

Michael Alexander Campbell's Heroes, Villains and Other Toys at Villa Magdalena

Clare Gemima
March 9, 2026



Michael Alexander Campbell: Heroes, Villains and Other Toys, Villa Magdalena, Madrid, Spain. Photography: Pablo Gómez-Ogando

Two Whole Foods bags sat beside me in Izhar Patkin's studio, filled to the brim with shards of unsuccessfully fired bowls, plates, and cups from his 1998 series *Mistresses & Wives, Husbands and Other Lives*. "What are we going to do with all of these?" he asked me, covered in dust as he continued his smashing spree. "I'm sure someone could recycle them" I told him as I ordered an Uber to Palazzo Chupi. A strategic killing of two birds with one stone as I was also hoping to catch *Sovereign Lapse* — a solo show of paintings by Michael Alexander Campbell curated by Andrew Woolbright which had closed there only a few days earlier.

When I arrived, a delightful ginger figure appeared. Tall, yet immediately dwarfed by the canvases that surrounded him, Campbell spoke with contagious excitement about his

process in the studio and upcoming residency plans that would soon carry him to some of the most beautiful corners of the world. His enthusiasm matched the monumental scale of his works. He also, thankfully, relieved me of my porcelain donation.

Fast forward to 2026, Campbell's most recent exhibition, *Heroes, Villains and Other Toys* — organized in collaboration with Florence based Tamburini Projects — took place at Villa Magdalena in Madrid. Founded by curator and writer Cy Schnabel, the gallery has developed a programme attentive to narrative and figurative work, and remains open minded to exhibiting painters working across a wide range of approaches. Having previously presented artists such as Lucy Mullican and Mie Yim—two painters whose work I have had the joy of writing about—the space champions



VILLA MAGDALENA

experimentation in painting by artists spanning generations, geographies, and techniques.

Heroes, Villains and Other Toys brings together paintings Campbell produced during his residency at Tamburini Projects in Florence last summer. Throughout the exhibition, traces of Giacometti, folklore, and the visual languages of both Europe and America surface within distinct compositions. Campbell, the son of British and Scottish teachers, moved to Switzerland as a child and grew up in the Engadine Valley near the Italian border. His parent's pedagogies inform a practice that repeatedly draws from fantasised fairy tales and classical storytelling.

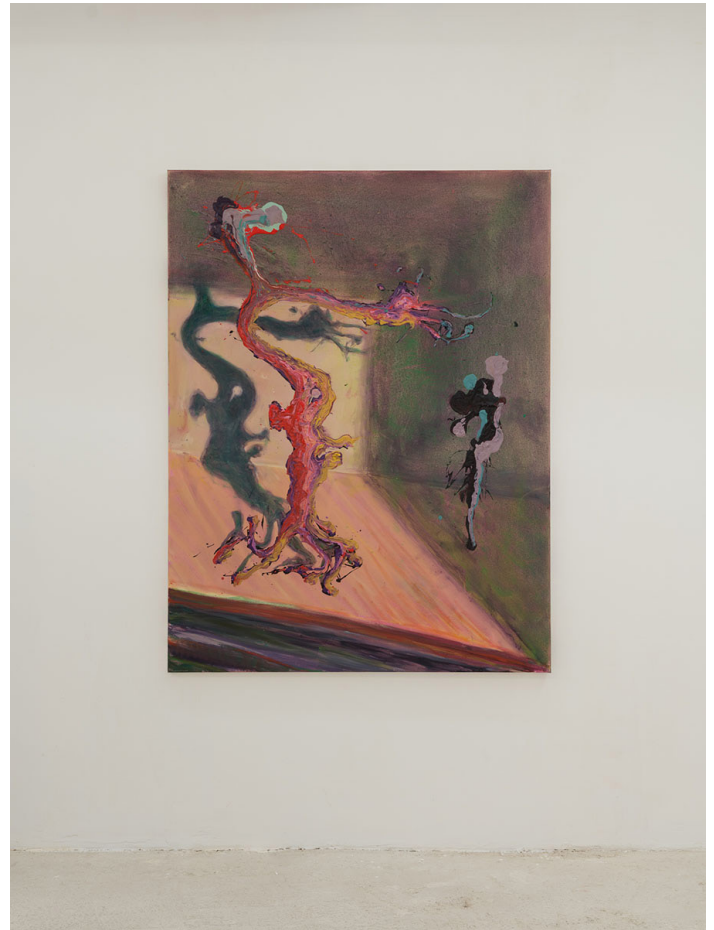


Sculpture Studio in Pietrasanta, 2025. Oil on canvas. 200 x 270 cm. (79 x 106 in). © Michael Alexander Campbell. Courtesy of the artist and Villa Magdalena. Photography: Pablo Gómez-Ogando

Sculpture Studio in Pietrasanta, 2025, takes influence from a photograph Campbell took during a visit to the 'Little Athens of Italy', one of the country's most historic centers of marble processing. Acting as a compositional scaffold, the image informed the painted studio interior which expands through ripe and romantic architectural details: a cathedral-arched wall, a diluted sunlit horizon line, and forms that seemingly hang, stand, or stretch in every direction within a cubic confine. Smudgy brushwork, almost chalky in finish, overcasts the composition in tones ranging from fuchsia and darting-shadow greys, to terracotta and muted mauves that discreetly demonstrate Campbell's finely tuned chromatic grasp.

Four sculptures swell and twist in place—like blown glass baubles or softened, puckered masses—their autonomy tested through unique heights and widths suggested merely by their accompanying shadows. As he explains, the painting "copies the forms of the photograph, but not

the content," allowing the scene to be reconfigured based on the painter's own curatorial discretion. Although echoes of elastic distortions of Dalí and Miró linger, Campbell's interests lie less in dream imagery than in pushing spatial invention. Occupying a threshold between abstraction and representation, *Sculpture Studio in Pietrasanta* ultimately offers something closer to a warped truth, or a painted white-lie.



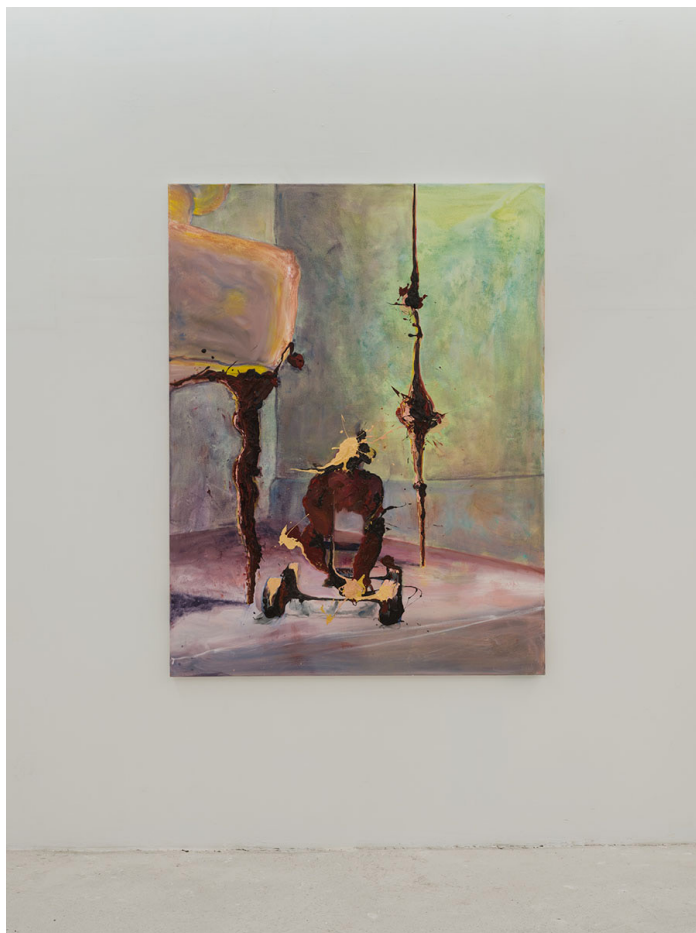
A Shop on Via Maggio, 2025. Oil on canvas. 170 x 130 cm. (67 x 51 in). © Michael Alexander Campbell. Courtesy of the artist and Villa Magdalena. Photography: Pablo Gómez-Ogando

A different painting takes its title from the historic Florentine street in the Santo Spirito district known for its antique dealers, artisan workshops, and noble palaces. In *A Shop on Via Maggio*, 2025, a spluttery, sinuous element dominates the foreground, and casts the sharpest shadow yet seen in Campbell's work. The image unfolds according to its own internal logic—more cousin to reality than direct transcription—as shadows simultaneously ground the forms in moments of undeniable presence, yet stretch the picture plane toward somewhere subtly otherworldly.



VILLA MAGDALENA

New York Charity Shop Safari I, 2025, grew out of a visit to an antique shop in Manhattan's East Village, where a stuffed monkey riding a go-kart caught Campbell's attention. Unfolding in cool greens and teals, with brown and wine-red undertones, the painting settles into a distinctly New York light, and generates an atmosphere markedly different from the Italy-based works. A piano leg anchors one edge of the composition, while the small vehicle appears suspended in motion—uncertain in its arrival or departure. Silhouettes secure the arrangement while overt subject matter fails to emerge. "These paintings inherit the geometry of the pictures I take" Campbell notes, emphasizing composition above all else. In this painting, as well as its companion in the series, *New York Charity Shop Safari II*, 2025, viewers encounter interiors that invite entry into what the artist describes as "a world within."



New York Charity Shop Safari I, 2025. Oil on canvas. 170 x 130 cm. (67 x 51 inches). © Michael Alexander Campbell. Courtesy of the artist and Villa Magdalena. Photography: Pablo Gómez-Ogando

In contrast to *Sovereign Lapse*, where, as Nicholas Heskies for the Brooklyn Rail observed, Campbell seemed "intently searching for something that might arise from

fragmentary lines, blotches, and strokes of paint," *Heroes, Villains and Other Toys* forges a firmer foothold in reality through glimpses of moments drawn from the artist's own journaling. Everyday encounters become staging grounds for images that feel both familiar and curiously estranged. Toys become less objects than vessels onto which viewers project meaning, much as we do with our own imagined versions of heroes and villains. In Campbell's hands, these archetypes loosen from their literality, leaving viewers suspended in a world where meaning remains slightly unsettling. It is within this delicate instability that Campbell's work, in its many states of limbo, finds strength in proposing images that feel less like faithful records than surreal scenes from a persuasive non-linear fiction.

Michael Alexander Campbell (b. 1999, Cambridge, UK) lives and works in New York. He studied Fine Art at Lancaster University (UK). Solo exhibitions include Villa Magdalena, Madrid (2026), Luce Gallery, Turin (2025) and Casa del Popolo, New York (2025). He has also completed residencies with Tamburini Projects, Florence (2025), the Edelman Glion Summer Residency, Switzerland (2025) and at Palazzo Chupi, New York (2023).

Based between the Basque coastal city of San Sebastian (Donostia) and Madrid, Villa Magdalena was founded by curator and writer Cy Schnabel (b. New York, 1993) in the fall of 2020. Villa Magdalena's multigenerational and international identity places emphasis on symbolic figuration and narrative painting, while also embracing artistic practices with a multimedia sensibility. The exhibitions reflect a long term commitment to emerging artists and rediscovering mature talents. Embracing a collaborative ethos, the gallery expands artist exposure through curated exhibitions at international galleries and projects at off site locations. The curatorial criteria of the gallery is led by the founder, from the selection of artists, to the exhibition design and production of each presentation. Publications and carefully crafted communication distinguish the gallery's literary sensibility. WM

Michael Alexander Campbell
Heroes, Villains and Other Toys
January 15 – February 19, 2026
Villa Magdalena, Madrid