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Suzanne McClelland
At L.A. Louver
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*Can I not say: a cry, a laugh, are full of meaning?
And that means, roughly: much can be gathered from them.*
–Ludwig Wittgenstein

Suzanne McClelland is gathering a lot, these days, from few words. More, anymore, sure. She persists in choosing words that depend for meaning on nonlinguistic factors that are the persuasive substrata of conversations. Then she paints them, repeatedly, each repetition altering them completely. In mute materiality words thicken with meanings never adhering to them before. Whether “anymore” quantifies, yearns, or reprimands is not to be decided here: such are its functions when spoken. The contrast in one large anymore between the tall, spindly letters and the small ones is a problem of scale, mainly a visual concern. The small letters are dense, the tall ones thin and open. The tall letters straddle the space of the canvas, and the small ones populate it. As in a western landscape, the scale in this painting is not human, for grand disparities allow no middle ground. What has happened to the word is no less dramatic than what would happen to it if uttered by two people in the heat of conflict; the non-linguistic dimensions of that conflict are no less evidenced in debate than in paint. But they are hardly translations: the uttered “anymore” is not commensurate with the painted “anymore” which exists as an image, non-metaphorical and reverberating with bodily propensities.

Some of these large paintings were begun out of doors, last summer. The canvases were lying unstretched near a shed in the backyard, where McClelland painted them and left them to the elements. Mildew mottles the surface of a rarefied anymore propelled by striking tempo changes. At the top the “mmm”s are running, but at the lower right they’ve screeched to a halt. There scribbling makes them look a little hairy, in affinity to the “grown” surface. Another anymore unfolds in the dead of night, with a slippery black splotch glistening like an ice puddle, and actual raccoon tracks and sticks discernible. A lush chiaroscuro modulates the image into a very great depth, as letters curl up in patches of foggy luminosity. From night to day in another version of anymore, a rockslide of letters that tumble pyramidically forward from a vanishing point of copper and jade, a mineral deposit of color. The relation of these works to natural phenomena, to wind and night and stones, is achieved through no illusionistic effort. Rather, the resemblances are crude, as the materials let themselves be known, obstinately. Clay, acrylic medium; mildew, sticks. The outside finds its way into the inside of the painting, just as the outside of words becomes indispensable to their meaning when spoken.

The materiality of the word is especially emphatic in the large painting, sure. One way McClelland “writes” her words is by making a barrier of them across the surface so they can be read left-to-right or right-to-left but with numerous formal events disrupting

their self-evidence as written language. These expressive outbreaks of marks and materials are guaranteed to exacerbate the rudeness of painterly speech. The surface of sure is obnoxious—thick and clotted; McClelland gave it the feeling of having been excavated by knocking off paint and clay to create the marks. The result is a paradox between the obtrusive physicality of the surface and the vaporous quality of the word, which reads blearily. The epiglottal “U” at the center makes the whole painting a view down a throat, with pink tonalities enhancing the effect. “SURE,” it intones, squeezing the “r” right over the top. The word is resounding, sore. In more, hatching is wielded in the “o” to create depth, but in a strip of white flatly, stitches in a wound. As in sure, the other letters squeeze the white “r,” that blanches as it suffocates within the foreground barricade. “Mmm”’s murmur in the interstices. Meaning fluctuates with circumstance, and the revelatory or concealing propensities of language can be vexatious.

After a hiatus, McClelland has returned to painting on square panels of unprimed wood. These surfaces can act like raw, homemade signs, felicitously compounding the materiality of the words. McClelland exploits knots and grain to become form and gesture, promoting the free exchange of substance and image. She plays with a broad repertory of marks. Letters are gouged directly onto the wood or scratched and pressed into the paint or thickly accreted in clay. In one work, “anymore” seethes and bubbles in a thick black pool where the letters are dripped and incised. In another, the word grows as it goes: a scratched “any” stretches into a monstrous “more,” its “e” crowned with a nasty arch of clay. In a third, the “an” is a bauble on a “y” – chain, a necklace to blurted clay “rr”s and “oo”s, fecal on a smear of shiny transparent medium. Drawn letters to one side poke fun at this awkwardly ostentatious display. Where the large paintings aspire to the abstract sublime, evoking Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, these smaller wood panels sling it out in the mud, behaving loopy and scatological by turn.

What are these few words from which so much is gathered? McClelland’s words are the ones that most easily disappear into language, the ones that are most dependent upon external conditions for their definition. On syntax, on emotional weather. They are porous, and infinitely malleable. For McClelland, they are a material like any other, subject to a capricious will. Their resemblance to language is, however, more embodied in how they behave, in a visual sense, than in the fact that they comprise letters. Disordered as words, they order themselves as form, functioning, like language itself, only in a network of subtle connections and associations. This is their expressive capability: to banish language in order to become sensible again, to re-form into something seen for the first time. Paradoxically, the lesson is conveyed by repeating the same word over and over again, but never the same way twice.