

J. Lynn Campbell



Symbol Process Provocation

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Essays by Lyn Carter and Margaret Rodgers

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Body House

How do we reconcile the imagined self with the hard reality of an allotted body? Are we all that we see in the mirror?

J. Lynn Campbell's latest works carefully rechart the complex landscape of the physical self. In her *Model* series Campbell has constructed surfaces that hint of mapped muscles. At first glance these works appear to be elegant recreations of anatomy models, airy renderings true to a familiar understanding of the body's make up. Anatomy models, which picture the body as a layering of identifiable, well organized systems, are encountered almost daily in colourful charts posted in the media or in our doctor's, dentist's, and chiropractor's offices. Campbell's models are, in fact, forms cast from real bodies. The markings within the forms are dressmaker's pattern lines generated from skintight fittings. These are depictions of individual male and female bodies. Particular.

Lived. The pattern shapes mimic muscle definition, but they are constrained by the planar shifts of each given body surface. Looking at these works we experience a surface that reads as a skin doubling as garment.

In *Skin: on the cultural border between self and the world*, Claudia Benthien explains the clothing metaphor for the body as one that goes back to antiquity. She cites phrases of biblical origin that include "to put on the flesh" and "to put on a body." She notes that the bodily garment, understood as a garment of the soul given by God, was to remain unstained; should it become soiled, it was to be cleansed by penance.¹ This body, associated with clothing, has a certain flexibility. Clothing conforms to the body's shape; it is soft and is changed frequently. There is a responsiveness to this image, a picture that takes its shape from the physical characteristics of the body itself.

Alongside the garment another long-standing metaphor for the body's skin, also dating back to antiquity, is the house.

On the one hand, skin is used as a stand-in for "person," "spirit," or "life," as a *pars pro toto* of the entire human being. On the other hand, and this is what makes skin so singular, it functions simultaneously as the other of the self, as its enclosure, prison, or mask. The analogy between house and the human body has a long tradition. On closer inspection, the notion of living in the body always turns out to be a discourse about hollow space: the imaginary room created by one's own skin.ⁱⁱ

Benthien argues that over the last two centuries the model of the body as house has gained prominence over that of the body as dress. The shift signals a change in perception to an enclosure that is somewhat immovable and static with a surface that is more like an impermeable wall. Benthien cites examples from 20th century literature among other sources to make the case that within this perceptual model we experience our selves as isolated prisoners, hidden within the containing walls of our body. The skin is experienced as a barrier rather than a sensorial extension [of self] that registers cold, heat, pressure, pain and pleasure. Could it be that the growing numbers of teenagers and adults who elect to change their physical appearance through cosmetic surgery are the embodiment of this perception? If sensed as distinct from its occupant, are we merely living in a house in need of a little exterior renovation?ⁱⁱⁱ

In contrast, the skin of Campbell's models is visually porous. The empty insides are receptacles for an imagined interior seen through and shaped by particular surfaces and materials. In some forms, the quiet of the emptiness is pierced by hair-like threads of copper wire, evoking the sensation of touch. Keeping in mind that touch is the first of our senses to develop,^{iv} the primacy of this gesture, on Campbell's part, reminds us that, though a model, the sensations of the modeled subject cannot be forgotten. In fact, poetically speaking, these works may be read as models of touch.

The majority of works in the *Model* series are made of a fine metal mesh screening. Different metals are used: copper, brass and stainless steel. These substances are symbolically charged. We know that at one time metals carried meanings beyond current associations shaped by the needs and requirements of industry. Copper has long been used for its healing qualities. Campbell's own research revealed the use of copper in powdered form during the seventeenth century. Called the "powder of sympathy," bandages soaked in water and copper vitriol were applied to the body to reduce inflammation.^v Viewed side by side in the exhibition, each material used in the *Model* works projects a different nature. The copper grows a green patina as it oxidizes. The steel gleams with a sterile utilitarianism. A golden glow permeates a glove, knitted from brass filament that is paired with another in copper; inside one of the mesh torsos they sit in the chest cavity as surrogates for the lungs. *Model #6* is rendered in handmade paper, creating a surface most evocative of skin itself. It is interesting

Model #6 exterior (top) and interior (bottom) 2003; Japanese handmade paper Kurotani, #96, thread, 36-gauge copper wire; 137 x 131.75 x 18 cm, stainless steel wall mounts 30 cm in length



that in the language of the Chirigua Indians of South America the word paper literally translates as “the skin of God.”^{vi}

That Campbell leaves the inside of the body visible turns us toward the body as container, the contents of which appear more complex than the generalized and categorical elements named by clinical science. We are led to imagine these contents through the outside skin that is presented to us. There are clues. Pierced images puncture the surface: a skull, spiral, honeycomb, a rose. These are symbols that relate to growth cycles: life, death and rebirth. Subtly, Campbell's delicate renderings lead us in reverse from the traditional anatomist's practice, though the science of anatomy is never quite forgotten in these works. Campbell reintroduces us to the notion of meaning inextricable from the substance of materials, most importantly the material of our own body. This notion further separates Campbell's *Model* works from the generic bodies of the anatomy textbook—the secular, dissected Adams and Eves. The body that is revealed through the science of anatomy is a markedly different body from that which preceded it.

Benthien notes that

from a historical perspective, the body had to be individually demarcated and fundamentally demystified before the anatomist could cut it open as matter that ceased to embody symbolic meaning. The links between the inside of the body as microcosm and its relationship to the macrocosm surrounding it, which were deeply embedded in culture, had to be cast aside

along with the belief in the kind of living exchange between the inside and the outside.^{vii}

In *The Woman beneath the Skin*, Barbara Duden investigates how the human body was understood previous to the medical model of anatomy. Riveted by the detailed journals of a women's doctor in Eisenach around the year 1730, she unravels a different understanding of body using this as her primary source. She describes the early eighteenth-century body as one that is opaque.

It is a place of hidden activities. As long as a person was alive, his body could not be opened, his inside could not be deciphered, could not be seen. People could speculate about its inside only with the help of signs that appeared on the body or emanated from it. All this was self-evident before our anatomical certainties became common knowledge.^{viii}

Rather than a skin that is perceived as an impervious wall, "[t]he skin was fragile and it was a boundary, but it was not meant to demarcate the body against the outside world. It was above all a surface on which the inside revealed itself."^{ix} From her investigations, Duden found that, for the people of Eisenach, the body was understood as a container of "fluxes" in constant motion. These fluxes, which could continually change their form, would exit the body as blood, pus, urine, phlegm, or sperm. A person's condition was read through these excretions from the body alongside any signs that appeared on the skin's surface. The matter of the body could be affected by all manner of experience: a heart could be literally broken, menses could rise and bleed

from the skin, and passion could overheat the body.

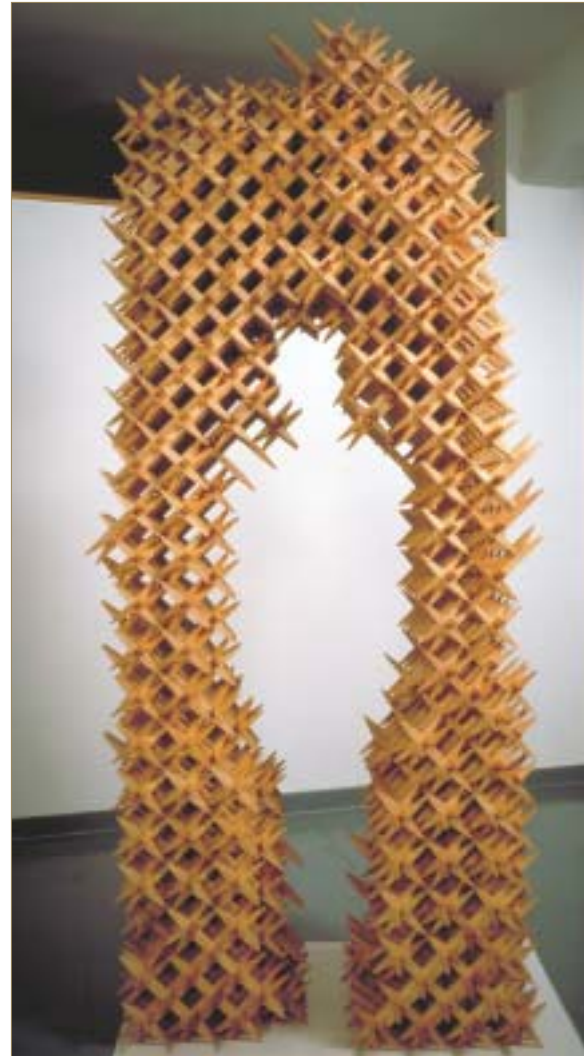
If the body prior to a dissected understanding was understood as an inseparable mix of physical, emotional and spiritual experiences, then Campbell's models are companions to these older models of thought. With a palpable potency, spirit, heart and soul are rooted in the very substances Campbell has chosen for her palette. In *Modern Model Form #8* we find musculature rendered in feathers. The metaphoric connections solicited by this material speak to archetypal associations that correspond to the element of air and to the realm of birds.^x This materially and symbolically rich surface encourages a reading that ties the body to external, universal stories while embedding the experience in a very physical present.

Campbell's use of materials and metaphor conjures up Surrealist strategies to create "a psychic disturbance," affecting both mind and the senses as a means to blur the distinction between thinking and feeling.^{xi} Surrealism looked to usurp rational interpretation through the disruption of logic. Unlikely materials coalesced with everyday objects in ways that mirrored dream's uncanny marriages. Campbell's *Maxim* recalls Surrealism's approach by substituting feathers in place of breath or speech. By tripping up the expected with materials that are so tactile, unconscious desire is enmeshed with bodily sensation. Truth is spoken in a language that is at once a physical extension of the body, and yet not of the body at all.

In *Passage*, Campbell forfeits the material for the immaterial. In this work the human form is defined by a surrounding

mass with the subject left as a vacant hollow. The substance of this work is an interlocking, three-dimensional wooden grid-work based on Japanese joinery. The pieces fit together puzzle-like, without nails or glue. The extreme logic of this configuration demands that each small piece must be equally similar for the mass to sustain itself. With the same precision as a successful magic act, the moment of truth is the realization of a vanished body. Matter understood as a particular ordering of microscopic elements gives way to the metaphor of puzzle—if one piece is off, the whole thing falls apart.

In a sense *Passage* encapsulates much of what lies behind all the works in the exhibition. In this particular work it is the surrounding environment that defines the form, the world determining the body. Like the *Model* series the human body is inextricably linked to that which it is amongst and definition is reciprocal. A whole is experienced as interconnected parts that, if isolated, risk the price of complete collapse. In Campbell's work, the image in the mirror cannot stand alone—it is only one piece of the puzzle. □



Passage 1990; bass wood, Danish oil; 244 x 106 x 61 cm

Model #7, 2003; stainless steel wire fabric (200 mesh/.0021 wire diameter), 34-gauge stainless steel wire, 20-gauge steel wire; 3.5 x 84 x 127 cm; steel trolley and casters, 10 x 50.5 x 81 cm; 110 round feathers, acrylic paint (iridescent stainless steel fine: iron, chromium, nickel), braided 34-gauge stainless steel wire (18 strands)





Maxim. 2002. Maple wood, found feathers, 30.25 x 15 x 67 cm; wall mounted steel plate, 15 x 23 x 30.5 cm

Modern Model Forms #8 1998-2001; dressmaker's form (Judy), found feathers, metallic paint (stabilized metal alloy base, Cu/Zn), brass wire, staples, dressmaker's tempered steel pins; 162.5 x 35 x 35 cm



Model #5 2002; copper wire fabric (100 mesh / .0045 wire diameter), 34-gauge copper wire, 34-gauge brass wire; 89 x 61 x 35 cm, flexible metal wall mount 48 cm in length



Delicate Armour

The exhibition title *Symbol-Process-Provocation* embodies all three aspects of Lynn Campbell's artistic process. The long and arduous path to completion is a Pilgrim's Progress toward finished works that find their existence outside the studio and into the public sphere, challenging and provoking audiences to explore meanings and relationships inherent in bodily forms fabricated from copper, stainless steel, feathers, and wood. The culmination of years of work, the exhibition includes three earlier pieces and seven new sculptures, allowing viewers to experience, understand, and appreciate the range and magnitude of her practice from 1990 to 2003.

Passage of 1990 is a freestanding doorway comprised of thousands of interlocking strips of wood. It frames a human-shaped figure, a negative space suggesting both an opening through the piece and the body-oriented direction that the artist takes in subsequent works. Constructed from 2,100 linear feet of basswood cut into approximately 2,000 pieces that measure from 15 cm up

to 130 cm in length, hand-crafted components fit together by a series of notches and "keys". Campbell notes that this method of joinery is used in Japanese roofing structures and can also be found in "Tramp Art," an American folk art form practised by tramps on the road who fashioned decorative objects from cigar-box wood and other found material. Here, the basic joining principle has been extended to a multi-layered, interconnecting structure. For the artist,

Passage symbolizes change, a moving from one state to another. The intricacy of the structure symbolizes the complex correlation of experiences that affect change and ultimately determine who we are as individuals. The wood construction forms a diagonal pattern that optically moves both toward and away from the opening, alluding to our numerous connections with the world encircling us. The human form in essence has made its passage. What remains is an outline or imprint of what one has been, and a

confluence of events and experiences marked by time to establish a particular history.ⁱ

The “passage” leads toward new works, semi-transparent torsos, lower bodies, and individual legs. Each piece is a poetic construction, its complexities of meaning touching on many aspects of what it is to be human. Stainless steel or copper wire mesh fabric is hand sewn with fine-gauge wire to create a three-dimensional fascia-like component of the body. Two earlier constructions are *Modern Model Forms #8*, a feather-clad dressmaker’s form, and *Maxim*, a carved maple head spewing forth (or swallowing) a mouthful of feathers. Feathers were collected from where they fell on the Toronto streets and parks frequented by the artist on her daily run. They create a link between everyday physical activity and a human-animal continuum—a running woman, a bird in flight, a connecting of the earth-bound human to feathers intended for a flying creature.

This continuum has global resonance in myth and legend, and has been explored within the context of Canadian wilderness studies by artists and writers such as Margaret Atwood, Joyce Wieland, and Gaile McGregor, among others. With reference to Atwood’s thesis that we identify with animals because of our similar position as victim, McGregor argues that the animal world provides models of virtue, in myth, romanticized symbols, and passivity, all illustrating meekness as a survival trait.ⁱⁱ Wieland’s art is positioned within a mythical realm, describing that “in 1976 I began this whole other thing, of humans uniting with nature, interspecies relationships

—people having a pig’s foot instead of a hand...all about union with nature, with the consciousness of nature.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Material varies relative to its embedded symbolism and the associations connected to each piece. *Model #2* is constructed of stainless steel wire fabric, patterned from the muscle structure of the artist’s own form. Just as steel fabric is used industrially for filtering, the implication here is that the surface or skin of the body also acts as a filter to protect its interior from outside matter. But mesh can also be a sieve, a vulnerable conduit allowing easy passage in both directions. Exo-skeletal segments are sewn together with 34-gauge stainless steel wire. The surface is perforated with tattoos, effecting a delicacy in marked contrast to the steely medium. Judiciously chosen by the artist are images that include a honeycomb, skull, shell, spiral, leaves, a nine-pointed star, and a rose over the heart. Whether considered as ancient symbols, indicators of the female imaginary^{iv} or common images from daily life, each one resonates in its connections to universal and timeless human concerns about death, rebirth, and regeneration.

Model #3 is constructed in copper wire mesh and sewn with 34-gauge copper wire. Visually luxurious, the metal has weathered into the characteristic *verdigris* and an opalescent moiré produced when the screening is seen against its interior matter. Hair-fine copper wire is fed through the seams, filling the inside with bushy androïdal viscera, as fine as fibre optic material and spilling forth from the lower opening like vulnerable internal stuffing that has come away.

Model #1: 2001; stainless steel wire fabric (150 mesh/.0026 wire diameter), 34-gauge stainless steel wire, 20-gauge steel wire; 107 x 38 x 30.5 cm, flexible metal wall mount 48.5 cm in length



In *Model #4—sympathy* copper fabric and wire are used to model a right leg. Six copper clips are attached at the upper seamed edge, reminiscent of the clips attached to the body for various diagnostic procedures such as EKG or EEG. Braided copper wires descend from the clips, coiling into the hollow space of the leg. The copper is unoxidized, shiny as a silk stocking. The word “sympathy,” tattooed on the bottom of the foot, is a gentle reminder that the sole of the foot has a most humble position in bodily hierarchy, and yet it bears the entire weight of its more poetic corporeal members. While Campbell raises serious issues surrounding notions about science, the body, and its superficial protections, there is also humour in her use of the word “sympathy.” Who hasn’t heard their feet cry out against the unreasonable demands placed upon them by heart and mind? Based upon the same pattern, *Model #1* is an entire lower body, its contrapuntal configuration suggesting a tentative step. Stainless steel wire fabric is reinforced to maintain hollowness, the form unembellished, the visual information spartan, ascetic. The artist suggests that it might be “emptied of its contents, or conversely, in readiness to being filled.”^v

Model #5 is perhaps the most haunting of the series. A split torso is constructed from copper wire fabric, its muscle pattern meticulously over-stitched inside and out. Each section of the chest cavity contains strange hands or gloves made from knitted copper and brass. Suspended from metal wall mounts, the halves dangle against each other, presenting contradictory messages rife with clinical interventions, healing comfort, and pure horror. Are they manifestations of pulmonary intrusion, soothing

massage or murderous dismemberment? Mythically charged, copper has been used as a healing element for hundreds of years, copper vitriol considered a “powder of sympathy” in the seventeenth century. It is a transmitter, a conductor of energy, architecturally functional and aesthetically beautiful. As a sculptural medium it calls up references to the visual vocabulary of Joseph Beuys, (1921-1986) who postulated that materials carried symbolic import. In his idealistic vision, the artist was like a shaman and art an engine of utopian goals.^{vi}

Model #6, one of two male forms, is made from hand-made Japanese paper (Kurotani #96) and sewn together with cotton thread. Splayed and wall mounted, the interior is exposed in its concavity, the chest containing two embroidered heads that face each other in mute communication, mimicking the feathered cry of the earlier work *Maxim*. *Model #7* is also male. Arcs of steel wire protrude where muscles intersect, creating a linear dynamism recalling Futurist painting and sculpture such as Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* or Giacomo Balla's *Flight of the Swifts* of 1913. Two bundles of wire-bound, painted feathers lie beside the figure. Campbell has used the primary flight feathers, which produce the power for flight. Movement itself is frozen in this fallen warrior, some of his energy escaping in protruding arcs, much of it contained in the muscle articulation created where curved wire is restrained, sewn into the seams. Energy is made visible, as it is contained, restrained, and also escaping.

Campbell's art raises questions about the body and its role in perception, sensation and communication. She asks,

[i]s the body defined by the external cause to which we assign our sensations? Can we think of the body without extensions? Within an existing environment what are the circumstances in which a person lives, and how are these physical conditions viewed in relation to the possibility of life?

The work contributes to artists' explorations of spirit and corpus. Exquisite fabrication and the beauty of the objects ameliorate a certain element of shock—the human form headless, disconnected from its whole, and within a figurative tradition informed by contemporary anxieties. Historically, clay models were used as studies to explore sections of the body as separate entities.

Individual body parts by Michelangelo entitled *Straight Standing Leg*, *Male Torso*, *A Right Male Arm*, or *A Right Thigh, Knee, and Part of a Male Body* appear in later paintings and marbles by the Renaissance master.^{vii}

In Campbell's work, the part becomes the whole. She points out that the physical body and its recorded experiences and sensations inform the head; the body's knowledge of its wants or needs precedes intellectual awareness. By emphasizing muscular structure, she raises questions about stasis and movement, and human strengths and vulnerabilities. Images suggesting amputation, metamorphosis, enclosure, unity and disunity with nature can be construed as reaction to a threatened body, a gendered body, a body existing both within and outside nature. The fallacy of security and protection are underscored as Campbell creates delicate armour for a fragile body. □

Endnotes

Body House

- i Claudia Benthien, *Skin: on the cultural border between self and the world*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (NY: Columbia UP, 2002) 24.
- ii Benthien, 13-14.
- iii See Gayle MacDonald, "Girls under the knife," *The Globe and Mail* 13 Jan 2001: R1, R25. Also Alexandra Gill, "Starring (body) parts," *The Globe and Mail* 3 May 2003: R2.
- iv Benthien, 7.
- v From a conversation with Lynn Campbell, 19 Feb 2003.
- vi Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: Faces and Masks*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (NY: Pantheon, 1987) 3.
- vii Benthien, 42.
- viii Barbara Duden, *The Woman beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1991) 106.
- ix Duben, 123.
- x J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (NY: Philosophical Library, 1962) 98.
- xi Robert Short, *Dada & Surrealism* (London: Octopus Books, 1980) 93-94.

Delicate Armour

- i Artist's statement.
 - ii Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome* (Toronto: UofT Press, 1985) 197-200.
 - iii Rodgers, transcript of interview with Joyce Wieland, June 1988.
 - iv Luce Irigaray's term for the identification of the preconscious as a site for the cultivation of female culture.
 - v Artist's statement.
 - vi Lynne Cooke, essay for "Joseph Beuys: Drawings after the Codices Madrid of Leonardo da Vinci, and Sculpture (NYC: Dia: Chelsea, September 10 1998 - June 13, 1999) website.
 - vii Paul James LeBrooy, *Michelangelo Models formerly in the Paul von Praun Collection* (Vancouver: Creelman & Drummond, 1972) 95, 145, 112, 47.
- * Cover image: *Modern Model Forms #8* detail 1998-2001; dress-maker's form (Judy), found feathers, metallic paint (stabilized metal alloy base, Cu/Zn), brass wire, staples, dressmaker's tempered steel pins; 162.5 x 35 x 35 cm.
- * Page 3 image: *Model #2* detail 2001; stainless steel wire fabric (150 mesh/.0026 wire diameter), 34-gauge stainless steel wire; 81.5 x 66 x 24 cm, flexible metal wall mount 46 cm in length
- * Page 11 image: *Model #3* detail 2001; copper wire fabric (100 mesh/.0045 wire diameter), 34-gauge copper wire; 114 x 63.5 x 24 cm, flexible metal wall mount 46 cm in length.
- * Page 16 images: *Model #6* interior details 2003; Japanese hand-made paper Kurotani #96, thread, 36-gauge copper wire; 137 x 131.75 x 18 cm, stainless steel wall mounts 30 cm in length.

Biographies



J. Lynn Campbell, a Toronto-based artist educated at the Ontario College of Art, with independent studies in France and Open Studio, and studies at the University of Toronto and York University, has been exhibiting her art since the early 1980's in Canada and Europe. Recent solo and group exhibitions include those at the Natural Light Window Gallery, Toronto (site-specific installation); York Quay Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto; Deleon White Gallery, Toronto; Visual Arts Centre of Clarington; The Tree Museum, Muskoka, Ontario (site-specific permanent installation); ACC Galerie Weimar, Germany (site-specific installation); Circolo Culturale Il Gabbiano, La Spezia, Italy; The Library and Gallery, Cambridge, Ontario (site-specific installation); and The Koffler Gallery, Toronto. Campbell was a member of Workscene Gallery, the Broadview Collective (BVW), and is currently a member of the Tree Museum Collective and the Red Head Gallery in Toronto. Her work is included in private, public and corporate collections.



Lyn Carter is an artist, writer, and educator. She holds an MFA from York University, Toronto, and a diploma in design from the Ontario College of Art. Her artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and has been widely reviewed in publications including *Espace*, *The Globe & Mail*, and *Canadian Art*. For the last two years she has been Co Studio Head of Textiles in the Crafts and Design Program at Sheridan College, Oakville. She is represented by Peak Gallery in Toronto.



Margaret Rodgers: Curator of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, has developed numerous exhibitions for the Centre from 1989 to the present time. She has contributed critical essays to Visual Arts Centre projects, and is the author of *Locating Alexandra* on Painters Eleven member Alexandra Luke (Toronto: ECW, 1995).

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