

Publications

[back to list](#)

Carter Ratcliff, *Intersections and Interruption: Catalog essay*, (Spring 2000)

Sometimes Suzanne McClelland divides a canvas into halves. Sometimes a dividing line produces two unequal parts, or two borders generate three zones. Symmetry is lost, yet clarity remains, as it does when the inverted triangle of eclipsing variable (sharing gravity) #2, 1999, rises from the lower edge of the canvas to a region of variously colored blobs. And even when a tangle of these irregular forms dominates a painting-see, for instance, tit for tat (Binary system), 1998-99-the surface still looks whole. Loading the canvas with complexity, McClelland nonetheless preserves its integrity, its simple oneness. For her shapes, colors, and textures always acknowledges the flatness and rectangularity of the canvas. Thus she remarks on this familiar geometry, giving it a salience it wouldn't have if she had left the surface blank.

For at least a century, perhaps longer, painters have reminded us that their works are not only images but also palpable things. McClelland sustains this tradition. Her paintings are insistently here, on a particular wall, objects no less physical than we are. I'm making a point of this because, in what follows, I'll be talking about the ambiguities of McClelland's art-the play of possibilities that leads her from tangible flatness to subtleties of pictorial depth, from seemingly abstract imagery to representational images, and beyond the pictorial to the verbal. Sometimes we read McClelland's works as if they were texts-and sometimes that is what they are. The drawings in this show are like pages from a writer's notebook. Yet their physicality of her paintings is crucial to their meaning, so we need to keep it in view, even when possibilities for interpretation draw us into realms of sheer speculation.

Even now, Minimalism supplies us with our exemplary instances of "objecthood," as it was called in the 1960s. Whether a cube, an oblong box, or a relentlessly repetitive grid, a Minimalist object presents its clarity of form as a self-evident virtue. Many were willing to see it that way when the style object was new, and some critics went so far as to interpret this fresh clarity as a variety of truth. The times made this an understandable temptation. In the decade before Minimalism's emergence, Abstract

Expressionist painters had claimed an expressive, even an existential truth for the splattery exuberance of their gestures. Inevitably, the claim became overworked and then dubious. The aura of "credibility"- to use a favorite word of the Minimalist Donald Judd-attached itself to blunt geometries. Right angles and simple symmetries took on an authority they had never before possessed in the realm of fine art.

Not every artist respected that authority, but many did and many still do- McClelland among them. Of course Minimalist surfaces are smooth and impersonal, while hers are vigorously inflected. Sometimes McClelland's line stretches itself taut, sometimes it turns back on itself, repeatedly. She is an artist of impacted textures and restless tangles. Often forms crowd in on themselves and one another, leaving wide expanses of the surface bare-see, in particular, tips #2 (between the lines), 1997-99, thought nearly all the works in this show have quiet regions overlooked by the prevailing furor. There is a roughness to certain passages, as if McClelland sometimes feels nearly overwhelmed by her need to address the surface. Yet even when it verges on frenzy, her line is somehow fragile- a means of conveying subtleties.

Calm or agitated, she is a painterly painter and her works attract the "Abstract Expressionist" label. Still, her wiry-and intensely wired-calligraphy owes nothing to Willem de Kooning, Abstract Expressionism's leading figure. Opening up a shallow space just behind the surface of the canvas, de Kooning's brushwork is Cubist, and his imagery is always at least obliquely figurative. No trace of this heritage appears in McClelland's art. Her imagery stays on the surface, like writing on a page. Thus the figure, that traditional theme, appears in McClelland's paintings as an implication of her gesture. The figure is absent, to make room for traces of a figure-herself.

Because McClelland's gesture sometimes has a manic edge, it may bring Jackson Pollock to mind. Yet her fields of imagery never sprawl the way his do. Pollock's gesture implied-or reached for-the infinite. McClelland contains her drips and splashes and looping lines with geometric simplicities of Minimalist lineage. Green and red share the canvas equally in horizon (grass is greener), 1999. Symmetry becomes mirroring in horizon (on thin ice), 1999, and once sees an echo of serial repetition, that indispensably Minimalist device, along the upper and lower edges of else (Hudson River), 1998-99. McClelland acknowledges the persistence of Minimalism, she abets it, yet she doesn't accept the Minimalist equation of formal clarity and unambiguous Truth-or, at the very least, certainty. From clarity she generates ambiguity, even doubt.

In else (Hudson River), shifts of color and texture map six zones ambiguous enough to be read as five or four. Does the light blue strip at the top of the painting count as an independent region or is it sky to the dark mountains below, one part of a two-part zone? Or is this the sky-blue shore of the river mentioned in the painting's subtitle? The main title- "else"-is puzzling when it appears on a wall label, and even more so when we trace it across the surface of the painting. Repeating itself upside down and reversed, the word enacts our puzzlement. "Else" is other, alternative, and "elsewhere" is-where, exactly? Or, to put the question the other way around, where is "here"? A partial answer to this question is obvious. "Here" is literally here, on the canvas, because McClelland's symmetries lock her imagery to the surface of the painting with offhand certainty. Yet reassurances like these have a way of transforming themselves.

In eclipsing variable (sharing gravity) #1, 1999, "here" becomes "there," repeated three times and running two ways at once-that is, three initial t's appear along the central axis of the canvas and each serves as a starting point for letters running left to right and the same letters running right to left. In horizon (on thin ice), "here" is given a name: "north," spelled out in spindly green letters. This is a perfectly plausible designation until one notices that the letters are echoed in ghostly gray on the other half of the painting. Thus McClelland induces symmetry to launch the imagination far from the facts of surface and paint, pattern and form-and far from the familiar sort of map that opposes north to south, east to west, in a reassuring way. Usually, a horizon divides earth from sky-another comforting dichotomy. Yet McClelland makes it difficult to distinguish up from down, the solid from the atmospheric. One's attention drifts beyond the earth-sky binarism to a third term, the territory beyond the horizon, and to all the terms lurking there-unseen but conjured up by lines that become words, by shapes that take on the air of hieroglyphs.

In three of her drawings, McClelland writes of "a variable star whose changes in brightness are caused by periodic eclipses of 2 stars in a binary system." For astronomers, a system of this sort might produce a predictable sequence of events, and in all her drawings McClelland invokes a transcendent certainly with the figures of the Annunciation, angel and Madonna, in silhouette. However, the silhouettes appear in reverse-what one sees first are ambiguous, Rorschach-like shapes-and there is nothing predictable about the variables generated by McClelland's binary systems, her patterns of earth/sky, left/right, image/text, and so on. In a drawing, she writes of getting "there where north is always beyond where we are and before south is . . ." In her universe, "there" is in a sense everywhere, no location or meaning is permanent, and one finds one's way by following shifts in mood across the surface of a painting.

Nearly every time she is interviewed, McClelland talks of language as "weather." One is immersed in its boundlessness. Like the quality of a day, of its light and temperature, the tone of local, ambient language tempers one's being. Then one speaks, inflecting language with the tone of one's utterance, as one imposes the quality of one's intention on the weather-the world felt as a mood. However one feels, the relations between self and world are intricate. Whatever one says, the relations between utterance and language are, if anything, even more complex. Because she wants to "say" the complexity itself, McClelland pushes the word beyond familiar talk to the verge of the pictorial. Swirling with the energies of McClelland's weather, the light in her paintings is always shifting. The talk that flows through her drawings disassembles words and reassembles them with new meanings, which engender new meanings in their turn. This instability is exhilarating, yet sooner or later a troubling doubt occurs. If works of art can mean so much of such elusive subtlety, perhaps everything in McClelland's world can mean anything, and she is inviting us to conclude that nothing means anything very convincingly.

At this point, the "objecthood" of her paintings comes back into focus. We see that, no matter how lushly ambiguous her imagery may be, it is always indubitably her own. So it is not merely the complexity of language, of our linguistic and cultural "weather," that she wants to pronounce. She wants as well to claim her place in the shifting currents of this weather. Working at the border that divides writing from painting, she gives her words the specificity of a handwriting that, because she is a painter, imbues language with the presence of her body. Thus she announces herself, giving her utterances-that is to say, her paintings-a presence comparable to her own.