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Suzanne McClelland
At Paul Kasmin Gallery

Suzanne McClelland has made a special niche for herself in abstract painting by fashioning the architecture of her pictorial space with expressive words. In previous series, McClelland has concentrated on the ear-ringing impact of definitive utterances that people say in moments of crisis. A single word like “no,” “sure, sure, sure” or “anymore”—using the metaphor of its echoing effect, filled the canvas and controlled its space. That word then grew into an exuberant web of new life that sometimes seemed to predict a rebirth for the abstract program.

Her new body of work has a different energy. The catalog essay accompanying the exhibition makes reference to the mythos of the Tower of Babel and its allegory of a verbal-architectural challenge to God, who, insulted, scattered a single voice into many languages. A series of works here is called “baybel,” and would seem to hoist itself up on the notion of a challenge. But in truth McClelland’s words are no longer challenging and controlling her space: in fact, these canvases are interesting, intriguing, dramatic but, for the artist, dangerous, because it feels like she is on the other side of the challenge lost, her once singular voice scattered by acknowledgement of a greater power.

The power that scatters language here is nature: evoked by a heavy use of weathering effects on the canvases. Some of these artifacts of McClelland’s new word-ark were left out in the rain, others inspired by a road trip which included the vistas of the waste of the Dakotas and whips of the winds of the plains. These meteorological sub-voices are now calling the shots, pushing letters every which way, breaking down the presumption of architecture, control, power and emotional breakthrough. The expressive wind-rotations are further emphasized by the use of charcoal, which lends a sullen, blown-away quality to some canvases. The powers that be also twist letters into phonetic scrambles like “baybel” and “zohnalfloh” (the name of a wind) and in a series of drawings seem to force nature itself to get up, call out a letter, and walk with it.