

Jerry Saltz

Cries and Whispers

Suzanne McClelland's *Ta Da*, 1990

Suzanne McClelland's paintings are cottonmouthed, murmuring, cooing things. They're talkative without being blabbermouthed; stammering and convoluted without being loquacious or garrulous. They're slow and unhurried—but slightly impatient. There's an awful, oozing formalism, an aggregate chaotic reverie to them. They feel anarchistic and unpredictable—in command and out of control. Her surfaces are as varied as her materials. She uses paint, clay, dirt, gesso, charcoal, and polymer mediums—and applies them with whatever it takes: hands, brushes, carving, gouging, or drawing. In a way, they read like emotionally charged, abstract David Salle. They reveal themselves in layers and through corrosive areas of paint and texture. But where Salle's surfaces are dense with images, almost bulimic with them, McClelland is open—more unfinished—and far less complex. There is an amazing physicality to her work, while Salle's remains forever elusive and un-pin-downable.

There's something very centrifugal about her paintings; things tend to happen around the edges of them. There is no left-to-right or top-to-bottomness about them. You can't read them like a book. They fly off in all directions at once—but then they sort of fall into place. Words begin to form and reform, and before you know it you're engaged in a kind of primary process, that of making shapes into letters, letters into sounds, and sounds into meaning. But the meaning McClelland makes you get is more than reading, it is remembering and experiencing the feelings that sounds like these made you feel, once upon a time, so long ago. We remember the ambivalence and hurt that words like "wait" made us feel. Even though the word is barely there—and it's carved into the surface, like a homemade tattoo on a teenager's arm—it resonates deep within us. You have to piece it together, but when you do, it reaches out and grabs you. There is no hierarchy or procedure in the way you "read" these paintings. You look at them and sounds



Suzanne McClelland, *Ta Da*, 1990, Oil on wood, 24" x 24".
Courtesy Stephanie Theodore Gallery.

begin to form within your head—letters and patterns emerge. You move your mouth while looking at McClelland's paintings, slowly forming the sounds or words she has placed in them. It's like lipreading. You begin to know the way an opera singer, say, feels the tiniest increments of sound. You see McClelland's daringly irrational paintings not only with your eyes, but with the air in your body, the shape of your mouth and the cavity of your chest. For this artist, breathing and talking are analogous with looking and knowing.

Like *Ta Da* (1990), almost all of McClelland's works are square and painted on plywood (although she does paint on canvas as well). This removes them from an instant "art" format, and takes away any

bookish "page-like" reading—makes them more like psychological street signs. They're beautifully painted in these wet-on-wet, creamy, off-colors—vaporous and patchy, porous and shapeless. Sometimes there's almost no painting at all, just a coating of gloss medium or a scruffy slurring of blotchy paint. At other times there's a gush of flamboyant, glistening brushwork that dematerializes even as it forms—relinquishing its staccato touch as it withdraws into veiled opacity. They seem very deliberate without being contrived, aesthetic without being arty. They are smeared and feel started and restarted over and over again, erased and crossed out, evasive and reserved. But she's insistent, even instructive. You start to feel like a student in front of her paintings—like you really want to know what they're about. You push your-

NOTES ON A PAINTING

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self, a little, in order to embrace them.

McClelland flirts with failure in so far as there is an absence of obvious structure or self-criticism in the work. The paintings have this “look”—the feel of art. You don’t know if the word is a device, or if these are just dumb words and shapes painted haphazardly. But they grab you and make you accept them on their own precipitous terms. The fact that she risks so much gives her work a dreamy, brave “can-do-ness.” They’re intelligent and this side of bravura. She never pulls out all the stops; she’s grounded. If Suzanne McClelland were a baseball player she’d be a catcher. She seems to have a game plan, and she calls for a lot of different pitches. She always protects the plate and never lets go completely. She’s aware of many things at once; yet she’s cocky and feels loose—she loves to play the game.

There’s a craziness to a piece like *Ta Da*—a babbling, free-floating, absurd side. You don’t know how seriously to take it. It’s mischievous, full of nonsense and mystery, untested and slightly temporal. You don’t really know how much weight you can place on it. Looking at the work is like walking out into the ocean from the shore. First you go slowly, one step at a time, acclimatizing yourself as you go. You never think about the immensity of it, just the goose bumps and the pebbles under foot. But when you get all the way in, there’s an unbounded abandon—a fantastic freedom. These are the feelings her work seeks to tap. It’s reckless and casual, yet intense and deep.

There’s a material imaginativeness to McClelland’s quirky work. You scan the painting like a radar dish; back and forth, up and down—checking all the edges and replaying the information in different orders, so as not to miss any hidden meaning. They’re like codes: hidden and cryptic. You start to realize that you’re using a lot of your faculties. Looking at the painting is a little like playing chess—your thinking tends to get out in front of you as possibilities form and reform. Letters begin to appear, followed by words and odd sounds. Words are reversed and inverted, letters transposed. Her work shows you how long it really takes to digest information—that it’s actually a much slower and more complex process than is usually imagined. McClelland slows you down on your

fifty-yard dash to understanding—placing detours, backwaters, and sand traps along the way, getting you off on a wondrous sidetrack. (She’s a little like the *Roadrunner* cartoon character who is always painting a fake black tunnel entrance on the side of a rock in order to thwart Wile E. Coyote.)

The words are secondary to the painting—you see color and space and texture first. But you’re aware of two types of consciousness: looking and reading, experiencing and understanding. Her paintings are like *disappearing acts*, forming and dissolving, spiraling towards oblivion, then solidifying into structure. Sound and sight are visual equivalents to her. Placement and composition are guided not only by touch but by tone. Indeed, her touch is not so much material as it is melodic or harmonic (though she has a gifted way with materials). Paint is understood in terms of cadence and arrangement, syncope and melody. Process—the *how* a thing or word is painted is more important than the *what*. There’s a lightness, a weightlessness, an ephemerality about the work, as if it could levitate and hover in space—like sounds in a room.

Ta Da feels strangely genderless—you don’t know if it was painted by a man or a woman. And this is disconcerting, somewhat disorienting. Why should it be important to know the sex of the painter? McClelland’s work broaches this taboo question. She forces the issue, pushing it to the forefront. She makes you come face to face with your mania—your obsession—to name things; everything—to identify and codify all things instantly; from the content in a painting to the hand of the painter. This can be particularly vexing for the critic. She takes matters into her own hands and turns you back on yourself. She makes you see how much easier it is to look *out* than it is to look *in*. Her paintings ask you to lead an examined life, which is the damnest thing—it’s like the paintings are saying “Come on, you know that’s not all you think about this. What else can you tell me?” How often has it happened that you feel lost when you can’t figure out whether an author, say, is a man or a woman? This is what happens in McClelland’s work. She fills her paintings with non-specific sexual messages.

The words and phrases McClelland paints are not brainy—in fact they’re downright dumb. Words like NO, YES, SURE, and SOON; MAYBE, WAIT, SEEMS SO, and NEVER MIND—you feel like a kid again. You remember that terrible neediness in the face of authority, the feeling of not being understood, or overlooked. Of being under someone else’s control—the sense that your needs are bigger than language and not analogous to words.

The paintings, somehow, remind you of how emotionally close we all still are to being children who depend on Mom and Dad for approval, permission. Words like SURE have ambiguous double meanings—they say “yes” and “no” at the same time. They take you in and leave you out, make you feel both heard and ignored. I always hated the words MAYBE and SOON—it’s no coincidence that McClelland paints images of these kinds of words. It’s as if she’s playing with your inner life a little. The paintings are poignant and powerful in this way—you have to confront your relationship to words like these. They speak in the voice of covert authority, in the voice of the teacher. There’s always more going on than meets the eye. They’re a little coy and flirtatious, sexual and alluring.

They’re very kindergarten and beginner-like—everything feels very rudimentary and basic. But they’re also cockeyed voices in the night, awkward, unsteady, and disembodied. They have an atmospheric pressuredness to them, they’re oddly tremulous and sing-songy. They form words the way one makes up songs—indeterminately and in parts. Things happen in different ways in the work. There’s a crosscurrent to it, a warm streaming quality, but it’s dithering and incoherent and defective, too. This is the alchemical side, the part that makes it occupy two visual places at once. It’s not “painting as usual” but neither is it “pushing the envelope.” It’s where words and pictures meet. And along this front of warm and cold aesthetic air bizarre things happen—electricity is generated; meaning is convoluted and techniques turn in on themselves.

Maybe her paintings don’t fit in anywhere—but that’s okay—on the whole, painting is trying to make a place for itself. Her works are like flickering silent movies that you drift in and out of. Inexplicable and stupid as stone, they are visionary meanderings inside the Big Picture; little-big paintings from the heart and the edge. These perishable word/non-word works are invisible at first and come into focus gradually—but with a wonderful flat-footed thud when they do. To return to McClelland as a baseball player: her paintings are like the “hidden ball trick” (when an infielder feigns not having the ball in order to draw the runner off base so as to pick him off). We are drawn off base, so to speak, in the belief that these little paintings are harmless and pretty—only to be tagged out big by their potent message and meaning. □

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears monthly in Arts.