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Suzanne McClelland
At Gallerie Kyoko Chirathivat, Bangkok

Abstracting the Feeling of Language

Continuing with its recent spate of artists working out of New York, Gallerie Kyoko Chirathivat is now showing the paintings and drawings of American artist Suzanne McClelland. The artist herself took the time out from the artistic hub of the “big Apple” to attend the opening in Bangkok. The work on view consists of six paintings and nine drawings loosely banded together under the guise of gestural abstraction.

McClelland was born in Florida in 1959, but now considers New York her physical and inspirational home. She feels that the city helps her to conceive. “The city has a pace that makes it possible to make my work.” She is firmly embedded within the city’s artistic community, and it provides her with the motivation and assurance to create. As well as painting she teaches art at New York University and manages as a single parent to raise her 12-year-old daughter.

The underlying aspiration of McClelland’s compositions is to visually represent the sensation and emotion carried in the spoken word, an elusive and abstract notion that she boldly attempts to make real and concrete. “I try to come up with a way of translating speech, which is invisible, into drawing and writing and somehow convey the tone of a word without being a poet.”

Her canvases are riddled with a multitude of letters and words both scrawled and poured, standing alone and repeated to form a larger body. They creep out or lay camouflaged in the picture plane. In 12996d (perfect)”, the word “purfect” squeezes together, being forced into numerous shapes, encompassed by streams of cackling “he-hes”. The language of tone is best represented in the picture “12996c (ha-ha)”, where the words “ha-ha” trickle across like a stream of laughter. These words aren’t supposed to conjure up any specific image, but fuse together inviting the viewer to make his own interpretations.

Anyone who hasn’t quite grasped the fundamentals of the English language need not worry about it detracting from fully experiencing McClelland’s pictures. She claims it would still be possible to elicit everything that she intends. However she emphasizes that it’s up the individual to form his personal definitions. She plays down the use of language as a single theme. “It would be a very sad thing to go to one of these paintings and just spend the entire time looking for the word. That could be a very dull experience to reduce it down to one meaning.”

Of the pieces hanging at Kyoko, the paintings appear more solidly resolved and exist more as separate entities than the less conclusive drawings. But these are siblings conveying the process the artist works through to achieve her ends, and provide the viewer with an insight into McClelland’s artistic process. She responds to works in

progress by drawing and photographing them. This is her way of having a “dialogue” with something that she’s brought into the world.

McClelland doesn’t distinguish between the act of drawing and painting; lines of charcoal or conte scramble and scratch around with flickers and blobs of enamel and acrylic. Her works are interspersed with globs or whole areas of plastic resin, all courting or destroying each other in a rebellious gritty chaos. Characters and marks enter the stage from all angles as she attacks the canvas, deliberately unsettling the viewer from any single viewpoint. She even allows nature’s forces to make their assault, leaving canvas exposed to the weather for long periods, eventually causing mildew to spread in molding speckles of color.

The weather is an integral feature of McClelland’s work. She tries to connect with its structure, patterns and the experience of feeling different conditions, like wind and rain. When building a composition, she chooses a weather condition, then puts words into it in a process of discovery.

The majority of color contained in her work is born out of the materials used, and are of secondary concern to the artist. In the paintings “12996e (perfect)” and “12996h (rrr)”, shades of black and white predominate, but are contrasted by the rustic, earthy siennas of the conte crayon, creating a spatial ambiguity that is far from monotone. This puzzling depth of space, which is a recurring feature, is deliberately confused further by variations in the scale of words contained within a single picture.

Some obvious comparisons will be drawn when looking for influences and inspirations in McClelland’s style of work; Jackson Pollock, the father of abstract expressionism, immediately springs to mind. Although there are no conceptual similarities, McClelland’s technique and application follow Pollock’s opting out of the traditional painter’s tool, the brush.

In the same vein of American abstraction, Pollock’s later contemporaries, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, also have provided McClelland with the visual foundations on which she’s built her 90’s adaptations. Less obvious in visual respects, though equally influential, are the ideas and issues being confronted by female contemporaries Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. Kruger incorporates text in her work, using it to raise the spectator’s awareness on a range of uses, including gender roles in media culture. McClelland feels that her paintings also express similar concerns of female artists. “I think my work does deal with my gender, but it’s not as explicit as some artists. Its less overt.”

Technically, McClelland’s paintings work extremely well, but is she moving gestural abstraction into a new realm, infusing it with freshness and worthy conceptual questions? Or, avoiding the New York art world hype, is her work just a regurgitative attempt at introducing novel elements (the weather and the word) into a well-trodden style, never really consolidating the synthesis. McClelland leaves it to the individual to decide.