

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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SUZANNE MCCLELLAND *Articulate Muscle* 1976

by Terence Trouillot

DIEU DONNÉ | MARCH 2 – APRIL 9, 2016

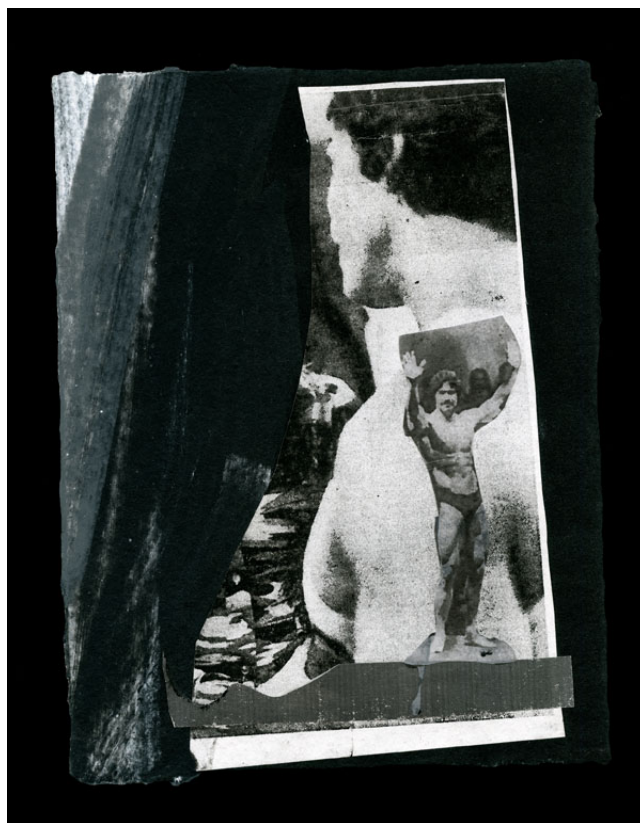
Heavy grunting, rattling weights, counting reps, men emphatically pumping iron, and the iconic voice of Arnold bumptiously stating, “You have to do everything possible to win,” are the vociferous sounds that echo across the showroom space and studio at Dieu Donn . The homoeroticism and machismo of these aural fragments is both chilling and humorously exciting. Excerpted from the cult classic film *Pumping Iron* (1977), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Lou Ferrigno, Ed Corney, and other big-bulgy-muscle men, the audio is played on loop as part of a new video piece by artist Suzanne McClelland. The work is on display with a selection of McClelland’s newest body of paper works produced during her Lab Grant residency at the Dieu Donn  paper-mill studio last year.

McClelland’s exhibition, *Articulate Muscle 1976*, includes three small paper works, an installation of eighteen unique paper works displayed on a horizontal surface close to the ground, and a twenty-two minute video—all concerned with the theme of body building. McClelland is no stranger to using the trope of body builders in her paintings, but here she puts aside her brush and takes on the subtle craft of wet papermaking to bring to light her concerns about male gender performativity, competitiveness, and popular culture. The work is breathtakingly beautiful, full of wit, dark, and inspired by archival research.

Borrowing the exhibition’s title from the Whitney’s unusual symposium *Articulate Muscle: Body as Art, 1976*, McClelland appropriates images of this wacky event in a way that levels out its meaning (or lack thereof). The “live exhibition” showcased then body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger, Frank Zane, and Ed Corney, flexing their bodies on a revolving platform in front of a panel of art historians, critics, and curators, moderated by the critic Vicki Goldberg. The exhibition, what looked like high-brow-meets-low-brow showdown with the blithe notion of pontificating on the idea of bodies as sculpture and narcissism as art, was in effect a publicity stunt to raise money for the unreleased film. The show, as it were, was a blockbuster success and helped attract investors to fund

the rest of the budget for the film.

A promotional video of the exhibition (available on YouTube) exposes the sheer absurdity of the event, which drew crowds of eager onlookers (5000, to be precise) who stormed the museum to ogle at muscular men. McClelland used still images of this video and manipulated the contrast to produce small black and white photocopies of the able bodied men. The photocopies were then dropped at random on the wet pulp—made from cotton linen with black pigment—to create a series or polyptych of 9-x-7 collaged paper works. The eponymous series *Articulate Muscle* includes twenty-six original pieces (*a-z*), which were also used to create the video, *Governor* (2016), projected in the corner of the gallery space. The video, reminiscent of Chris Marker's *La jetée*, is an entropic film-noir-esque work, consisting entirely of frozen stills of abstracted figuration: silhouettes of bodies with swashing marks of grey and white pigment on the page. The accompanying sound loop creates a dizzying effect, but generates a certain playfulness as well.



Suzanne McClelland, *Articulate Muscle, 1976 (z)*, 2015. Part of a series of 26 unique works and a video. Pigment handmade cotton and linen paper and collage. 9 x 7 inches. Courtesy Dieu Donné.

An impressive series of larger black-and-white paper works rest on a rectangular pedestal just a few inches off the ground. The white paper works, with titles such as $0+0=6$ and $0+0=1$ —harkening back to Sigmar Polke series *Solutions V* (1967)—are abstract with swatches and layers of grey and black pigment. The equation “ $0+0=$ ” is faintly inscribed on the surface of each page. The black paper works, in a series of works with titles such as *In the Black #2* or *In the Black #5* and so on, are richly dark assemblages with numbers of body measurements and weight sizes—numbers of great importance to bodybuilders—imbedded in the paper. These works exemplify a sort of sardonic view of the arbitrariness of numbers and their function when it comes to measuring success, both physical and abstract.

The pedestal functions as a kind of leveling device. Painted in gold, silver, and bronze—as if to represent an Olympic podium—the pedestal has been completely flattened out into one equal plane. The flattening out of the sculptural elements in McClelland's work is a violent act that is both literal and symbolic. Literal in the sense that making paper is a very tactile and sculptural process, putting layers of wet paper pulp and then flattening it out in a press for several hours. It is also a flattening out of the sculptural elements of the male body. Not only is it a reification of the male body into the thingness of a flat piece of paper, but also a complete abstraction of the male body as a symbol of power into nothingness.

This act of obliterating and abstracting the male body is a bold critique of American competitive culture and its obsessive credence to the muscular male body as perfection. But the act is also jocular in nature, poking fun at a veiled notion of competition based on vanity and brut size—particularly apt in a time when Republican candidates defend their masculinity in terms of the size of their hands.

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