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# Abstraction in a Changing Environment

INTERVIEWS BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Since the heyday of Neo-Geo, circa 1987, abstract painting in New York has been without a convenient label. In a landscape still dense with painters, no single tendency has achieved the critical mass needed to create a movement. Instead of a movement, there is simply *movement*, a turbulent, chaotic flow in which any coalescence of artists is limited in size and brief in duration. Perhaps this proves that the triumph of pluralism is at last complete or, to put it slightly differently, that we live in an era in which no single artist is willing to cede autonomy to a larger grouping, and no faction is willing to make common esthetic cause with another. No wonder critics and curators seem to have given up inventing catchy tags for current painting.

Some might conclude from this that abstraction has fallen on hard times; my experience has been just the opposite. Freed from having to claim allegiance to this or that tendency, and every day more distant from the market frenzies of the 1980s, painters have been left to get on with their work, and to talk among themselves. As other kinds of art have received the lion's share of critical and media attention over the last few years, abstract painting has been quietly extending its boundaries and achievements. While it's always a good idea to keep a skeptical distance from charged

terms like "renaissance," it's hard to recall a time when abstract painting was in better condition. This doesn't mean that there are endless numbers of great painters at work, but there are certainly enough interesting ones to make paying close attention to painting worthwhile. The hardest part of this project was having to limit my selection to only four painters.

Typical of the current variety, the four painters interviewed here are strikingly different from one another stylistically, and yet they do have something in common: a concern with gestural painting. Perhaps if there has been any trend in painting over the last five years, it is a recovery of gesture. When Lilly Wei interviewed nine younger abstract artists for this magazine in 1987 [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '87], significantly, not a single one of them relied on gesture. In contrast, Richmond Burton, Lydia Dona, Suzanne McClelland and Fabian Marcaccio all use gesture to a greater or lesser degree. In Burton's work, which in the last several years has moved steadily away from geometry, the individual marks are delimited and repeated as they form part of an overall design. Although gesture is only part of the story in Dona's paintings, appearing, as it were, between quotation marks, she is miles away from the clean conceptual geometry of Peter Halley. McClelland is an emphatically gestural painter, the one who comes closest to the concerns of Abstract Expressionism. Marcaccio, the youngest of the four, coaxes gesture from every element in his work, even the stretcher bars and the weave of the canvas, and his central image remains the brushstroke, even if his means of making it are unorthodox.

So, what one sees is a kind of gestural painting, but (and it's an important "but") none of them has built a body of work on the foundation of gesture alone. Whether the alternative is Burton's skewed grid, Dona's schematic system, McClelland's writing or Marcaccio's indirect procedures, none of these painters chooses to step up to a canvas, loaded brush in hand, and begin to paint. In their different ways they have been affected by the tangled esthetic discourse of the last ten years. Assiduous readers of French theory, Dona and Marcaccio are obviously marked by Neo-Geo and the theoretical crucible that painting passed through in the late 1980s; McClelland can count Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer among her influences; Burton, who admits he has little time for theory, acknowledges a debt to, of all things, appropriation art.

In the course of conversation with these artists, a lot of names came up, from Matisse to Sigmar Polke, from Pollock to Joan Mitchell, from Tàpies to David Reed, from Borges to Jimi Hendrix, but what was always clear was that all four of these young artists, driven by inspiration and criticality, by ambition and doubt, by timing and luck, have arrived at a moment in their careers when things are going so well in their studios that they find it a little hard to believe. I hope some of this awe and enthusiasm comes through in their interviews; I think it's certainly visible in the paintings. —R.R.



*Suzanne McClelland: Anymore, 1994, dry pigment, charcoal, acrylic gel and enamel on canvas, 72 inches square.  
Courtesy L.A. Louver.*

## Suzanne McClelland

*Suzanne McClelland was born in Florida in 1959. She attended the University of Michigan (BFA, 1981) and the School of Visual Arts (MFA, 1989). Her 1994 one-person shows include L.A. Louver (April) and Paul Kasmin (October). Next year she*

**"In the discourse around abstraction so often people talk about being 'beyond language.' I don't see how you can be beyond language." —Suzanne McClelland**

*will show with Barbara Krakow (Boston). Her work was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial.*

When I first moved to New York in the early 1980s there were women making work that used language, artists like Barbara Kruger. I was attracted to the voice in that work. I suppose I wanted to take it into the world I was comfortable with, the world of painting. Often people want to associate my work with Cy Twombly. There are superficial connections that have to do with physicality, mark-making and drawing, but his need to write in his paintings is entirely different from mine. He chooses to write names and places, things that identify and locate. He seems to be interested in inscription, whereas my relationship to language starts with the voice. I'm interested in meaning that depends on context, in words that act like connectors. My words don't evoke specific images; they depend on context and intona-

tion. In my paintings the way I use the materials provides the intonation.

You could say that Jimi Hendrix has influenced me as much as Cy Twombly. In his music Hendrix could go from outer space to the center of the earth with sound. His words were sounds as well as language; he could go from harsh to gentle, from playful to deep. He didn't feel that he had to find a sound or a style. I admire that range and expansiveness, and the fact that he was not afraid.

In the discourse around abstraction so often people talk about being "beyond language." I don't know what they mean by that. I don't see how you can be beyond language. I've always carried around small notebooks (I like to write and draw while I'm moving) where I write down words, fragments of conversations, descriptions of installations, things I see for a second in one of my paintings that I can develop later.

*McClelland: More, 1994, clay, enamel, charcoal and acrylic gel on canvas, 72 inches square. Courtesy L.A. Louvre.*



We have reading habits—left to right, top to bottom, at least in this culture—but you can do anything in a painting. When I'm painting I ask myself questions like: what is the full meaning of the word written as big as my fingernail? Or as big as the wall? Or dangling upside down? Or backwards? Or layered underneath other words? Each one of those makes some kind of place and also relates to the body. I'm not saying that every letter form is descriptive of a body, but it is embedded in there somewhere.

Although I use words, I don't consider myself a very good storyteller. For me, language is more like a weather condition, something huge, much bigger than us.

Am I a gestural painter? I may start making scratches with my fingernail and they turn into letters which become marks, and if I use my whole body it becomes what we call gesture, but it's still writing!

It usually takes somewhere in the realm of six months for me to finish a painting, but there are paintings that I've had going for three years that I don't consider finished. It's rare that I can sit down and execute an idea. When I look at the painting and it's all of a sudden a real thing in the world, it's out of my control. I have to start having a dialogue with it, responding to it. While I'm working I have to do drawings of the paintings, take Polaroids of them, look at them upside-down, on the floor, on the wall.

Lately the work is gravitating to extremes. For instance, the modeling clay I use on the surface of the painting has ended up on a table as small structures of letter forms. I don't know what's going to happen with them. These little clay "i"s, for instance. It takes me a few minutes to make them, but it may be five years before I use them. I like using clay as a pigment. It can go from being mushy to being an object on the top of the painting. It's an incredibly flexible material.

In contrast to film and video, paintings are objects that are something of a burden on the planet. They take up space, they need to go somewhere. They are more permanent than some things, less than others. We can seal them off from air and light, but nothing will stay the same forever. People say to me, "These aren't oil paintings, they're not permanent enough." In fact my paintings will be harder to get rid of because there's so much plastic in them. I allow and accept change. In the recent work I'm using a lot of charcoal, which is a dust.

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Although I use words, I don't consider myself a very good storyteller. For me, language is more like a weather condition, something huge, even bigger than us.

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and the canvas itself is mildewed. When I begin I stop the mildewing by leaving them in the sun.

The paintings involve me but are not about me. They're about permanence and loss, time and desire, all those ideas that are too big to simply talk about. All of us deal with a single lifespan during which we attempt to embed ourselves in the world. I don't think painting is any more absurd than working in a bank or playing basketball. You have to find something to do while you're alive.

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McClelland, Suzanne, 1994, Clay, charcoal, charcoal, and acrylic on paper, 110 x 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

