

# Suzanne McClelland

**A**rt and Language, aside from being the name of one of the most important collective enterprises to emerge from conceptual art, is also the name of one of the central sets of questions in all the art of the last forty years. It has been no less central to “expressionist” painting—from Cy Twombly through Anselm Kiefer and Joan Snyder to Jean-Michel Basquiat, Archie Rand (the remarkable “Letter Paintings” recently shown at Exit Art), and Julian Schnabel—than it has been to conceptual art, although the latter has dominated critical investigation of this area (example: one recent scholarly rehash of the “‘eruption’ of language into the field of the visual arts,” *Art Discourse/ Discourse in Art* by Jessica Prinz, mentions none of the artists I just named except, in passing, Kiefer). The work of Suzanne McClelland represents a radical contribution to this field—one that decisively reinvokes the cognitive salience of gestural spontaneity as artistic means, despite poorly reasoned consensus having ruled it out of bounds.

Sometimes the paintings are almost nothing but writing—a simple word like ALWAYS patiently scrawled (if that’s possible—I never would have thought so before seeing this painting) a few times, mostly with its letters scrambled out of order, on an otherwise blank canvas: WAYSAL, AYSLAW. Or the inscription, if that elegant word describes what is often a fecal coagulation of marks in brown clay seemingly caught in the act of trying to peel its way off the canvas, may be buried almost to the point of illegibility under glutinous gobs of the most toxic-looking acrylic. But words are always there somewhere, often repeated, reiterated as though in different tones of voice, at different times, perhaps by different voices altogether. What the words all share is their function as rejoinders. When we “enter” these paintings we stumble onto a dialogue that’s already begun, a history we’ll never recapture. The phrases are simple: NEVER MIND, MY PLEASURE, NOW. McClelland breaks them down: in a painting not shown here, for instance, we’re made to face the PLEA in PLEASURE. There is pathos here, but just as much disdain, sarcasm, weariness, distraction. For all the energy communicated by these paintings, their point of resolution seems to come at the moment when that energy has exhausted itself. Where other gestural paintings seem to begin with automatism, these seem to end there, at the moment when mind and body can no longer spare the effort to maintain their separation.

Suzanne McClelland, *Now*, 1991, Clay, acrylic, enamel, gesso on canvas, 40' x 40'. Courtesy Stephanie Theodore Gallery.



But McClelland is no primitivist. It’s not about returning to the imagined moment when language was born dripping with what Georges Bataille called “base matter”; rather, this immersion of language in materiality—or is it emergence of language out of materiality? immersion of materiality in language? emergence of materiality out of language?—is simply what is happening at any moment. Orthodox conceptualism remains prey to the Gnostic denigration of matter as “an element deprived of *logos* and consequently irrational and chaotic, subject to disordered tensions and movements” (Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*). As McClelland’s work testifies, *logos* itself is irrational and lacks its proper *logos*, while *hyle* (matter) is imbued with it at every turn. What these paintings deploy are not just words, not just language, but the ecstasy of words in the expiration of language, the stuttering of sense in the face of its own indeterminacy, the echo of sound as it ripples across the pool of matter, indifferent replies to no possible interlocutor. While most paintings are either fast takes or slow burns, these are unusual in that they “happen” very quickly, but over and over again—they seem to flare up and fizzle repeatedly like rounds of fireworks. If language always positions its speaker somewhere in the symbolic order, this echoing through the unstable space of painting seems constantly to displace the speaker, rendering her unlocatable—there is no “original” sound behind this echo, it is all aftereffect, traces of a sound that appears in-

sistently but is present only elsewhere. Michel Foucault might have been observing these paintings when he wrote, in the little-known essay *Sept propos sur le septième ange*, which I am grateful to Steven Shaviro for calling to my attention,

*Phonetic repetition does not mark the total liberation of language with respect to things, thoughts, and bodies; it does not reveal in discourse a state of absolute weightlessness; on the contrary, it thrusts syllables into the body, it gives them back the functions of cries and gestures, it rediscovers the great plastic power which vociferates and gesticulates; it puts words back into the mouth and around the sexual organs; in a time faster than any thought it gives birth to and effaces a whirlwind of frantic, savage, or exultant scenes, from which words arise and which words call forth.*

McClelland participates in something essential to the modern project in painting insofar as what she paints takes place on the other side of language, but she parts company with much of that tradition insofar as for her this does not mean maintaining any distance from language, any purity in its regard. Her painting hovers beyond language, but only just beyond it, almost laminated to the membrane through which language seeps into the unspeakable. Unlike art that merely uses language, hers engages it, materializes it, looks beyond it. (*Stephanie Theodore*, October 3–26)  
Barry Schwabsky