**Christina Orr-Cahall**
**Norton Museum of Art**
**Catalogue Essay, 1995**

**"Suzanne McClelland"**

Suzanne McClelland is one of the youngest artists represented in the Norton's collection. She was born in Jacksonville, Florida, and presently lives and works in New York City. McClelland received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1981, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of Visual Arts, New York, in 1989. She spent a year abroad, in 1980, at the Universita Italiana per Stranieri, Perugia, Italy.

      McClelland is one of a number of contemporary artists to incorporate words into her art, as a means of calling attention to language. Two other artists to do so are Barbara Krueger, who is known primarily for her paintings with texts that comment on gender issues, and Jenny Holzer, whose multi-media works allude to sayings and phrases that, although common, are perfunctory or lacking in meaning. Cy Twombly, however, is McClelland's major influence. Twombly's loosely painted word-paintings, which call to mind graffiti, scribbling, or doodling, most directly inspire McClelland's own scrawling images.

      McClelland's use of text in her paintings is unique because she highlights one word, or at most, two related ones, and never entire sentences. She believes that her works make more potent statements this way. Because the words are isolated, they are removed from their broader contexts. Their meaning is thus obscured or left open for the viewer to interpret. Words or phrases are repeated, however, and often fragmented and rearranged, as if spoken in different tones of voice, by different people, or at different times. But, the manner in which paint is applied to the canvas helps to evoke the effect of varying voices, as well. In McClelland's words, "the 'how; of something and the 'what' of something have to work together, so that how something is conveyed is really how it's painted. If [a word] is written in a heavy-handed, aggressive, assertive way, that gives it its tone, in the same way that if you speak, you can't separate the tone of the spoken word and the content of it."

      McClelland's words, which come from conversations she has either participated in or overheard, fall into four or fiver general categories. The first category consists of words that suggest time – soon, never, till, wait. The second group is made up of words that suggest a person or place other than, or apart from, herself – them, they, there. The third category consists of words that are onomatopoetic or even pre-lingual in character – ow, he-he, ah-ha. (McClelland reports being influenced by her daughter's learning to speak.) A fourth group consists of words that are used as responses to replies – yes, no, maybe, sure. When McClelland employs phrases, they consist of no more than two words, like "My Pleasure" or "While Away".

      It is difficult to view McClelland's words, which can be frustratingly vague, without trying to reconstruct the contexts from which they arise. Thus, her greatest contribution may be the fact that she invites us to contemplate the nature of communication. More specifically, McClelland's canvases point to language's power

both to provide meaning and to confound it. Though the artist dos not see her work as didactic, we, nevertheless, come away richer for having considered it.

McClelland's paintings have an energetic quality similar to those of the 1950s Abstract Expressionists. Like Jackson Pollock's canvases, which are covered with spattered or poured paint, McClelland's works are laced with web-like patterns. McClelland uses a variety of materials to achieve her effect, however, not just paint, as is the case with Pollock. Canvases, such as *"so long"*, are covered with a mixture of acrylic, charcoal, clay, gesso, and rabbit-skin glue.

The animated quality of McClelland's canvases, coupled with fragmentation of the word or words that she highlights, force the viewer to examine the entire canvas in order to comprehend what is spelled out. The words that make up the title *so long* become apparent only after close scrutiny. First, one has to differentiate the letters from a tangle of arcs, arabesques, and other abstract lines, and then, one has to rearrange them in an order that makes sense. Most readily apparent in *so long*, are the darker letters. While "LLLLOng" at the center of the piece, is easily read, the upside-down "n n n n " however, and the widely spaced "o"s across the top of the canvas, are not. The letters are repeated in white paint (note the large "o" at the bottom of the canvas) and in clear glue.

*"so long"* is one of the few paintings by McClelland to highlight a phrase, rather than a single word. The expression "so long" suggests parting and alludes to time. To utter the phrase "so long" is to imply that a present state is coming to an end, and thus, to suggest the idea of a past. "so long" also alludes to the future, however. Unlike the more permanent "goodbye, " the casual "so long" suggests a point at which a reunion will occur. It is this power of suggestions that gives McClelland's canvases the power to intrigue.