

**Raphael Rubinstein**  
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**Suzanne McClelland : The Spell (ing) of Painting**

Letters have been rolling freely through Western art and literature since the alphabet was loosened from its conventional moorings by two late 19<sup>th</sup>-century French poets, Stephane Mallarme, in his typographically dispersed poem *Un Coup de des* (A Throw of the Dice) and Arthur Rimbaud who, in a famous sonnet, proposed a poetic color chart for the vowels of his language:

“A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue”

In the 100-plus years since, liberated letters have infiltrated painting at some of its most crucial moments, from the snippets of newspaper clippings in the collages of the Cubists and Dadaists to the wild typographical compositions of the Italian Futurists to the flowing metamorphizing inscriptions of Surrealist-influence painters such as Miro. In the years after World War II, writing in painting took a more abstract turn, partly inspired by Surrealist automatism, partly impelled an awareness of the calligraphic traditions of Asian art. It turned more readable again when Jasper Johns stenciled names across his painterly map of the United States.

Clearly, Suzanne McClelland is a beneficiary of this modern tradition, but she also brings to it something new and very much her own. Since the beginning of the decade, McClelland has been creating powerful, complex paintings composed around and with letters and words. At a time when too many other painters have been content with a skeptical formalism of facile mockery, McClelland has managed to reinvent the vitality of Abstract Expressionism, and has done so without a hint of historical pastiche.

She is one of those artists who immediately make you aware of the physical process of looking at a painting. At first sight, her vigorous, tactile, tangled paintings seem confusing and chaotic – and so they should, since confusion and chaos (and our struggles with them) are among her subjects. Although bursting with palpable presence, these are not paintings which can be absorbed in a glance. One has to plunge into them and start trying to make sense of the wilderness. Because of the overlays of materials, numerous shifts in scale and, above all, the unpredictable forms of the words (which come backwards, upside down, broken up, turned inside out), McClelland asks the viewer to do some strenuous looking. But as we struggle to spell out the words in her paintings (or sometimes read them with immediate ease), the work of looking is always stimulating and pleasurable.

There are plenty of connections to be made between McClelland’s work and that of other artists, past and present. Focusing on her imaginative transformation of letters, I think of the medieval Irish scribes who created the illuminated manuscript *The Book of Kells* (800 AD), or the fanciful decorative letters invented in the British monasteries of Lindisfarne and Iona at about the same time. Closer to the present, her precursors include

the established painters Cy Twombly and Antoni Tàpies, the brilliant cartoonist Saul Steinberg and the little known Swiss-Brazilian artist Mira Schendel (1919-1988).

A less obvious (and perhaps more useful) comparison would be between McClelland's canvases and the paintings of Jackson Pollock. One of the things they share is an interest in making paintings without a paintbrush. So natural is McClelland's rejection of the brush that it took me some time of looking at her paintings to realize that they had been created without the aid of that most basic tool in the painter's studio. Her favored mediums, instead, are charcoal sticks, conte crayons, poured acrylic and enamel paint and polymer emulsion. She also employs natural processes by often allowing her canvases to mildew before she starts to work on them. The mildew process, which is stopped by exposing the canvas to strong sunlight, accounts for the unevenly distributed patterns of speckles and stains around the canvas.

Such art-historical connections only begin to tap the wealth of associations in McClelland's work. Her paintings can resemble those old school desks in which generations of students have carved and scribbled their names. They can also evoke landscapes: a winter scene of desolate frozen ground in someplace like Montana or a detail of some industrial wasteland of rusting factories and abandoned dumps. There's a hint of toxicity in the paintings, subtly reinforced by the occasionally intruding tubular forms from which one can easily imagine an industrial by-product flowing.

The letter forms themselves are also full of suggestion. For instance, at almost the exact moment I perceived the "r"s in *12996g*, 1996 (r) as "r"s, I also saw them as sprouting grass or wheat. And the ruler marks, a recent addition to McClelland's vocabulary, in between them suggest, to me, nothing so much as body hair or a day-old beard. In *12996h*, 1996 (rrr), I am reminded of barbed wire and, simultaneously, birds on a wire, but I also see my own initials, repeated ad infinitum. The swarming marks in her paintings can also stand for humanity, from its huddled masses to outsiders and stragglers. One of the things McClelland may be expressing with her repeated letters and words is our individual yearning to finally, after many attempts, get things right, to voice a definitive authenticity. But she also reminds us, with gentle humor, of the futility of ever wanting to have the last word.

There's an interesting dialectic in McClelland's work between the natural and the manmade. On the one hand, everything in the paintings, from the letters and words to the industrial-looking materials, seems to signal human presence. And yet, at the same time, the wild structures of the paintings, their sense of whirling winds and flourishing weeds, in emphatically a thing of nature. While McClelland's work is engaged with the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup>-century painting, especially with the grand ambition to be "becoming nature" exemplified by Pollock, the presence of writing continually skews this ambition in unexpected ways. What, for instance, are we to make of a steely gray, heavily textured abstraction with the words "ha ha" dribbled across it in white paint? Whose visual voices are these that we see blown sideways through her paintings? The words also do strange things to space. While filling the paintings with sensuously modeled and intricately assembled presences, the words as words can slide our minds out of the painting as we wonder, "who said that?" This may partly account for the uncanny sense of ventilation in McClelland's paintings, the sense that the paintings are at once full and empty.

Given that McClelland's paintings are so involved with techniques of drawing, it's interesting (and perhaps wholly appropriate) that her drawings have more in common with the conventional notion of painting than her canvases. The drawings tend to have more color and show signs of brushwork, and yet, they can be just as unpredictable as the paintings. One drawing in this show, *I210961*, 1996 (so) has an architectural structure where the phrase "if I told you so" forms a solid structure from which sprout bending lines which, in turn, support fanciful "so"s that seem to be turning into eyes. Another one, *I21096c*, 1996 (perfect), seems to show tombstones inscribed with the word "perfect" entering (or leaving?) the picture from each of the paper's four sides.

A further aspect of McClelland's work involves small clay sculptures. Depicting various letter forms, in particular "i"s and "r"s, these sculptures sit on a table in McClelland's studio. She photographs them in different configurations and then overlays the photographs with hand drawn marks and shapes. (Originally, McClelland used clay as one of the materials in her paintings but somehow, as the artist tells it, the clay migrated off the canvas to become an independent sculptural form.) While the clay pieces are interesting in themselves (confirming the theory that good painters usually have compelling things to say in sculpture) and offer a variety of letter shapes, they cannot approach the much greater variety of letters in the paintings. Inadvertently they underscore the incredible imaginative freedom of McClelland's alphabetical images, her seemingly infinite variants for spelling the name of the painting's soul.