



COVER AND UNCOVER:

ERIC CAMERON

edited by Ann Davis

ISBN 978-1-55238-590-6

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

TO UNCOVER: AN INTRODUCTION

Ann Davis

In his 1995 novel, *Blindness*, José Saramago concluded with a provocative definition of blindness: the doctor's wife says "I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."¹ The distinction between ability and will is what is important. Eric Cameron, trying to see, covers his objects to expose the experience visible in the spaces around the objects. To see, Cameron covers, like the Buddhist artificer in Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*. His activity of painting, with all its unpredictability and surprises, mirrors and reveals his life.

Cameron's oeuvre seeks to eliminate the distinction between art and life. His immense contribution not merely consists of the act of painting objects, but, more importantly, includes concomitant analysis, which has led him to embrace and reveal the mysteries of life. Well known in Canada, and now gaining increasing attention internationally, Cameron is one of Canada's great artists. His early work, his perceptive writings, his videos, and his Thick Paintings – very tangible objects, or more accurately objects made into new objects – demonstrate his extraordinary creativity, persistence, and sensitive analysis.

This is a book about the work of Eric Cameron, painter, author, teacher, and videographer. Perforce it is also about the life of Eric Cameron and how that life informed his art. The emphasis is very much on the work, Cameron's rich production over almost fifty years, but the relationship between the life and the work inevitably creeps in, drawing attention to the author's background, ideas, ideals, location, and even feelings.

Eric Cameron was born in Leicester, England, in 1935. He turned to art, he declared in his self-deprecating way, after failing Greek at grammar school in Durham. From 1953 to 1957 he studied art at King's College, Durham University, in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, under Lawrence Gowing, Victor Pasmore, and Richard Hamilton. Gowing in particular taught the "Euston Road" method, deliberate and painstaking, demanding impersonal figures and still lifes painted in tones and relationships. Upon graduation with his coveted first-class honours degree, Cameron went to the Courtauld Institute in London, studying Renaissance and

nineteenth-century European art history from 1957 to 1959, graduating with an Academic Diploma in History of Art.

In 1959 the newly graduated artist accepted a position teaching at the University of Leeds, where Quentin Bell was Head of the Art Department. (Lawrence Gowing would later take over from Bell.) Cameron spent ten years at Leeds, teaching art history and producing his Process Paintings, those carefully executed conceptual works made by applying paint through a grid of one-inch masking tape. These were given the first and only solo exhibition in 1967 at the Queen's Square Gallery in Leeds.

After a decade at Leeds, in 1969, Cameron moved to Canada, where he was appointed Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Fine Art at the University of Guelph in Ontario. There he embarked on video as the second phase of his oeuvre – short, time-based essays on the desires, absurdity, and, sometimes painfulness of everyday life. Seven years later, in 1976, he moved to Halifax to teach at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), staying for eleven years, before moving to Calgary in 1987. In Halifax, in the spring of 1979, he initiated his Thick Paintings (to be continued), the constant application of gesso on ordinary objects – an egg, an alarm clock – the work he continues to this day. Like the Process Paintings before them, the Thick Paintings developed from an interest in materials and a belief that, with sufficient hard work and precision, he could manipulate and control those materials to execute his idea. Despite his strenuous efforts, his self-denial and self-criticism, small imperfections in the results confounded him. Much of his voluminous writing has focused on exploring and explaining these imperfections and analyzing his changing responses. Cameron continues to teach at the University of Calgary, where he was Head of the Department of Art from 1987 to 1997, and was appointed University Professor in 2004, one of the highest honours a university can bestow.

He has participated in numerous exhibitions, both in Canada and abroad, starting in 1953. Solo shows include *Bent Axis Approach* (1984) at The Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, Alberta, *Squareness*: (1989 at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta, *Divine Comedy* (1990), a joint production of the National Gallery of Canada and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and *The Shadow of Self* (1992) at the Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, D.C. His international activities include *English Roots*, at the Tate Gallery St. Ives, England, *Kaleidoscope*, Amsterdam, *Voici*, Palais des beaux-arts, Brussels, *L'oeuvre en programme* in Bordeaux, France, and *Eric Cameron – Record of Work* in Paris in 2008.

In addition to his exhibitions, his writings, sales, and awards are impressive. Cameron had published extensively, including the books *Bent Axis Approach*, *Divine Comedy*, and, recently, *English Roots*. His works are held in major collections such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, as well as at the University of East Anglia and Leeds University. Cameron's considerable accomplishments, both his inspired teaching and his unusual art, have been recognized with major awards: the Victor Lynch-Staunton Award (1992), the Gershorn Iskowitz Prize (1994), and the Governor General's Award (2004). He has also been honoured by his peers, being elected a fellow of both the Royal Society of Arts and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

This book comprises four essays, each exploring one aspect of Cameron's creativity: his writings, the Process Paintings, the videos, and the Thick Paintings. Together, these essays produce the only concentrated analysis of all periods of Cameron's work. Detailing both the development of his creativity and the important changes in his art and in his philosophy, the authors also clearly adumbrate the principal thinkers Cameron has sought and explores how they have influenced him and his work.

The first essay is Peggy Gale's "Eric Cameron: Author, Author!" Gale looks at six of Cameron's strikingly honest autobiographical texts, starting with the most expansive one, *English Roots*, using this to give us an abbreviated biography of his obsession with a deep and detailed examination of every aspect of his life and creative endeavours. Interested in Cameron's "visual Freudian slips" and the engagement she sees in his Thick Paintings, Gale argues that the mechanical covering of objects releases the artist from self-conscious artistry, from aesthetic decisions. Here Gale refers to Marcel Duchamp's map of unfulfilled sexual consummation, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, suggesting that since the Thick Paintings are to be continued, perpetually unfinished, similarly Cameron's sexual desires can never be satisfied. Throughout these writings, Gale notes a tone of regret, the suffering of loss, a sense of disappointment, in this a confession on the order of St. Augustine.

In the next essay, departing from Cameron's early works, his Process Paintings, I examine how these conceptual pieces forecast both his videos and his Thick Paintings in their covering and imperfect materialism. Cameron's frustration, his constant search for the inevitability of form, led him, through Clement Greenberg, to Aristotle. It is with an understanding of Aristotelian form that one can apprehend Cameron's conviction of perfection, of the unavoidable. Then I turn to Cameron's oft-stated conclusion that his practice can be labelled "material

mysticism,” a term that seems almost to be an oxymoron. Again Aristotle, with his concept of one world, both real and eternal, provides the bridge necessary to accommodate both matter and mystic, a spiritual possibility, itness.

The third essay, by Diana Nemiroff, examines Cameron’s videotapes, produced between 1972 and 1981. Initially Cameron began by formulating a conceptual program for the work he was to undertake, probing the difference between video as document and video as art. Each of his resulting videos made the camera an actor in the end production rather than just a passive means of recording an act. In these works Cameron’s struggles are most evident; the passions that nourish his art are close to the surface. By considering seven tapes, Nemiroff exposes the artist’s ongoing battle with imperfection and incompetence, recording his failure to conceal the irrepressibility of everyday life and the sexual desires that are a part of it. This trope then is identified as a characteristic not simply of the videotapes but of each phase of his work, such that concealment and exposure taken together form parts of a single whole.

The final essay, written by Thierry de Duve, considers the Thick Paintings, those enigmatic ghost objects started in 1979 to be continued. De Duve probes Cameron’s insistence on an art that justifies “the inevitability of its particular form,” the blind rejection of chance, of accident, by examining Kant and the problem of freedom to respond to ethical imperatives. Rejecting or deferring the aesthetic decision, Cameron contends that he is the instrument of a mechanical process beyond his control and that his role is to induce his materials to fulfill their own nature. De Duve argues otherwise – and here Cameron and de Duve agree to differ. By bringing Kant up to date and supposing him to be familiar with today’s science, de Duve suggests that Cameron has created a new interpretation of Kant’s theory of genius wherein the antinomy between nature and freedom has been eliminated and has become a domain beyond nature (science) and freedom (art), yet contains both. De Duve concludes that Cameron’s program is determined by an aesthetic idea, or taste, and renames Cameron’s material mysticism, “transcendental materialism.”

These essays uncover the mystery that is Eric Cameron’s art and expose his probing analysis, his personal honesty, his persistent dedication, and his extensive knowledge. To see, Cameron covers. His activity of creating, filled with struggle and passion, mirrors and reveals life. Eric Cameron’s writings, Process Paintings, videos and Thick Paintings all defend the usefulness of space around and beyond objects. His works are eyes that have been blinded and can now see. They are the indefinable defined, the experience of life brought to mysterious, intangible reality.



Photo of Eric Cameron, 2010. Photo: David H. Brown, University of Calgary Imaging Services.

