Peter Campbell

Clear Days, opening: Saturday, October 17, 2026. By Pieter-Jan de Paepe

At first glance, Peter Campbell's new paintings seem to be almost naïve representations of fleeting moments in the landscape. Waterfalls, densely wooded areas and open fields beneath a clear sky form the backdrop for blossoming trees, reflections on the water and vast horizons. Yet behind this apparent simplicity lies a meticulously balanced composition. Anyone who analyses the images will discover recurring patterns and interrelationships between forms and organic structures that forge the image into a unified whole. This quest for balance and compositional coherence is a constant feature of Campbell's practice.

A key source of inspiration for this exhibition is Cape Breton, a rugged and sparsely populated island in Nova Scotia, on the east coast of Canada. With its vast coastlines, rivers and largely unspoilt natural landscape, it offers an environment where long walks provide an opportunity to find peace, gather one's thoughts and work through inner conflicts. The sparse settlements and seemingly endless vistas heighten the sense of space, evoking a realisation of human insignificance in the face of nature's vastness. This experience of space, silence and tranquillity is an important starting point for Campbell's paintings.

Although his choice of subject matter is rooted in Canadian landscape painting, Campbell's work shows affinities with various European traditions. His compositions and use of perspective are reminiscent of British landscapes by Paul Nash and Eric Ravilious, while the sculptural natural forms recall Nordic painting by artists such as Jóhannes Kjarval. The rhythmic, divisionist brushwork also echoes the Swiss painting tradition exemplified by Giovanni Segantini and Cuno Amiet. These influences touch upon a fundamental dilemma within painting: every artist must, in a sense, start afresh, developing both their own conservatism and radicalism in the process. For Campbell, his attachment to the Canadian landscape is closely linked to his constant exploration of the possibilities of pictorial representation.

In this respect, *Clear Days* seems to mark a new clarity in Campbell's artistic development over the past five years. Whereas his earlier paintings often brought together hyper-complex, almost microscopic details to create an overwhelming whole – a kind of pointillist horror vacui that at times evokes psychedelic LSD experiences – his more recent works are characterised by a clearer representation of natural imagery. However, the same analytical approach to the organic world remains evident. It is as if the painter is zooming out from an extreme close-up, where the atomic building blocks of nature can be seen, to a broader perspective where larger structures and geometric relationships become visible.

This interest in geometric order in nature makes the art-historical comparison with Paul Cézanne evident. Cézanne, too, recognised elementary forms in nature, which he approached in a Platonic sense and whose interrelationships he explored in pursuit of a cohesive composition. In doing so, he took as his starting point what he termed 'the sensation' – the sensory perception that he translated onto the canvas through colour modulation and formal relationships. The painterly sensory experience thus took precedence over faithful representation of reality. Like Cézanne, Campbell is preoccupied with structure, particularly the way in which individual forms interact and interlock to form a convincing pictorial unity.

The idea of landscape as a pictorial structure has a long history. As early as his *Schilder-Boeck* (1604), Flemish writer and painter Karel van Mander emphasised the exceptional significance of landscape painting, regarding it as a paradigm for the art of painting. The visual impressions generated by the landscape served as a model for the composition of a painted scene, regardless of the subject. Figures in the foreground act as backdrops that define the field of vision, while lines of perspective and deep backgrounds draw the eye further into the scene. Within this *rhetoric of illusionism*, the landscape organises the viewer's visual pathways, enticing the gaze to enter the painted space.

It is precisely with this organisation of the visual experience that Campbell works. By arranging shapes and areas of colour in relation to one another, he brings certain elements to the fore, causes others to recede and makes yet others dissolve into the picture plane. This sense of depth is based on a painterly logic that serves the compositional structure. The result is a tension between deep space and flat space, between a depth that draws the eye into the landscape and a flatness that imposes itself on the viewer, with the two alternating in an almost musical rhythm and subverting the conventional rules of perspective.

His approach is as analytical as it is intuitive. He compares painting to a tentative movement in the dark, in which one tries to grasp the contours and weight of an unknown object. As if carving his way out of stone, he searches for the structure of an image that gradually reveals itself.

Behind this formal quest lies, ultimately, a distinctly romantic conception of landscape painting. For Campbell, the landscape is more than a subject: it embodies memories and feelings of longing, beauty and love. This emotional engagement is reflected in his aspiration to achieve 'presence', whereby, through his painterly treatment of forms, colours and spatial relationships, he seeks to give certain elements of the landscape an almost tangible quality. In this way, the painter seeks not only to capture what he sees, but also to make the very experience of looking perceptible.