

MR PORTER



MR TOMO CAMPBELL

Artist, London

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Mr Campbell combines a formal artistic education with an instinctive painting style to create large-scale artworks that seem to tremble with nervous energy. The corduroy suit that he models in this short film is not too different from the one he wore to his wedding.

Mr Tomo Campbell talks like he paints. Words tumble out at the speed of thought. Half-finished sentences melt into one another. His hands move constantly, as if trying to lend shape to ideas too abstract for words alone. It makes for an amusingly off-beat conversation; you never quite know what he’s going to say next, and suspect that neither does he. When translated to canvas, though, that same nervous energy makes for strikingly beautiful art.

“I never have a preconceived idea of what I’m going to do,” says Mr Campbell in his east London studio. “The possibility of a painting can only happen in the moment. Ideas change depending on my mood, on the time of day, on what else is in the room.” That’s not to suggest, however, that his paintings are entirely spontaneous. Look beyond the feverish brushstrokes and evidence of a formal

artistic education begins to emerge. Littering the walls and floor of his studio are black-and-white scans of 15th-century tapestries, sketches by Flemish master Mr Peter Paul Rubens and paintings by little-known Victorian artist Mr Albert Joseph Moore. These classical influences are designed to reveal themselves over time, almost like a Magic Eye, Mr Campbell says: “The more you look, the more you can see.”



The charismatic Mr Campbell got an early break. A graduate of Central Saint Martins, he was thrust into the limelight when photographer Mr Mario Testino bought a piece from his degree show. Now 29 years old and married with a son, he has managed to establish himself as one of London’s most sought-after fine artists. With unruly hair, aquiline features and a penchant for corduroy suits – he even got married in one – he fits the bohemian ideal. But clearly there is even more to the artist than meets the eye. MR PORTER met him preparing for his new show in Melbourne, Australia.

It’s notoriously difficult to make a living as an artist. Did it ever worry you?

Never in those terms. I always figured that this was what I was going to do, and I’ve been lucky enough that it seems to be working

out. I’d never tell anyone to become a painter if they wanted to be make a lot of money, because you can’t predict your fortunes. That’s not the reason you do it.

How do you paint?

It’s quite instinctive. I like to let my work cross-pollinate. I might use one brush and go round several paintings at a time. I never really know when a painting’s finished, either. I like to leave that uncertain.

Do you have a set routine?

I’m in the studio from late morning until early evening, but during that time I could be doing anything. Sometimes I might get in the zone and work frantically for a three-week period, and then sometimes I might not paint at all. I might spend all day looking at a painting and trying to reassess it, or just doing admin – cleaning my brushes, that sort of thing. I don’t see that as any less important than time spent painting, though.

Have you taken any style cues from the art world?

When I first got into painting, I’d watch videos of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud in Soho in the 1960s and 1970s. They’d have paint on their shoes and their trousers, but they’d wear a cravat or an overcoat. And it would kind of smarten them up. It was scruffy yet smart at the same time. I quite like that if it’s done honestly. If it’s not, it feels like an affectation.

So that's not the sort of thing you'd copy?

I'd never go out with paint on my shoes, because I'd be terrified that people would think I'd done it on purpose. No – whenever I get paint on my clothes they become my “painting clothes” and they don't leave the studio.

Has becoming a father changed the way you dress?

Well, Sid [Mr Campbell and Ms Sam Campbell's one-year-old son] has no direct influence on what I wear. But I suppose becoming a dad has made me try to dress a bit more grown-up. Maybe that's why I've started wearing a lot more trousers? I've always imagined dads in trousers.

What do you look for in clothes?

I tend to think of myself as quite a messy person. My mum always used to say that I looked like a crumpled heap. I've got lots of nervous energy, and you can see that in the paintings, in the way I move, in the way I talk. The way I dress helps to counterbalance that a little bit. I don't want the clothes I wear to define me. I just want them to make me look presentable, that's all.

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