

Jerry Saltz

Cries and Whispers

Suzanne McClelland's *Ta Da*, 1990

Suzanne McClelland's paintings are cottonmouthed, murmuring, cooing things. They're talkative without being blabbermouthed; stammering and convoluted without being loquacious or garrulous. They're slow and unhurried—but slightly impatient. There's an awful, oozing formalism, an aggregate chaotic reverie to them. They feel anarchistic and unpredictable—in command and out of control. Her surfaces are as varied as her materials. She uses paint, clay, dirt, gesso, charcoal, and polymer mediums—and applies them with whatever it takes: hands, brushes, carving, gouging, or drawing. In a way, they read like emotionally charged, abstract David Salles. They reveal themselves in layers and through corrosive areas of paint and texture. But where Salle's surfaces are dense with images, almost bulimic with them, McClelland is open—more unfinished—and far less complex. There is an amazing physicality to her work, while Salle's remains forever elusive and un-pin-downable.

There's something very centrifugal about her paintings; things tend to happen around the edges of them. There is no left-to-right or top-to-bottomness about them. You can't read them like a book. They fly off in all directions at once—but then they sort of fall into place. Words begin to form and reform, and before you know it you're engaged in a kind of primary process, that of making shapes into letters, letters into sounds, and sounds into meaning. But the meaning McClelland makes you get is more than reading, it is remembering and experiencing the feelings that sounds like these made you feel, once upon a time, so long ago. We remember the ambivalence and hurt that words like "wait" made us feel. Even though the word is barely there—and it's carved into the surface, like a homemade tattoo on a teenager's arm—it resonates deep within us. You have to piece it together, but when you do, it reaches out and grabs you. There is no hierarchy or procedure in the way you "read" these paintings. You look at them and sounds



Suzanne McClelland, *Ta Da*, 1990, Oil on wood, 24" × 24".
Courtesy Stephanie Theodore Gallery.

begin to form within your head—letters and patterns emerge. You move your mouth while looking at McClelland's paintings, slowly forming the sounds or words she has placed in them. It's like lipreading. You begin to know the way an opera singer, say, feels the tiniest increments of sound. You see McClelland's daringly irrational paintings not only with your eyes, but with the air in your body, the shape of your mouth and the cavity of your chest. For this artist, breathing and talking are analogous with looking and knowing.

Like *Ta Da* (1990), almost all of McClelland's works are square and painted on plywood (although she does paint on canvas as well). This removes them from an instant "art" format, and takes away any

bookish "page-like" reading—makes them more like psychological street signs. They're beautifully painted in these wet-on-wet, creamy, off-colors—vaporous and patchy, porous and shapeless. Sometimes there's almost no painting at all, just a coating of gloss medium or a scruffy slurring of blotchy paint. At other times there's a gush of flamboyant, glistening brushwork that dematerializes even as it forms—relinquishing its staccato touch as it withdraws into veiled opacity. They seem very deliberate without being contrived, aesthetic without being arty. They are smeared and feel started and restarted over and over again, erased and crossed out, evasive and reserved. But she's insistent, even instructive. You start to feel like a student in front of her paintings—like you really want to know what they're about. You push your-