Suzanne McClelland at David Krut

The unrestricted accumulation of evidence, in the form of mounting layers of notes, photographs, and sketches tacked willy-nilly to the wall, can be associated on the one hand with criminal investigations, and on the other with certain kinds of emotional crisis. Suzanne McClelland's "STrAY" evokes both, in a dauntingly complex account of war and the confusion that attends it. Though the conflict in question is the American Civil War, analogies with our current military engagement in Iraq were plainly intended.

"STrAY" began with a cycle of 12 epistolary poems by George Garrett, which draw from actual letters by two Civil War soldiers, one a Yankee and the other a Confederate. McClelland responded to each poem with a "portfolio" of uneditioned works on paper, including drawings, photographs and inkjet prints (a "title page" of additional images constitutes a 13th such unique dossier). The portfolios are offered for sale in big cardboard folders; for this exhibition, they were pinned up in groups of three, all but one of the trios framed by square blue fields painted on the gallery walls. A fourth group was tacked to a roughly crayoned grid, also drawn right on the wall; the title-page portfolio appeared on a red field.

Garrett's poems, printed in full in a book that accompanied the exhibition, are brief, elliptical in their references to violence, and thoroughly haunting. McClelland reduced their language further to single words and word fragments. Nor was the integrity of each poem fully preserved in the installation, which was bewilderingly profuse. Images were tacked up singly and in sheaves, some fluttering loosely. Shadows, drawn and photographed, abounded within them, and many more were created by their installation. Often, sheets extended beyond their organizing fields; some were hung outside the painted squares' borders. In a few places, there were constellations of bare nails, suggesting withdrawn information or missing people.

Handwritten or cut out letter by letter, the words varied widely in legibility and valence. Some, bold and spiky, seemed percussive; others, cursive and ghostly, felt whispered or hissed. Black paper prevailed, variously flocked, slick and tissue-thin. But the installation's overall tone, a low, dense murmur, was not uncomplicatedly bleak. That the only literally audible voice was of McClelland's five-year-old son, who offered sweet commentary on weapons in one of two short videos that played continuously on little DVD players, added an emotional note that hovered in a very disturbing place just short of sentimentality.

Best known as a painter, McClelland is an adept of visible language—of speech and text transformed to image, always witty and often funny. Her abundant formal intelligence, and even her sense of humor, were evident here, too, not least in the few drawings that stray into loopy abstraction and, almost, figuration. But underneath all was an urgent plea: to penetrate the fog of war, at least far enough to see some of the people it engulfs.

—*Nancy Princenthal*

View of Suzanne McClelland's exhibition "STrAY," 2007, drawings, photographs, prints, video and sound, with poems by George Garrett; at David Krut.