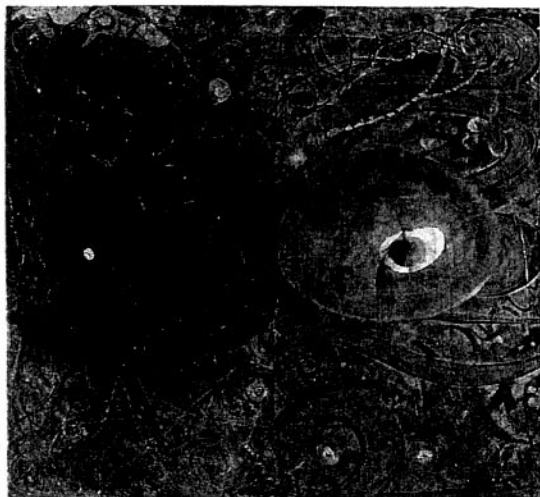


# ARTFORUM

January 2001



Suzanne McClelland, *Gertrude Stein and Alice*, 2000, absorbent ground, polymer emulsion, and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 34".

## SUZANNE MCCLELLAND PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

There's no way to synthesize Florine Stettheimer's florid fancies with the turbulent energy of Jackson Pollock, and why would anyone want to anyway? Doing just that, Suzanne McClelland's new paintings put the impossible at the service of the unreasonable. Stettheimer and Pollock do come to terms in McClelland's *Cynthia and Angela* (all works 2000): The Abstract Expressionist's flung and poured paint morphs into something resembling the arabesque festoons of Stettheimer's twee ornamentalism, as well as lettering that spells out a series of broken phrases: "i came to you," "you always said," "my eyes." Along with two other diptychs, *Frankie and Tallulah* and *Nina and Sophia*, *Cynthia and Angela* represents a break with McClelland's earlier work, and with the status quo of contemporary painting: It decisively sidesteps formalist self-referentiality without sacrificing (indeed, while intensifying) formal stringency and invention. With the possible exception of some works by Kerry James Marshall, these are about the only paintings being made these days in which subject matter is irreducible to an emblematic device—which is just as much the case with figurative painters like John Currin (or Alex Katz) as it is with abstractionists like Karin Davie (or Brice Marden).

As their titles imply, these diptychs are portraits—double portraits—though not of the familiar sort: They are pictures of dialogue (McClelland cites Gertrude Stein's "word portraits" as an inspiration). The material they handle is language—specifically, language the artist has culled from videotapes she made of conversations between the mothers and daughters for whom each painting is named. (The videos, not meant to be exhibited, served essentially as sketches for the finished work.) As with any portraits, only those who know the subjects can judge for likeness, but each canvas within the diptychs conveys a sense of stubborn individuality, just as their pairing forms an entangled but conflicted unity that is differently constituted in each case.

Of these conversation paintings, *Frankie and Tallulah* is the densest visually but the simplest compositionally, with its clear contrasts of black against white, perspectival recession against projection. *Nina and Sophia* is the most unruffled and lyrical, with its watery fields of greenish yellow and pink floating over delicate curling tendril-like lines of polymer emulsion, not to mention its goofy, bulbous, Peter Max-ish lettering of scattered phrases, insistent yet faltering, like "you you you get into into my life." *Cynthia and Angela* is a vast, empty, resounding architecture infested with frothy marginalia. Each of these works evokes a specific ethos and makes enough room for the viewer to enter it. The paintings neither illustrate the words they contain nor subsume them to a purely visual schema. You can't read them all the way through, but you can't just look at them as graphic shapes either. Instead, word and image, text and matter seem to erupt from within one another, each with an enormous plastic power with respect to the other. Four small single-panel paintings hanging in an adjoining room will seem more familiar to those who know McClelland's previous work, though they also pursue the notion of portraiture (one is a Dubuffet-esque *Self Portrait*). They are denser than their larger cousins, but less conclusive.

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