



“Circle of Friends” Eva Campbell, (work in progress) 48 X 67 inches, oil on canvas

## Eva Campbell painting the town **RED**

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BROADLAND

**A**t the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria’s recent Christmas gift sale of small works, Eva Campbell’s miniature oils glowed like precious and semiprecious jewels—ruby, citrine and emerald. Her palette is as warm as the African nation of her birth, inviting us to sit by the hearth during our long winters. How, I wondered, would a woman bred in Ghana and raised in the warm Caribbean manage to maintain such intense creativity in this climate?

Campbell, who supports herself by teaching and selling her work, lives in a small apartment in Cook Street Village. When I slip and slide over icy sidewalks to her interview, she jokes that our snow reminds her of the beaches in Barbados. I find that this observant person has noticed my shoe fetish and pulled out a large canvas, which has been in progress for over a year. The painting dominated by a figure seen from behind—a frequent Campbell device—is of a circle of women, all of them flaunting arresting footwear. The beautiful Afghan carpet beneath their feet can barely compete with the shoes. Each one tells the story of the wearer, as does the demonstrative back of the woman whose skin and bones tells us everything about her.





“Embodiment” (work in progress) 60 X 36 inches, oil on canvas

I am amazed that Eva can work on such a scale in her small well-ordered living room, which has a large window facing onto Cook Street. “It lets in the afternoon light, which works for me because I often teach in the morning. Then, if I can’t stop, I paint far into the night using artificial light. The best light is in the months between March and October.

“I dare to dream of a studio that will allow me to work effectively: excellent lighting—even in winter—high walls to display artwork, good props and models.”

There are several works in progress leaning against the walls. Two life-size studies of women speak of spiritual bondage much as do the unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo. One, also seen from behind, called “Embodiment,” is a self-portrait of the painter wearing a corset and crinoline rented from Langham Court Theatre. The undergarments speak of colonialism and women as commodities. Campbell painted the corset laces red.

“They look like wounds from a whipping,” I notice.

“I thought so too,” Eva says quietly. She came of age hearing the rhetoric of the feminist movement, and has been educated in the prin-



“Cat’s Cradle” Eva Campbell, 2007, 30 X 47 inches, oil on canvas

ciples of equality, not only of women, but black women in particular. “I think it is important to examine and insert this part of Canadian culture into the mainstream.”

There are sisters in music and literature in particular who are making their way inside the cultural mosaic, but Eva is one of a few Canadian painters who are telling the stories of women with her cultural background. “Painting in the western world has been a male-dominated profession for many centuries.” Feminist perspectives are slowly changing that reality. Now, Campbell notices, more women are seriously training themselves for lives as artists.

Campbell is one of three children born to a mathematician father. Her mother has been a teacher and radio announcer. Campbell’s uncle was a painter, and her aunt designed the flag of Ghana. As a child, she was obsessed with drawing. Because she was reserved, she made her way socially through her paintings which were coveted by schoolmates, many of whom wanted portraits by Eva. During the political upheaval of the Sixties, her Barbadian father took his family back to the Caribbean. The young artist went to school in Jamaica, later returning to Ghana for art school.

As an intellectually liberated woman, she returned to a country where women’s art was still perceived as a domestic skill, convinced that “exchanges between cultures was legitimate in the post-modern, post-colonial diasporan context.” She gave herself permission to enter the mainstream of modern art.

Eva’s other passion is books. A reader of fiction and non-fiction, she still plays with the idea of painting with words. Certainly her pictures tell stories. On her wall there is a portrait of a friend sitting in front of her window playing cat’s cradle. Behind the subject, cherry trees

in complementary maroon and green promise a way out of the puzzle the woman is creating with her fingers.

“Some people think she looks relaxed,” Eva muses.

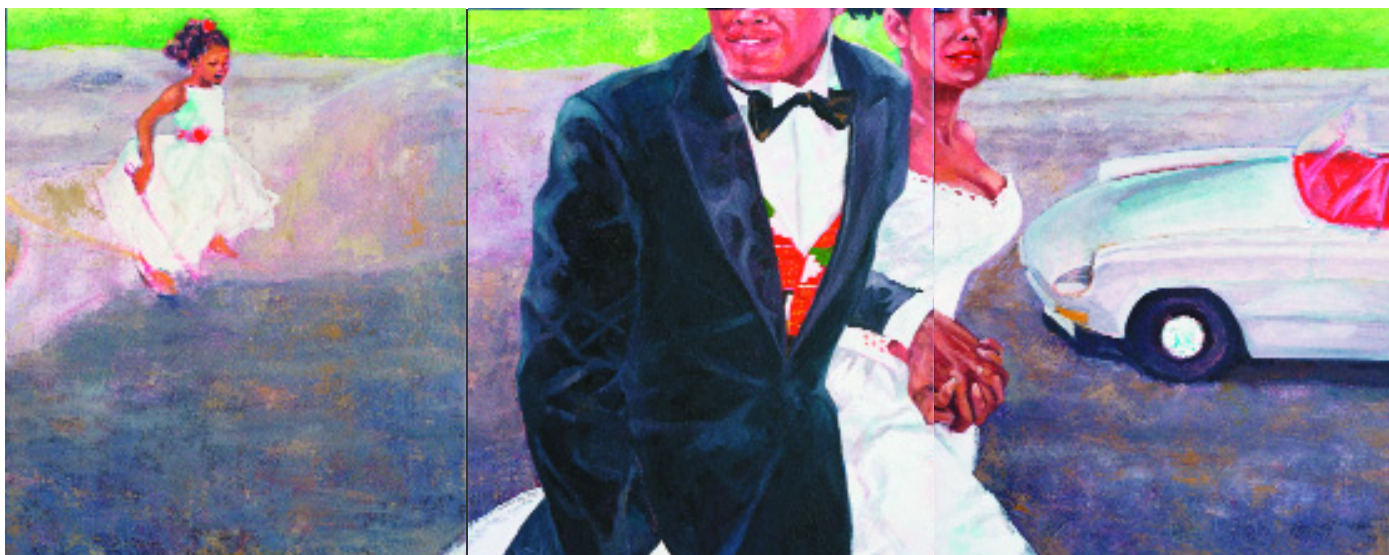
“Hardly,” I say, noticing the subtle tensions; and she makes the typically West African Um sound that indicates thought.

“Do you know that you do that?” I ask. Our mutual friend Chris Kumi, also Ghanaian, does the same thing. I think how lucky we are to live in a multicultural community where we have the opportunity to celebrate our similarities and our differences, the counterpoint ehs, uhms, and uh-huhs.

When I ask Eva, whose apartment is stacked with books, to name a favourite work of fiction, she says, not surprisingly, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, a colourful novel about transformation written for the author’s sexually complicated friend, Vita Sackville-West. Visually rich, *Orlando* weaves different periods and realities into an androgynous character, much as Campbell integrates her life on two continents.

Perhaps it is in the medium of film that Eva finds the most satisfactory fusion of her major passions, words and picture. Last year she made a film, *Routes*, which examines her arrival in Victoria and subsequent search for African-Canadian culture and history in the city. Another is soon to follow. “Film making is another vehicle to examine ideas—it is collaborative, unlike painting, which I need to do in the more solitary and meditative space in my studio.”

The artist, who came to the University of Victoria on a scholarship to complete her MFA and stayed, has brought pieces of Africa and the Caribbean with her. She resolutely re-creates the intense light that illuminated her childhood. The rich cadmium red and yellow ochres that inspire intense feelings of joy in spite of what we know of the realities



Untitled triptych, Eva Campbell, (work in progress) 30 X 72 inches, oil on canvas

of this world, reflect her inner landscape, the memory that informs her oeuvre.

It is the lives of women that interest her. She paints portrait after portrait of women with skin that has the patina of experience. Many are Black, their stories told in the texture of skin and hair, their choice of fabric and accessories. The women stand like plinths in the light, as if they know the future of Africa and the world rests on their shoulders.

Eva has not yet had a child of her own, but she is auntie to many. "I am intrigued by the mysteries of motherhood," she says. Her paintings

of children, usually notoriously difficult to pose and present realistically, are eloquent in their grace. Her short subjects appear to be confident of their importance in the time to come. A large wedding triptych shows a bride and groom in half-face. It is the child, skipping in the bride's long veil, who is the real focus of the series. She is the future.

"How do you see so well with paint on your glasses," I ask as Eva polishes the lenses with her shirt. She is an artist who sees with her heart.

Several commissioned paintings hang in various stages of completion. This is bread-and-butter work, but Eva insists she falls in love

when her subject is willing to be emotionally naked in front of her. Their sorrows, their expectations are the truths she seeks to reveal.

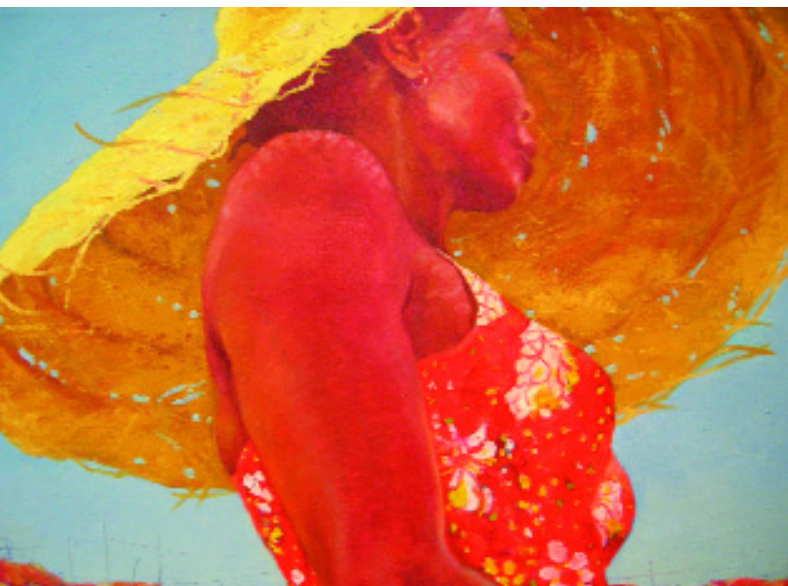
"I see my subjects as actors. They release particular aspects of themselves when they sit for me. Sometimes using costumes helps bring that out."

Does she have any difficulty finding models, I wonder? This I know is the bane of figure painters, and she did mention models in her wish list. Convincing people to sit long hours is not easy and can be very expensive for an artist.

Eva laughs. Then she asks what I am doing in the next little while. That is my answer.

"Who do you admire?" I wonder, thinking that Campbell will probably name African predecessors, Ghanaian painters who influenced her formative years. Surprisingly, her list of mentors, which does include Amon Kotei, Skunder Boghossian, Yinka Shonibare and the African-American collagist Kara Walker, also mentions European artists of the Renaissance and modern periods. Vermeer is regarded for his details and Caravaggio for his treatment of light, Velasquez for his elegant social commentary.

Of the modern painters, she mentions the brilliant British painter Lucien Freud, nephew of Sigmund, feminist Jenny Saville, and Henri Matisse, among others.



"Woman in a Hat" 2001, 18 X 30 inches, oil on canvas

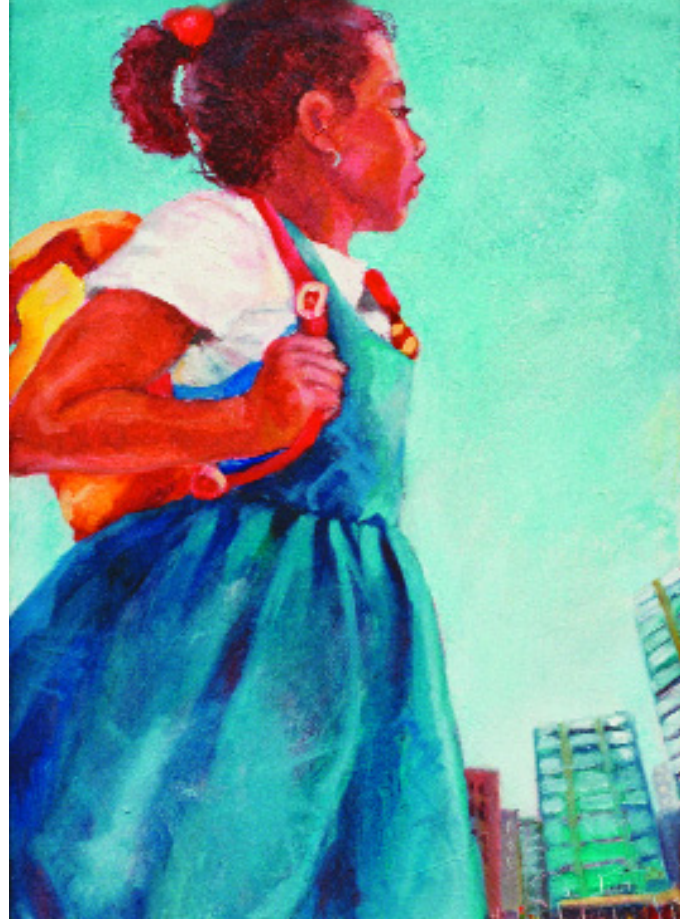
"If the Fauve painters could borrow from African and Oriental tradition," she argues, "why would it be so strange that an African painter would in turn be influenced by them? Why can't an African woman continue the European tradition?"

In traditional Africa, Eva mentions, women paint the insides of their houses, men the outside. This is an interesting metaphor for her own domestic and female preoccupations. She too is an interior painter.

"I sit on my sofa for hours looking at my work in progress," she says apologizing for the possibility that she has worn out the springs and I may not be able to extricate myself. "Who was it that said art is ten percent inspiration?"

"George Bernard Shaw," I answer. "And 90 percent perspiration."

"For me it is ten percent inspiration, 90 percent contemplation." She laughs. Eva looks for the meaning and the beauty as the work



"Off to School" Eva Campbell, 2006, 22 X 18 inches, oil on canvas

evolves. It reveals itself for her, telling her what she must do to advance the narrative.

"What about your own story? You came here to continue your education. Do you see yourself primarily as a painter or an academic."

"I got so caught up in painting that I abandoned my PhD dissertation on 18th-century racial images, specifically Caribbean trade cards."

Perhaps the temptation to tell the human story is more compelling than the impulse to examine the past. Eva is making history. It is more important to record the lives of women, especially African women who must take charge of the continent ravaged by colonialism, social unrest and disease and return it to its paradisiacal condition, in order to reinvent the opportunities that we were offered millennia ago, when Africa was our first home.

I ask Eva if she had seen Roland Brener's coffin ship when it was displayed at the Art gallery of Greater Victoria last fall. In one tradition in her home country, a man or woman may choose to be buried in the coffin that reflects his or her dreams. A woman who wishes to fly might choose an airplane.

A friend and student of Brener, Eva says: "Roland asked me about the coffin art in Ghana and he discussed the replica of his beloved sailboat which would be a perfect metaphor for him."

"What would you choose for your coffin, Eva?"

She thinks for a minute, then laughs. "Oh, a tube of paint! Cadmium red, of course!"

*Eva Campbell will be showing at the Martin Batchelor Gallery from April 28-May 24, 2007.*



Linda Roger's new book, *The Empress Letters*, is narrated by a Victoria painter whose Oak Bay house is built on a foundation of secrets and lies.