Bomb Magazine
Issue 118, December 2011

# Suzanne McClelland by Barry Schwabsky

"An artist who is trying to make paint do things it hasn't done before"—that's the way Roberta Smith described Suzanne McClelland when she burst onto the New York scene 20 years ago. The critic had put her finger on something that was instantly clear to a lot of us. It was around that time that I began a conversation with McClelland that continues to this day. Over the ensuing decades I've seen her not only succeed in making paint do unprecedented things, but also continue to experiment—at times dismantling her own accomplishments to find out how she could continue to paint otherwise. Not that there haven't been constants. For one thing, her work has always involved language. But unlike almost any painter you can think of who uses words—whether the visual reference is print, as with Richard Prince, or handwriting, as with Cy Twombly or Julian Schnabel—McClelland is concerned not only with the visual and semantic aspects of language but also, just as much, with its acoustic form. She aims to capture its resonances and overtones, the wake it leaves in the air when a phrase has just been whispered under someone's breath, or tossed in passing to someone walking the other way, or yelled from one room to another. When you've had a long, ongoing conversation with someone, a lot of the dialogue takes place in between the words—in the spacings and shadings of the sculpted pauses. Things are communicated without quite being said. So when we caught up this late summer as McClelland was preparing for her fall exhibition at Sue Scott Gallery in New York, it was a refreshing change to sit down together—with an MP3 recorder, a couple of glasses of wine, and a sound track of Long Island crickets and tree frogs—to try to fill in some of the implications usually left hanging between words.

— BARRY SCHWABSKY

**BS:** Let's start at the beginning of *our* story, which for me is when I saw your *My Pleasure* painting at the Wolff Gallery. When was that?

**SM:** In the fall of 1990.

**BS:** I remember fantasizing with the painter David Humphrey about how we could buy the painting together and share it by taking turns and each having it six months at a time. We had a long talk about whether it was a masculine or feminine painting, and it seemed to leave us in the air about that.

**SM:** I don't know what feminine and masculine are, really.  Do you?

**BS:** Who does?

**SM:** To me, the feminine can be very physical, at times aggressive, even bombastic—some qualities that people associate with masculine. So I get confused about what people mean by it.

**BS:** Well, that's exactly what was interesting about the painting. In the '80s, painting was reputed to be a macho thing to do. This was aggressive in a different way. Was this on your mind then?

**SM:** Yes. I came to New York at the end of 1981 and all through the '80s I saw large, physical painting in the galleries. I was painting, and I was finding a way to—

**BS:** What were you painting in 1981?

**SM:** I actually photographed the city and the performances at Storefront for Art and Architecture since I lacked a proper studio for painting. In college I spent hours in the darkroom watching images appear. I couldn't imagine the logic in painting an image of a recognizable form since the darkroom did this so well and offered the magic of flattening reality. So, when I finally shared a studio space and had a place to assemble materials, I focused on making "stuff" move. I made rubbings of the streets in Chinatown, where I lived, by dragging canvas and linen out at night along with a single bucket of color and a roller. I collected surfaces, then stretched them indoors. I ripped up canvas using these strips; the torn edge has a softer line than a cut edge. In college I spent time with the textile students; they were clear and intelligent about how they separated the structures of their work from the color decisions. That time I spent with photography and textiles was more instructive than any painting class I took.

**BS:** Did you know then about the French Supports/Surfaces artists who had sone that sort of thing?

**SM:** No.

**BS:** Maybe it would have misled you.

**SM:** I think it would have made me feel like there was an affinity with something in painting rather than with photography and collage, and this would have given me courage. Unfortunately, what this kind of ripping, cutting, dropping, and rubbing action connected me to were aspects of Color Field painting. This movement didn't help me reconcile the things that were in my head with the things I was doing with my body in my studio. I understood the Color Field agenda as a rejection of drawing and of language.

I met Clement Greenberg during those years. He looked at my work and said, "Stop drawing so much." But I just went deeper into drawing. The drawing had to do with what I was hearing. There was so much sound and so many kinds of speech all around the city; New york was full of human and mechanical sound, and that's what I sought to reflect in my paintings. I saw Babara Kruger and Jenny Holzer take on public spaces with their texts—it seemed like a kind of bravado with a purpose, or maybe it's better to say that the *size* of their work was integral to the subjects they had in play. Their use of advertising language and text displays made it possible to experience language in a physically immersive way, yet advertising wasn't something I wanted to be associated with at that time. It was so clean, smooth, sharp, and bright...very cool. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel, and even Anselm Kiefer were making language in this very physical way—the stain, smudge, or spray seemed close to the way a body can draw, write, or speak. Kruger and Holzer produced text requiring a different kind of translation from experience. What they did with language was not *saying* what I had in mind. In other words, I felt in sync with their subjects, but in terms of the physical delivery or the gesture, I was challenged by those painters who happened to be male. I had not been exposed to Joan Snyder or Louise Fishman or any of the other important women artists who had long before begun this process in contemporary American art. They made legible statements in English with painted language. This climate really pointed to questions about who has permission to make physical work and also be socially relevant. And with this came the question, What, if any, are the feminine or masculine tendencies in visual art?

Through Basquiat and Schnabel's paintings I learned more about Cy Twombly's paintings, which showed how writing and drawing fused. These guys would use language to name things, but naming them in this big Western and often classical way, identifying the Romans, or Olympia, or Leda. Or in Schnabel's case it was Olatz, a girlfriend, or a wife. Proper nouns.

**BS:** It's all about mythologizing or monumentalizing something—

**SM:** Yeah. All the work I was looking at in the '80s was monumentalizing things, and it was a fantastic time to be a viewer *looking* at art. I didn't necessarily want to make large things to put in the world, but I wanted the thoughts or the words that I had in my head, and the sounds that I heard in the city, to be subjects for my painting.

**BS:** Did it ever strike you as paradoxical to use sound as a subject for music or poetry? In other words, for painting to have a non-visual, non-visible subject?

**SM:** Maybe it's paradoxical. But being trained in both, I have always loved and been attracted to abstraction in music and art. To Take something that you can't touch, or that is intangible, and put it into a physical reality of some sort—that seemed actually quite reasonable to me.

**BS:** Can you say a little more about how your involvement with the Color Field painters played into your work? It's a whole area of art that's very much in the shadows today. There could even be connections that might be very evident to someone who knew that work well, but there aren't very many people like that around anymore. *(laughter)*

**SM:** I was educated in the late '70s by sculptors and photographers, primarily, and the conversation was around minimalism and feminism. My first experience of connecting with contemporary art was with Robert Morris's felt piece at the Albright-Knox and then with Lee Bontecou at the Art Institute of chicago. Both of their works were positioned on the wall as painting, yet they were not pictures and they were not design. Color Field work, which was fading from the public eye by the time I saw it, *appeared* to be dealing with physics, with gravity, with trying to make something stand up, lean, or project. But I was puzzled by the lack of irony, awareness, or absurdity. I wasn't sure what they were up to or after.

**BS:** Did you ever come to understand it?

**SM:** No, I still don't. Maybe for me there had to be more of a risk of failing at something. But I could not see how one could fail by repeating the same activity over and over and then burying the results. Sigmar Polke, for instance, is an artist of whom I never could predict what in the world he would jump into next or how far he would go to develop his ideas and material. I loved how he could go from one process to another, and also from one type of imagery to another, and move through without clinging to his own brand. I wonder what the resistance was that caused him to stop or to hit a dead end and leave a project. What draws you back to it when it's unfinished but a kernel of life still remains in it? This is one reason why your book *12 Abandoned Poems* is really significant to me. Not only because of what you did with other people's poems but also because of your description of *failure*. Im still not quite sure if it's necessary to abandon something that has failed. Can you return to it?

**BS:** I wasn't really thinking about what failure was. The poems just had to have failed in the eyes of the person who wrote them, and he or she had given up on them. When I asked people to give poems for my project, there were some who said, "No, I can't give you something, because I always still hope that I can go back to it and make it work." In a sense, I understood that very well, but, still, I wasn't asking them to give it up forever. I thought, If you

gave me an abandoned text of yours to work on, and afterward you decided to go ahead and work on it anyway, that'd be fine with me—then we'd have two different things. You know, it's like a crosswords where they took the path to the right and I took the path to the left. That would actually be very interesting. Later I saw that Geoffrey Young did publish a version of at least one of the poems he gave me.

**SM:** Well, that's the ideal situation for any art—that it continues to have some sort of life even in the hands of another artist. I guess leaving something behind isn't the same as abandoning it, right? The Color Field painting that I came upon in 1982 didn't seem to offer an opportunity to value what was left behind or left over, or to feature the overlooked remains.

**BS:** The whole line of thought and activity became uninteresting when painting became all about painting, sculpture all about sculpture, and so on. Painting is more interesting when it's part of a universe of all kinds of activities that one might be doing as an artist—

**SM:** —and as a person. And getting it right, you know? *(laughter)* Obviously when you're painting as object, or a figure, or a landscape, there is an identifiable *right*. But with abstraction there is a sense of what *feels* right—it's very subjective and people may agree in a nonverbal way.

**BS:** Well, a lot of abstract things have names, like *square* and *circle*—

**SM:** —*mist* or *fog*. Are those abstract things? Is a square abstract? I mean, I know that people use those things in abstract paintings—

**SM:** —but it isn't! It's a square. there's abstraction that has to do with not being able to easily *nail* it with a name. And the question of what's right has more to do with a groove, like when you're with people who are connecting to the same music or the same sound. When you can get into that groove, that's a kind of rightness.

**BS:** So it's not an accord between an image and what the image is made of; it's an accord between two or more people who are looking at the same image.

**SM:** Yes, there's a compatibility and spiritual agreement that has to do with being in the same room but not necessarily with similarity of appearance. I'm more involved now in what's left after the important ingredient is used up. When to walk away from the thing that calls attention to itself, and how it has changed when I return to it. I don't have to keep making new things. I can keep returning to things that I left behind, or that somebody else left behind, and pick up on them.

**BS:** How do you show that it's something that's left behind?

**SM:** Lately, I've been into looking at things that are loud and clear but unfinished. I've been listening to a lot of early rap artists, mostly women, who really were talking to one another in their songs—there were a lot of answer songs-there were a lot of correspondence between people.

**BS:** Do you ever do an answer paintings to somebody else's painting?

**SM:** Polke did this really beautifully painting, *Solutions V*, of math problems that were all wrong...but so right. *(laughter)* I made a painting as an answer to this work of his. The paintings I'm doing now are all answer paintings. *The Roxanne Wars*, for instance, is a response to a Twombly painting. The Roxanne Wars, a series of hip-hop rivalries were in the air in NYC in the '80s: Roxanne Shanté the Real Roxanne, Sparky D...The question was, who was the *real* Roxanne? this launched answer songs galore. In 1991 Shanté made "Big Mama," which "lists" her competitors, or colleagues; she "names names"—Monie Love, Yo Yo, Latifah, and on and on. My new paintings in a group called *Left* are lists and memories of these events. My painted lists are, of course, incomplete because they are only from my memory, from relooking at, or relistening to, that music with more distance. These rap artists are really what gave me the space to make paintings that had language as a structure or as a foundation. Hip-hop, house, and rap music in the early '80s were, to me, a completely mind-blowing revolution. I grew with radio: rock and roll, blues, and Motown. Near Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, radio DJs played The Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, Muddy Waters, and Iggy Pop...fantastic music, but I wasn't around much visual art. A painting was clearly very different from its photographic reproduction (which functioned more like a thumbnail of itself), but recorded music had more of a life of its own abstracted from the body that produced it. It was real *talking* music.

**BS:** What I liked about the first rap music that I heard was that it could be so funny. "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang: "I don't mean to brag, I don't mean to boast, but we like hot butter on our breakfast toast." *(laughter)* How do you get away with that?

**SM:** You get away with it because the words are the beat this mix of what you think and what you can feel simultaneously with the percussion_the abstraction of the music—is embedded in the language and it doesn't *work*, it plays.

**BS:** As soon as rap got involved in stories and realism I lost interest in it.

**SM:** The reason I was interested in women rap artists is that they were weaving experiences that I could relate to with experiences that were unfamiliar. They educated me. We didn't share the experiences that caused

this music, poetry, and speech, but the relationships they talked about—not only with each other but with the larger world_I could connect with completely. And they were able to maintain all of that real experience and have a blast at the same time; *play* with each other and *play* each other. One of the fortunate things about deciding to live like an artist is that you can take your time to hunt for existing fragments, even if you work a full-time job. The person that you're picking up from may not want to hear what you have to say, but somebody else down the line just might. This is how history is made, and so much of history is not recorded. So i had best be alert to what is floating, unpublished, and unsigned. Before arriving in New York, when I heard my first rap record I was moving in a car. At that time it was easy for me to move through the city and be around artists as much as musicians. In the clubs no one cared much about what part of the world you came from, what your alma mater was, or who your family was. Nowadays much of my social exchange is clean, global, and electric, unless I have a conversation or go to "see" music.

**BS:** Artists, musicians, and writers being physically in the same place or situation doesn't seem as common now—

**SM:** —and sweating!

**BS:** Sweating the same sweat—

**SM:** —and bumping into people! We were not just sharing space in the trains and buses focused on getting to a destination, we were looking to commune. I think it is just more segregated now, in every sense. You brought up that painting, *My Pleasure*, which was what brought you to my studio. You were the very first person who came to my studio after grad school who wasn't another artist or a musician friend. You were the first stranger, after Jamie Wolff.

**BS:** But I didn't know.

**SM:** That painting was part of a body of work that was language but not instructive. I didn't want to send verbal messages. I wanted the paintings to insinuate that something else—

**BS:**—had already been said. What are other works from that time?

**SM:** *Forever, Someday, Always, Now, Never, Sure....*These were responses that don't offer imagery to somebody asking, When? Where? I used the words *then, anymore*. I did a whole exhibition on the word *more*. *(laughter)*

**BS:** It reminds me of a conversation with a kid: "Where've you been?" "Out." "What have you been doing?" "Nothing."

**SM:** The language of evasion—responding, but not saying anything-—like a grunt or a laugh. It's physical because it comes out of your body, and your size and shape can affect the tone. the voice is a synthesis of thought, desire, and body. To me, that's great material for painting.

**BS:** It works because the paintings create a space in which the said things echo. You feel like you've heard them or *almost* heard them, and you're cocking your head to catch them.

**SM:** That's what I hope for. Some of the paintings have more space than others, and some people refuse to read or, in a sense, *hear* the characters in my work. They may read the material before the words and then flip between the two.

**BS:** At different times the texts in your paintings have been more legible or less legible. There have been times when I've found it very hard, if not impossible, to read what's written, even though I knew that there must be something written there. And then at other times it's quite blatant.

**SM:** Because sometimes the physical material will consume the name. I use clay and dry pigment and acrylic medium, separating the binder from the color from the ground so that the material could become "the word" in an absurd way...overstating it to the point that it can't be understood. See, I don't want to use size alone to convey tone.

**BS:** So these days, how readable are your paintings?

**SM:** Characters and fragments of names are legible—all names of rap artists.

**BS:** One name per painting, or many names per painting?

**SM:** There are two paintings that stay together as a pair, a double list of names. They're made with a variety of grays, blacks, whites, and stainless-steel pigment.

**BS:** The paintings are blacks and whites?

**SM:** The paintings, yes.

**BS:** The rappers too.

**SM:** (*laughter)* The rap artists made up their names, which is the great thing.

**BS:** No artist, no painter, ever had a name like Run-DMC.

**SM:** No. Or Yo Yo.

**BS:** Forget it.

**SM:** Or Da Brat. Or Monie Love, or Bytches with Problems, or Hoez with Attitude, or MC Lyte.

**BS:** Did you listen to their records while you made paintings?

**SM:** No. I listen to jazz when I work, because it is not telling me what to do or what to think.

**BS:** I've been shocked by some painters who've told me that they listen to audio books while working in their studio.

**SM:** There's no way I could do that unless I were preparing surfaces.

**BS:** The surface is so important. When people paint—not for every kind of painting, but far more or less traditional paintings that you do by hand with a brush or any kind of implement—there's a physical communication that goes from the surface of the support through the material that's on the end of the brush. Through the soft part of the brush, through the rigid part of the brush, to your hand, up your arm, and into your brain, and there is a loss of the sense of distinction between what's part of one's self and what's part of the objective world. I think that's where a certain "mysticism" in painting comes from.

**SM:** That's the groove! There's a way to know what you're doing but you aren't controlling the thing and it's not controlling you. Abstraction makes a lot of sense to me because it doesn't tell you what to do. It can be an open space, even if it's square.

**BS:** You insist on the term *abstraction*. I've always wondered whether paintings of writing, paintings of language, were abstraction or not. In other words, they don't seem to be representational in the way a painting of a cow, or a person, or a sunrise is. But because words have meaning they don't seem to be abstract in the way that paintings of brushstrokes are abstract, or paintings that are all red and nothing but that.

**SM:** It may be more open-ended than concrete reality; it may offer more fluid space than what's real. Many of the hip-hop and rap artists that I'm revisiting have names that are abstractions, in a sense. There is an ongoing debate in their music about who and what is more *real*...more authentic, who did what first and, at the same time, the sampling is always from somewhere else! There is a lot of value placed on who is more real. But there's nobody arguing about what's more abstract or who's the most abstract. People make a song and then they'll leave it to be responded to, and, I guess, in painting, the thing I keep returning to is that there is this huge history that has been documented

and valued, and, there is a larger, deeper, underground stream of history that has not been documented and has not been valued. And I can keep revisiting both, through different routes. One of the paintings in my upcoming show is *Woman as Landscape*. I stole the titled from de Kooning and drew a head—woman as landscape. I do not see a body in the de Kooning, only a tiny little face; it's getting lost resurfacing, all while sitting still.

**BS:** That theme occupied de Kooning for decades upon decades. He always was painting landscapes as if they were made up of forms of female bodies and painting women as though they were made up pieces of landscape—

**SM:** And why not? Human bodies are interesting and wildly varied, as is the land. His paintings use the idea of a woman to make gestures, and he buries himself in the trail of gestures building upon and dissolving an idea, not a woman. He makes no attempt to *depict* a woman, in my view. Isolating that one painting where he used the pronoun *as* in his title seemed like an opportunity to explore the silliness of using a female body over and over again. The woman's body became the landscape to fight over, but, ultimately, I would rather assert women's voices as subject matter.

**BS:** One question that was raised a lot in all that discussion of the '80s was who has the right or the power to depict someone or make someone the subject matter of their depiction or reflection. I'm not sure if that discussion ever went anywhere because, in a sense, as soon as we're out in the world, we're fair game for anyone's perceptions and reflections.

**SM:** Yeah, we are all fair game. But how dull only to work over the women. One way to deal with this important issue you raise is just to avoid the female body altogether. It's been painted and drawn and described and photographed so many times that I don't feel the need to join in on reclaiming the female body when there's the voice.

**BS:** Maybe that goes back to the quandary that David Humphrey and I had about your *My Pleasure* painting. The voice in this painting resonated in abstraction from the body that "spoke"—we felt like we had a problem knowing whether it was a female or a male voice, and that it was important to know.

**SM:** Was it because it had the word *my* in it? *My* pleasure? And so then you wanted to know who the author was?

**BS:** I suppose. My pleasure versus yours.

**SM:** I hoped the phrase would take the person out of the picture, so to speak. It's pleasure not *owned* by somebody specific, it's the automatic polite response to a request—to want to please. The question of mutual pleasure is

what I hope to raise, the mutual pleasure in looking and reading. My aim is to locate language that isn't in the possession of a particular person. That's why I don't use text that is taken from literature to make paintings.

**BS:** But using names is very different, it's somebody's name.

**SM:** It is different with using the rappers' names, which are not their own names. They choose names to represent themselves in public. The names are both representational and abstract. Lyndah McCaskill and Tanisha Michele Morgan are Bytches with Problems. Lolita Gooden Is Roxanne Shanté; Simone Riscoe is Monie Love. These artists have left a lot of unsaid or unanswered, and that makes what they did attractive to me.

**BS:** Not to finish it, but to continue it.

**SM:** Yeah, to pick up on fragments of it and refer to the things that were said and done. To remember them, and, of course, in your memory you don't get it right. *(laughter)* Even when you have a recording, you're not *there* then, at the time in the studio when the music is being made and mixed. Even when it's sealed and done, everbody is going to hear it and get only fragments of the original reality.

**BS:** So, whoever transcribes this conversation is going to pick up on something—

**SM:** *(laughter)* I hope so!

**BS:** —but it might not be what we thought.