

Thisness and Barbara Campbell Thomas's Paintings

The Medieval theory of haecceity asserts individuality resides within a person's or object's *thisness*, the non-qualitative properties that make someone or something not just **any** someone or something, but particular. A haecceity is not a "wedding ring;" a haecceity is the specific band you wear on your finger, weighty with personal significance. Barbara Campbell Thomas's paintings are equal parts paint, collage and fabric piecing set within the painting ground. Her paintings' present construction, carefully evolved over the last fifteen years, reveals their *thisness*.

Thisness, in Barbara Campbell Thomas's studio, is the coupling of painting with quilting, a fusion rooted in the artist's simultaneous love for painting and her dissatisfaction with the narrow definition of abstract painting canonized in western art history. Five years ago, a different lineage opened up for Campbell Thomas when her mother taught her how to make quilts. The artist observes, "In the months following my mother's quilting lessons, I spent most evenings piecing together quilt blocks. The visual thinking at work as I sewed together color and pattern was deeply linked to the paintings simultaneously underway in my studio. But the material was new and unfamiliar, and initially I could not see where my sewing machine met my paint brush. I continued this foray into quilt-making, propelled to make quilts by a visceral realization: had I lived just 150 or 200 years ago, I would likely not have been a painter, because such an identity would not have been readily open to me as a woman. Instead, I understood with eerie clarity, I would have made quilts. I started to see quilting as the flipside of painting, and immediately a new strain of influence and possibility opened up before me."

Thisness, in Campbell Thomas's paintings, is rooted in the particular physicality of commingled paint and fabric. But Campbell Thomas's attentive working of paint, fabric and collage is not an end in itself; rather materiality is a conduit into the unfolding co-exploration of her own bodily *thisness*. Through painting she asks: What is it to make a painting as a body? What is it for a body to breath and also to paint? When does a body end and a painting begin? Such questions fan out across the surface of her paintings through rhythmic shifts of wobbly line and through repetition of simple shapes made at ever larger scales. The latter evoke patterns of inhalation and exhalation, linking repetition with rhythm. Along with the painting's emanating linear elements, Barbara Campbell Thomas's propensity toward high-keyed jolts of color evoke an ecstatic, unfolding space that plays with scale, and depth perception.