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The Swell Life

Thomas Campbell's endless summer.

By Lisa Eisner and Roman Alonso

Photographs by Lisa Eisner

Thomas Campbell is 37, an Aries, an artist, a film director, a painter, a photographer, a sculptor, a skateboarder, a surfer of twin fins, of single fins, of fish fins, long boards and even of lunch trays, a global traveler, a record-label founder, a designer of album covers, a stuff maker, a dude who keeps everything at hobby's distance to further his enjoyment of life.

He is perhaps best known, however, as one of the Beautiful Losers, the bicoastal movement of street-smart artists who take their cues from underground culture — skateboarding, graffiti, hip-hop, you know, low-brow art. The school of art that has nothing to do with any school but the one of real life and counts among its students Barry McGee, Mark Gonzales, Ed Templeton, Chris Johanson, Spike Jonze and Mike Mills.

Campbell, who lives and works out of a tiny, nondescript house in the hippie surf town of Santa Cruz, Calif., grew up an Orange County punk and has remained true to an eclectic, outsider sensibility that traverses all kinds of media — drawing, painting, photography, film and music. “I grew up skateboarding in the 70’s and 80’s,” he says. “Back then it was normal for skateboarders to do graffiti, draw, paint, take pictures, make movies, play music, make a zine. My work is about an aesthetic. You don’t need a manifesto to understand it.”

Aaron Rose, the founder of Alleged Gallery in New York and the curator of the Beautiful Losers traveling exhibition (most recently up in Milan), gave Campbell one of his first shows, in 1994. “Thomas is like a multimedia corporation but completely underground,” he says. “He runs a creative empire from his house, and he doesn’t even have an office. That guy is so busy — the art, the music, the movies, the T-shirts — but always makes it seem like he’s out surfing . . . and he is.”

In 1999, Campbell released “The Seedling,” a “traditional single-fin long-boarding movie,” followed by “Sprout” in 2004. “The surf world has been segregated for years — people either ride long boards or short boards,” Campbell says. “Through the films, I wanted to show people all the possibilities, whether riding fishes or short boards or eggs or long boards or even boogie boards, surfing is a sensational activity. I wanted to show all the different possibilities we have in accessing the ocean.”

Both films were largely self-financed, mostly on his credit cards, and have become cult favorites, selling more than 50,000 copies on DVD.

Campbell promotes them in much the same way that Bruce Brown promoted his surf films (“The Endless Summer” among them) in the 60’s: by taking them on the road and showing them in community centers and local movie houses around the country. His films are of a similar genre as well — beautifully photographed travelogues that wander from point break to point break in the eternal quest for the perfect wave. Campbell has done up to 60 shows in 32 locations, traveling for three months at a time. He screens the film, bands perform, stuff gets raffled off. And kids get turned on because it’s the opposite of a movie premiere — pure grassroots and totally authentic. “There is no compromise with the films — they are not for the general public,” he says. “They are for surfers only, and the only way to get the films to surfers is to take the films to them.”

Campbell also has a record label, Galaxia, which he started back in 1992 with his friend and neighbor Greg Lamson. Their 28 releases range from indie rock to folk to modern classical Indian music by the Oakland band Gojogo. Like all things Campbell, the record label is more or less a hobby. It has worldwide distribution and a big following in Japan but basically breaks even. His M.O. is to work with longtime friends and watch them mature professionally; plus the biggest perks are the instant soundtracks for his surf films.

But 2006 is Campbell’s art year. All year he has been painting and drawing on canvas, wood planks and gourds. He has been building mini-shacks on stilts out of scraps and painting otherworldly creatures all over them. And he has been sewing intricate paper pinwheels that resemble psychedelic quilts for a show currently at Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles and another later this fall at the Museum Het Domein in Sittard, the Netherlands.

He is also busy with his gig for the clothing brand Paul Frank, for which he serves as “cultural ambassador” and occasionally designs things — like the corduroys he wears. And he is marrying Tiffany Morgan, a fellow multitasker — skateboarder, surfer, filmmaker, author and animal tracker. “I just want to make stuff and push it within my own area — enjoy my life and enjoy my stuff,” he says. “I try to keep it noncorporate and totally creative, and this is what keeps the kids interested and excited. At my shows, kids always come up to me and say, ‘I’ve been painting and taking pictures and making stuff,’ which is great because they are not being surfer dorks, they are creating, and if what I do can inspire that, great.” ■



ROOM AND BOARD The artist and his fiancée, Tiffany Morgan (far left, bottom), live together in the small house that also increasingly serves as Campbell's studio. Campbell uses the living room for drawing and paints and builds stuff in his garage. The house is full of artful vignettes, like a collection of surfboard fins in the living-room window. The sculpture hanging by the front door is by the fellow Beautiful Loser artist Chris Johanson.