fashion worlds for years — in 2020 he teamed up with the French brand Ami during London Frieze, Campbell showing art and Alexandre Mattiussi, the label’s founder and creative director, showcasing clothes. At Celine, Hedi Slimane printed a Campbell painting on a dress as part of the house’s spring/summer 2021 collection. In a typical painting you’ll find horses, hunters and parades jostling between spontaneous sweeps of colour, predominantly in pastels. “I purposefully use colours that you never see in nature and, if you do, they’re not tangible — they’re in the sea or the sky,” he says.

I am at Campbell’s house to talk about his new show, a solo exhibition called *Spitting Feathers* at Cob Gallery in Camden, north London. There are eight works of varying sizes propped up against the walls of his studio, a former pigsty in Essex. Despite appearing finished, “they’ll probably go to the show wet — it’s always so last-minute”, he says. He tells me about them in the most easy-to-understand way possible. “They’re like a big *Where’s Wally?*,” he says, himself skinny-framed and wearing a stripy jumper. But the “Wallies” he’s referring to are Rubens’s horses, Lombardo busts and sculptures from the Elgin Marbles. Before taking brush to canvas, he conceptualises his paintings — what he calls “collages of different paintings throughout history” — in a thoroughly modern way: on an app on his iPhone, where he cuts, pastes, rotates and layers scrapbooked images from the internet, books and beyond.

The pigsty is just one of the many outhouses of the 35-year-old’s new Essex digs. Although “digs” is selling it a bit short — it’s a higgledy-piggledy, whitewashed, grade II listed country house (“someone told me it was Henry VIII’s hunting lodge”) with over an acre of land. The apples and plums from the trees are given to the local pub for their pies. Oh, and there’s a pool that, when they arrived — “they” being Campbell, his wife, Sam, the co-founder of London’s hippest hair salon, Bleach, and their three children, Sid, seven, Honor, five, and Billy, five months — was more akin to a swamp.

Having lived in Dalston for over a decade (he met his wife at the famous Hackney haunt



Tomo Campbell in his Essex studio with the paintings *If Only*, left, and *Heaven Knows*

Below Campbell moved into this Essex house a year ago. Opposite Campbell’s painting *It Seems That Way Sometimes* hangs in the hallway. Campbell often hangs paintings here before they are exhibited



Bardens Boudoir), it has been a welcome gear change. Is his art imitating life? “Yeah, I think trees, quite abstract ones, have crept in more. There’s certainly a lot more green,” he says, gesturing to the biggest work in the show, which is roughly 8ft by 15ft. “I’ve got a bit of nervous energy and am quite quick with what I do... Often the same sort of motifs repeat themselves but they’re always different, evolving with momentum.”

There’s a piece that jars with those around it, the style of which I recognise as one of his earlier works; something similar sits above a fireplace in a much-shared house on Instagram by the interior designer Rachel Chudley. “That? Yeah, that’s an old one.” It’s too tantalising not to question its appreciation in value. “It was about £10,000 when it sold five or six years ago, but maybe £25,000 now,” he says without a whiff of complacency or boast. “I’ve got the next two years of exhibitions planned out [he has shown everywhere from Tokyo and Taipei to Miami], but after that, what happens if no one buys a painting again?”

Earlier this year, news of one of his early works, *Ok, Ok*, going to auction at Sotheby’s in Paris slightly perturbed him “because it’s like, if this does terribly then the price of the paintings could change, people would want to sell theirs. I honestly don’t really understand how it all works.” Thankfully it did fine.



## NEPTUNE

Thoughtful design, built to last a lifetime.

Kitchens Furniture Accessories Lighting Paint Design services  
neptune.com

Campbell grew up in an unarty family in Hounslow — his dad was in industrial printing and his mum was a bursar — and went to the local comprehensive. “It was the kind of art department where the paintbrushes were covered in PVA,” he remembers, though his teacher was encouraging and responsible for him applying to art school in the first place. At his graduate show at Central Saint Martins in 2010 Mario Testino bought one of his paintings.

When it comes to titling pieces, and indeed exhibitions, he’s inspired by his wife and his best friend, both northerners. “They always say, ‘To be fair,’ so that became one.” Others include *While You’re Up*, *C’mere* and *How’s Things*. They don’t mean anything, but as Campbell qualifies: “You shouldn’t have to have context to enjoy something.”

Of all the painters who have inspired Campbell, he would want a piece by the contemporary American artist Matt Connors. In the meantime his own work hangs in the living room. “I’m just waiting for someone to collect it,” he says. The someone in question is a divorcee who owned one with her husband, which he got when they split. A compliment of the highest order, then, that she wants to reinstate a reminder.

After meeting Testino, Campbell was invited to visit his personal collection in west London, which was “in a vault in a basement with studio lights”. “I was pulling these paintings out, like Yan Pei-Ming and Cecily Brown — it was my dream. Probably millions of pounds’ worth of stuff there that people couldn’t see,” he then says, momentarily saddened.

Campbell is convinced his success is down to luck. “Mario Testino could have been an hour late or someone else entirely. There are some painters I know who are just as talented as me who haven’t...” His thought trails off — he wouldn’t be so gauche as to finish that sentence with “made it”. ■ @phoebejmcd

*Spitting Feathers*, until October 7, Cob Gallery, London NW1, [cobgallery.com](http://cobgallery.com)



**Above** Campbell at the entrance to his studio, a space he also uses to pot plants. **Left** Paintings for the forthcoming Cob Gallery show, from left: *So*; *After All*; *Even If There Was*; and *If Only*