

Jerry Saltz
Catalogue Essay
June 1992

Suzanne McClelland
At Jason Rubell Gallery

Let it Rain: Suzanne McClelland's Doors of Perception

Imagine a wondrous dictionary, not of words or language or definitions or rules – but of *space* – of the infinite oceanic forms it takes, all the manifestations of proportion and the emanations of atmospheric invisibility it takes. Imagine the shadowy elocution of this phosphorescent book – how it might inexplicably rematerialize space into emotional equivalents and substantialize prelogical correspondences into beholdable form. Imagine the sense of shimmering energy this book might give its owner – the secrets it would unlock, the questions it might answer. Well, such a *book* exists – and it is being written by Suzanne McClelland. They say the strongest magic the *Shaman* has is to change shape – this is the magic Suzanne McClelland sets in motion within her wild work. She is the creator of this ineffable language of space – and form. McClelland is a poet of space – she's the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross of it. She's articulated so many oscillating states of it you could say she's provided a kind of *Rosetta Stone* of space. She's developed a visual language rooted in the subjective experience of physical reality – only she graphs the turns of painting with the rules of the world in order to allow each an extended life span.

What would this dictionary look like? Probably a lot like Suzanne McClelland's paintings if they were to exist all at once and in book form. You wouldn't turn the pages as much as they'd transport you to various majestic realities, where you would see the space that feelings look like. It would be marvelous and blissful, captivating and a little scary too. After all, this is stuff that's been around a long time so there must be a reason it's never been delved into in quite the same way. It may be a lucky coincidence of McClelland's talent merging at just the right moment with art history – but you feel like she's pushing for something, going that extra distance in order to get something out – so you start or pull for her too, start rooting for these weird painting that should look like a mess but don't or on the other hand look intentionally elegant – but never do. McClelland walks a thin line; she seems to glide between two extremely dangerous visual traps only to emerge unscathed on the other side.

Suzanne McClelland's recent painting are her largest so far and probably her best too, if only because, in them, you feel a letting go, and explorative eminence and a sureness of heart. McClelland gives herself problems – and then she solves them. More than any artist I've seen emerge in the past several years McClelland set up a situation then bravely goes into it rather than *around* it (like so many other painters). She avoids the formulaic in favor of this more *rangy, risky* approach – and this endears you to her. She's relatively young – only thirty one – but she seems to avoid the pit of repetition and the pendulum of recipe hit on by so many of her peers. Rather she chooses to sidestep the sideshow of razzle-dazzle cleverness in favor of an edgy abandon which in turn makes her difficult to classify. Where other painters make it easy to label them (sometimes you

get the feeling they're painting mainly to be labeled) McClelland makes it hard – so she's off to the side and at the calm center all at the same time. In a little more than two years she has produced a body of work as rich and protean as any I can think of – and her recent paintings suggest she'll just keep opening out. If she does it's possible we've got another major talent at hand.

Physically her paintings flirt with an exquisite unfinishedness and an odd ugliness or ungainliness. They can look incomplete and sort of messy, but these are the qualities that McClelland prefers to set loose. It's risky – and it means she'll take a cut in the *market share* – but it's admirable to see an artist take chances. There's nothing gratuitous in her work – nothing that lets you in for a self-satisfied easy-chair ride. Her work is serious without being heavy handed – but about *big things* without appearing important or pompous.

The paintings have the look of things dirty and slightly out of control – like if you touched one it would come off on you. But she has such a gliding *alive* touch as to make you want to rub the back of your hand over them. They're sexy this way – you get up close to them, try to smell them. You want to know more about them in *more* than a visual way. They feel flirtatious this way – and can make you feel a little lecherous but unafraid, willing and able. And it's strange that a painting should make you feel all these feelings. They're lush too, and woozy, like they're a little drunk or tipsy – and again you're put in touch with this feeling of wanting to take advantage of them. They're vulnerable this way and they make you start to fall in love with them. But all her work is still somehow distant. It's as if, in spite of all their desire to communicate they're mute, or at least they're muffled or murmuring – and this makes your heart go out to them all the more as if they were slightly maimed or disabled. They're slow and involved in their own course of being. You can't "take one home on the first date" – they're more *mermaid-ian* than that, more quicksilver – hard to know and impossible to hold on to. But all this engages you more. There's almost no sense of epiphany in her work – you have to look at them a long, lingering time, get lost in them as they in turn get you to lay down your defenses. They're mysterious this way and disarming – like you're in for something *bigger* than you bargained for. They have an ethereal magic – like she's added a dose of elixir to the paint.

McClelland doesn't want you to "get" her work – she wants you to *experience* it. And it is easier to 'understand' a work of art than to 'know' it on some deeper level. She says the "source" of her work is "the word" and indeed *all* of her paintings are built on one or two or more words – which she often repeats ad-infinity, like a crazy *Mantra*. But she doesn't paint words per se, doesn't use language the way Ed Ruscha does or Joseph Kosuth or Lawrence Weiner or even Cy Twombly (although at her best this is the artist McClelland would seem to come closest to). All these artists (except for Twombly) use language primarily as a *conceptual* conceit, a way to get an *idea* across. McClelland is the opposite. Her words float all over the surface of her works, go every which way: up, down, in and out. This patterning causes your eye to attempt to follow the order of the letters in order to reconstruct the word or words she's painting. Although in the present body of work, the words are sometimes near impossible to make out. You struggle to make out the word – you see letters perceive pattern – but they tend to collapse into gibberish or 'baby talk' – bits and pieces of half words. Only she's gotten you to do something quite remarkable in the process. She's gotten you to 'travel' all over the

surface of her work – and in a way that is not entirely familiar to painting. She *tricks* you, or seduces you into *reading* the work (something that you’re used to, and not particularly frightened of) and then you find they’re not really *logical* this way – and so all the structure you usually fall back on gives way and you’re in this wild aesthetic free-fall – but it’s liberating. McClelland gets you to look at the entire painting with your mind preoccupied, as it were, so that you might actually see the painting without really trying. It’s the same way you sometimes do something rather extraordinary and only later, after the fact, do you realize you normally couldn’t do that particular thing. It’s weird but McClelland gets you to trust yourself more in the face of abstract painting – it’s like her touch – no her *intelligence* is this mothering, encouraging presence that gets you to know art better.

I asked McClelland what her relationship to “things upside down” is – and she quickly responded – “they’re vulnerable” – and I *got* it. The physical state of the world, the material state of the world is completely tied up to the emotional state of the world. Direction is important to McClelland – everything’s important to her and it puts you in mind of Freud’s famous dictum: “Either everything means something or nothing does”. And in perhaps a more female way McClelland doesn’t go in for any of this *all or nothingness* – but she fills the world with inexact meaning and allows you all this beautiful latitude in her amorphous work. That upside-down is “vulnerable” feels right – in fact it feels like something of a discovery. She gets you to ask yourself a whole bunch of questions – like what do things going on in spirals mean? Or what do things floating around edges mean? And all of this is – well – it’s *warm* and feels *important*, like McClelland has gotten you to *cross over* some logical line, some mental frontier.

But it’s not all so subjective and open to interpretation as all this might lead one to believe. If it were you’d label McClelland an “Expressionist” and be done with it – but she’s not. What she is is an amalgam of lots of little things that end up pretty big. There’s a real method to her process. The two structure she uses: *words* and *space* are actually quite codified. The words, which take on an elliptical non-gravity – permutating, twisting, turning inside out – can be broken down into three or four quasi-categories. The first is a set of words that have to do with time or permanence, promises or wishfulness – words like **Soon**, **Never**, **Till** or **Wait**. The second category is words that refer to beings outside of one’s own space of control, words like **Them** or **They** or **There** – un-nameable forces which act upon us or fail to do so (like parents or friends or lovers). The third grouping is ‘onomatopoetic’ equivalents that are pure expressions, almost pre-lingual. Words like **Ow** or **He He** or **Ah-ha**. They are utterances that come from close to the core. Occasionally McClelland uses two-word expressions like *My Pleasure* or *While Away* and they are beautiful *haikus* packed with meaning. A fourth category might be response words – those answers and relies that say so much with so little: words like **Yes**, **No**, **Maybe** or **Sure**. Mixed in are those painful dismissals of **Never Mind**, **So What**, and **Oh No**. Her paintings are like *Illuminated Manuscripts* – they have that kind of loving touch; that kind of hands-on carefully worked on quality. And like *Illuminated Manuscripts*, what McClelland paints begins to recede into the background as her technique takes us to ‘*higher ground*’. The point is, that for McClelland language is *not* narrow. They say it would take a year to recount the events of a single day. McClelland has that kind of relationship with words – you could say she has *a way with words* – for her every word opens out like a rose into ever more omnifarious implications.

All the words she chooses vibrate between states of being and circumvent strict logical interpretation – remaining instead more in the domain of the *subjective* or the *poetic*. She strips language of extemporaneous detail or superfluousness – she’s a *primal reductivist* pushing a word back onto itself until it reverts back to something fundamental and honest, elemental and guttural – and less clear than you imagined. It’s like she performs this magical linguistic alchemical operation on her words – reducing them to their essence, their “lowest common denominator”; their *purest* form.

McClelland is the Diderot of space – it’s like she’s writing an *encyclopedia of space* – and she’s fluent in more than one kind of space. She gets it to *open up* the same way she does with words. She makes it unsure, un-named, and yet vaguely knowable. She has referred to various states of *shapes* of space. And again you can divide this space into three loose categories. One, what she calls a “receptive space” (i.e. in the painting **Always** – one of those ‘promise words’, it almost brings tears to your heart, it’s what you want to hear from someone you love) is absorbent – you go into it but not too far into it – it’s not every deep space (so it’s not Romantic space) – but it is very spongy. It takes impressions rather than transmits a lot of material insistence. It has a weightless reverie – you fly inside the painting, but **Always** brings you back to its surface, sprinkled with lovely **Cheshire Cat** letters spelling out this secret word.

Then again in a painting like **While Away** (a term rife with day-dreamy airiness) the space is more active and extroverted -- or **Transmitive Space** – its communicative, almost overly so. You get this *bulimic* rush – the feeling that too many visual incidents are packed in and layered on. It’s a more complex, grid-like space; perforated and slightly *hysterical* (and McClelland has a fascinating relationship with hysteria – she’s the seer-of-hysteria, the *necromancer* of it. She knows things about it that no one’s known before) like there are invisible mirrors reflecting everything in the painting off one another. She gets this ordered cacophony going, only you feel like she’s out of control. This may be because she’s limited her means so. You feel like she’s juggling the right number of balls. In any event, this is a noisy space – the sound of the static is implied.

Finally there is **Spinning Space**, which implies *motion* rather than *gravity* or *weight*. And these paintings can get very *centrifugal* – things tend to spin out to the edges of her work. You lose your visual equilibrium. You have to hunt around at the periphery of her paintings sometimes, for things to make sense. Her work is like *lip reading* – you have to use more than one of your faculties to do it. You begin to know the way an opera singer, say, feels the tiniest increment of sound within their bodies. 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.

Now you’ve just turned the first page of this *Dictionary of Space* and already you feel this Glass Bead Game complexity – how everything not only means something, but means something in relation to everything else. She really gets you to see the connectedness between things. Everything feels so linked-up – in spite (or maybe because of) the raw, messy means she employs (clay, charcoal, oil paint and other icky looking stuff), her works feel endlessly sensual – like charged skin –fleshy and slightly alive.

There’s no narrative to her work but she tells a story – a story we all somehow know. Her paintings are spooky this way – like she’s coaxing something out of us –

they're a little wistful, tapping out this silent, muffled, cotton mouthed message you've long ago forgotten. She's against the didactic and in favor of the reflective. These ghost paintings have a spectral presence – as if they might actually possess a *soul*. She charges her space with *miracles* – as if maybe we could see the unseeable shape of all the oceanic space which embraces us all – all the days of our lives, that *embryonic* space – get you to bath in it, makes you forget and remember at the same time.