

Barry Schwabsky
May 1996

Suzanne McClelland
At Paul Kasmin Gallery

Carnal Meteorology

“Here’s the primordial alphabet shooting pell-mell, crisscross.”
-Joseph Brodsky

In the beginning was flesh. Then the flesh became words.

Or was it the other way around? Strange that it’s so hard to say, for both flesh and words are always with us, so much so that we can hardly say where the human being leaves off and “her” flesh and “his” words (can I trust the fork-like implement which is the quotation mark to communicate diffidence toward the possessive and toward its gendering at the same time?) begin. You’d think they’d carry within them some recollections of their entwined genesis. And after all they do – but too many memories, with too many contradictions. It’s like a lovers’ spat, and only fools rush in to separate two lovers from the quarrel that keeps them together.

Flesh, as Willem de Kooning said, is the reason oil paint was invented, and so it may be significant that oil paint no longer seems to be among the material resources of which Suzanne McClelland avails herself in painting. Acrylic is undoubtedly neutral – it chooses neither flesh nor words. But enamel, which is a sign-painter’s medium, and charcoal, with its evident affinity for writing, are less neutral, and may suggest that in this struggle words may have an advantage. And yet the artist does not seem to take their side. Isn’t the clay she often uses the very stuff of which the first human flesh was made? McClelland stands with de Kooning (who would sometimes begin a painting by writing a word across the canvas, or at least some letters, and using those “literal” shapes to extrude the ever more complicated image under which they would remain unknown and buried) in being a shamelessly impulsive painter, one for whom the idea of “gesture” has less to do with the masterful imposition of an identifying signature than with the premeditated submission to a capricious somatic movement which only subsequently can be reconciled to an ulterior pictorial scheme. Through that movement the body leaves unmistakable traces in these paintings.

McClelland’s pet metaphor for this compelling force, this unmastered movement, has been “weather.” Everybody talks about it but no one can do anything about it – it cuts the Gordian knot binding language to power. Her canvases are permeated with weather in more ways than one. I remember seeing some of them laying for weeks on end out in the backyard of a house McClelland was renting one summer in the Springs – the hick corner of Easthampton – day and night, rain or shine. The elements were working on them at the same time as she was. Later those canvases came back to her Manhattan studio, and they hardly appear today as they did at their slow birth in the heat and humidity of a summer spent down the road from the shades of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, but the

weathering the canvases endured is still palpable as part of the atmosphere the paintings so strongly exude.

Weather has no sex. The snow blows in your face no matter who you are. But we want to say that someone is responsible for a painting, for what a painting does (when it is capable of doing something) and that someone is bound to history by a body that is socially required to have one gender or the other (just as it is required to be of one race or another). Who painted these paintings? A man or a woman? Two things I'll never forget about the first time I saw Suzanne McClelland's work (this was in 1990) are that, one, the question immediately came to mind, which it usually doesn't; and two, that I immediately knew I couldn't guess, but had to ask the artist's name. The paintings gave the question urgency by rendering it unanswerable. Why? Because the weather these paintings are really about happens inside a body: corporeal meteorology. McClelland's work was once included in a controversial article on painting "in the realm of the feminine," but its inclusion there, if not wrong-headed, took its bite from the work's dramatized evasions of all such classifications. To experience McClelland's paintings is to enter into a cloud of unknowing, and yet it is not a shapeless, nebulous experience.

The weather I see in the paintings now is not the weather the paintings absorbed then. True, it's just as humid, but it's also considerably cooler. There are gray mists, and some times snow. In fact the three paintings titled *zohnalfloh* (sound it out: McClelland's new titles are spelled phonetically) all derive from drawings McClelland made while on a cross-country car trip, drawings of snow fences out in the plains of South Dakota. "I couldn't paint the wind," McClelland later reflected, "but I could if I painted the snow." So the warped grid that undergirds the lightest of the three paintings, and which I'd at first seen as allusive to latitude/longitudinal network of a mapping system – an interpretation equally compatible with McClelland's weather metaphors – turns out to depend on much more concrete and specific, less intellectual images than I'd imagined, though perhaps I should have known better. After all these paintings are more like expedients for coping with experiences than like systems for organizing experiences – more like snow fences than like maps.

In two other recent paintings, it looks more like tornado weather. Here again, however, the imagistic source for pictorial structure has been "veiled," to use Pollock's word. McClelland's title, again by way of phonetic spelling, gives the clue: *baybel*. The studio visitor notes a prominently placed reproduction of Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* – already a major source for modern art as the model for Valdimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* – but McClelland has turned the structure upside down: wide at the top narrowing toward the bottom. This does not necessarily mean she has transformed an ascending structure to a descending one. That is unambiguously the case in only one painting of the pair, but there at least we may legitimately be reminded of one of those hauntingly gnomish lines only Franz Kafka was capable of: "We are digging the pit of Babel."

Although the large letters of the "heavy," more clearly downward-tending *baybel* have a sort of cartoonily pneumatic plumpness vaguely reminiscent of forms seen in some of Carroll Dunham's paintings of recent years, the leaner letter-forms in its charcoal-on-canvas companion seem ready to fly off like flocks of birds. And yet the dense crowd of them at the bottom center, what I am tempted to call the crotch of the

painting, seems to be exerting a demonic attraction on the letters that approach their gravitational field. As my contemplation of the work continues, the hidden magnetic force of that mass becomes more and more apparent, and I start to think that, Bruegel aside, there is a second pictorial source for this painting, one I'm sure I saw once but cannot quite recall, but which in any case would be thematically related to the *Tower of Babel*: some late 19th- century Symbolist picture which must have been a *Fall of the Rebel Angels*. "Byebye," says the painting, over and over again, Hasta la vista, baby.

Which brings us to the relation between what the words of which McClelland's paintings are made say, and what the paintings do. Words are usually thought to add a modicum of explicitness to paintings in which they appear, but not with McClelland. Her words are evasive, withholding, with the deliberately unconscious vagueness of someone half-ignoring what you've just said to them – a quality quite different from the tempestuous expressivity with which the words may seem to be inscribed. A critic once said the small works McClelland used to paint on plywood boards were "like psychological street signs," and in an exhibition I organized at an outdoor site in upstate New York in 1992, she presented some of them as the rural equivalent of street signs, attaching to stakes across a field like the "POSTED" notices I suddenly began to spot everywhere around the neighboring territory. But that's just part of the work's disguise – in-direction disguised as direction, drift as command. Or again, is it the other way around? The paintings' stance contains something of a mute protest, the weary disdain of the powerless for those whose will must be endured. They are as far from Julian Schnabel's stentorian declamations as from Cy Twombly's mandarin graffiti – to cite two obvious precursors to McClelland's pictorial graphism. "PERFECT," we read in the remarkable photo/drawing works McClelland recently extrapolated from one of her clay sculptures, and which she has titled *snohjob*. Isn't that what you say when, after many small disasters, the big one finally hits?