

PAINT BY NUMBERS

In a spate of exhibitions featuring recent paintings, photographs and videos, Suzanne McClelland explores the power of numbers as a motif.

by Nancy Princenthal

THE WEATHER IS HEAVY in Suzanne McClelland's new paintings, where paint surges, lines whip and skid, and fragmentary letters and numbers collapse, inflate and slam into each other, hard. Words have a longstanding place in McClelland's work, often formed in a way that links their visible shape to their voiced sound, and to their origin in breath and body. Recently, the artist has shifted her attention from the link between spoken and written language to the juncture between letters and numbers. But as before, multitudes of ideas race through these images at speed. The works' range of social and cultural observation is matched by an extravagantly free dispersal of mediums across a variety of supports. Painting, pouring, dripping, splattering, writing and drawing, McClelland produces surfaces that are variously rococo, catastrophic, sparkly and black as dried blood.

Included in her show at Team Gallery this fall were three examples from a new series of paintings titled "Ideal Proportions" (2013), all incorporating lists of measurements, in inches. As sketchily painted words indicate, they are the circumferences of arms, chest, waist, thighs and calves—specifically, though this is not spelled out in the paintings, those of professional bodybuilders. The

7-by-12-foot diptych *Phil "The Gift" and Jay "Cuts,"* for example, features statistics for the current competitors Phil Heath and Jay Cutler. In the left panel, a column of numbers in flaming pink soars up toward the right, the names of body parts they measure unfurling alongside like a banner. To the left is a congealed pool of queasily colorless polymer medium; McClelland is partial to off-label uses of paint's components. In this diptych's opposing panel, a list of numbers, in black, drops down a gully of marbled jade-green; above it is a cheery burst of small painted gold bubbles. For these works, McClelland has used portrait linen, its fine thread and tight weave producing a hard, smooth surface on which fluids tend to float and dry pigments scatter; among the other mediums in play are gesso, oil paint and charcoal.

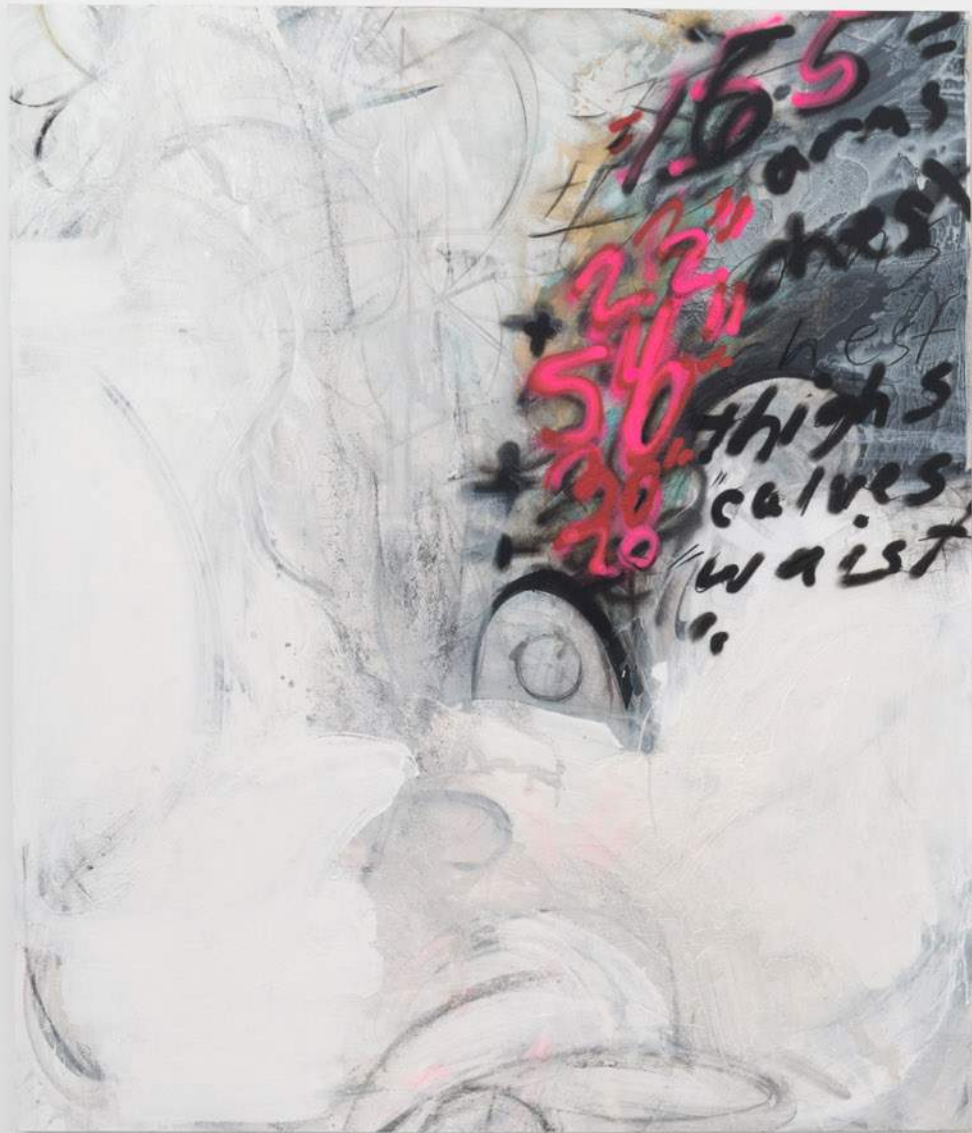
In *Frank "The Chemist,"* what looks like a spray of coal dust appears below a tumble of numbers, these the measurements of bodybuilder Frank Zane. A handful of small, irregular, black-rimmed circles that evoke bullet holes are scattered here and there, discreetly sinister. More benign are faint numerals seemingly scratched into a puddle of polymer medium, an evocation of finger painting that brings the term "digital artwork" to mind. Reading puns into this work is, in fact, welcomed

Suzanne McClelland: *Frank "The Chemist" (Ideal Proportions)*, 2013, dry pigment, gesso, polymer and oil paint on portrait linen, 84 by 72 inches. All images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Team Gallery, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Work by McClelland in the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through May 25.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL is a writer based in New York. See Contributors page.





Ideal Proportions: Squeeze—A Winning Hand, 2013, dry pigment, gesso, polymer and oil paint on portrait linen, 72 by 84 inches.



Previous spread, Phil "The Gift" and Jay "Cuts" (*Ideal Proportions*), 2013, dry pigment, gesso, polymer and oil paint on portrait linen, diptych, 84 by 145 inches overall.

by McClelland, who acknowledges that the "Ideal Proportions" series constitutes a form of figure drawing, with "figure" meant to be read at least two ways.¹ She points out, too, that in bodybuilding competitions—which involve flexing limbs and striking poses, not lifting weights—contestants are judged by their graceful transitions from one position to the next, and, notably, by their muscles' definition and form, the latter criteria also applicable to traditional figure painting (which McClelland studied as an undergraduate, at the University of Michigan).

At the same time, it interests McClelland that bodybuilders' proportions are judged to within a fraction of an inch, the competitors held to standards even more exacting than those once applied to beauty pageant contestants, who were routinely evaluated by their hip, waist and bust measurements. In a culture ever more awash in information, McClelland points out, immeasurable things are increasingly quantified, compared and broadcast, submerging personal specifications in a sea of public data. That the overlapping fields of self-improvement, athletics and popular entertainment have also long since merged with

political theater is at issue in *Arnold "The Body,"* a 7-foot-high, screamingly loud canvas in which the list of measurements starts in silvery metallic paint and then proceeds to heavy black numerals shadowed by electric blue. The arm, chest, waist and thigh circumferences are those of bodybuilding's most famous contestant, later turned actor, and then governor of California.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that the digital age has rearranged the relations between words and numbers, in the sense that all electronic text can be reduced to a series of ones and zeros. McClelland's current work turns the process around, finding narrative and visual power in integers, and thereby reframing the question of how images address viewers. We often say that pictures speak to us, just as their physical presence offers a tactile invitation. When numbers are substituted for letters, the metaphor shifts to the suggestion that paintings might size us up, a bit of symbolic play bolstered by the regime of digital data sharing (including, we've recently learned, state scrutiny). And the problem of identifying falsehood, as when photo-



Solutions for Polke
(6 + 6 = 5), 2013,
dry pigment,
gesso, polymer
and oil paint on
portrait linen, 40
by 48 inches.

graphs are understood to represent lies, gets interestingly complicated when math is telling the story. Is it possible to create compelling fiction with numbers? Just how uninhibited by logic are the irrational ones? Are numbers more abstract than letters or more embodied, arising as they do from a language first counted out on fingers?

McClelland explores these questions in another series sampled at Team called “Solutions for Polke” (2013). All are homages to a single 1967 canvas by Sigmar Polke that presents nine patently false equations: $2+3=6$, $4+4=5$, and so on, painted primarily in tidy rows. McClelland’s “Solutions” range from pale, Twombly-esque fields of cloudy white in which digits are drawn hesitantly, as if by a child ($1+1=3$, a good guess for a beginning mathematician), to others in which bolder, blockier numbers declare similar mathematical impossibilities ($6+6=5$; not even close). Numbers get sucked into churning whirlpools that spit out little silvery stars or get dropped into expanses of paint that evoke dirty snow. Some are defaced with what look like wads of chewing gum, others nearly washed away with

quick swipes of a broad brush. Ciphers slide sideways, pile up in corners and join forces with black and gray circles that resemble abacus beads or perhaps enlarged decimal points.

Polke was a famously heterodox painter whose experiments included a series of “Lens Paintings” (2006–08), in which ridged surfaces of polymer gel promised (falsely) the kind of commercial lenticular image that produces two different readings when viewed from one side or another. McClelland’s numbers actually do read forward and backward, and also flip back and forth between legible and indecipherable. Lawrence Weiner long ago implored viewers to “learn to read art”; in the face of McClelland’s arithmetic, the effort can make the gears in your head creak. Weiner’s own quasi-mathematical formulations are knottily poetic, and most of the artists to whom his injunction referred favored words. But even the math-friendly Conceptualists—Hanne Darboven, On Kawara, Bernar Venet—deploy numbers in fixed sequences that are distinctly at odds with McClelland’s moody “Solutions.” Closer in spirit are cosmology-minded



Furtive Gesture (detail), 2013, mixed-medium drawings, prints and photographs on various papers, dimensions variable. Courtesy Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo Zheng Hu.

numerologists like Alfred Jensen; a kinship can also be seen with Charles Demuth's ecstatic dream of the figure five in gold. Still, McClelland's turbulent compositions undeniably couple oddly with number problems. On the other hand, they make a comfortable transitive equation to math through the metric beat of music, which has propelled a great deal of her work. She has often cited musicians in her paintings' titles and painted words, and honored them in her brushwork's driving rhythm—a force she considers fundamental to all forms of expression. As McClelland puts it, the link between rhythm and the irrepressible human desire for connection is so strong you can see it in babies throwing a ball back and forth, communicating without a single word.

BUT SHE IS INTERESTED, too, in the languages of solitude. In the painting series "Internal Sensations" (2013), also shown at Team, words for inner states, such as "brood" and "yearn," are buried in moody fields of white and gray. In some of these, the support is not portrait linen but a coarser canvas whose weave provides visible texture, creating what looks like a dot screen that patterns the paint brushed over it. These works are particularly cryptic, and link McClelland with such hybridizers of word and image as Bruce Pearson, in whose psychedelically patterned relief paintings words can be puzzled out only with great difficulty. Similarly, the experiences named in the "Internal Sensations" paintings, by nature covert and often

deliberately suppressed, are mostly seen to guard their privacy.

There has been speculation, McClelland says, that writing began with footprints in the sand. "Furtive Gesture_CEDepart2," her substantial exhibition last fall at the art museum of the State University of New York at Albany, made that notion manifest, constructing reading as a peripatetic experience. Circling the big gallery at eye level was a wide band of chalkboard paint, 240 feet long, that served as the ground line for hundreds of original drawings and Internet-sourced photographs spread out and pinned up, with copper tacks, like the contents of a ransacked library. Called *Furtive Gesture*, this installation included words (among them "stalker," repeatedly) and word fragments, the inscriptions made in ink (sumi, tusche) and paint, some of it metallic. There were collages on silk that paired photographs of rocket launchings at Cape Canaveral with reproductions of paintings of figures pointing (John the Baptist, Leif Ericson), and also tracings in ink, graphite and ballpoint of the space between Gabriel and the Virgin in representations of the Annunciation, taken from postcards and small reproductions of Italian and Northern Renaissance paintings. From a 2011 series called "Mergers and Acquisitions," there were superimposed photographs of paired public figures, making soul mates of the likes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Michele Bachmann, Silvio Berlusconi and Rupert Murdoch.

Also present in Albany in large numbers were inkjet prints of photos found on the Internet following searches under the terms "handshakes," "furtive gestures" and "fleeing." Among

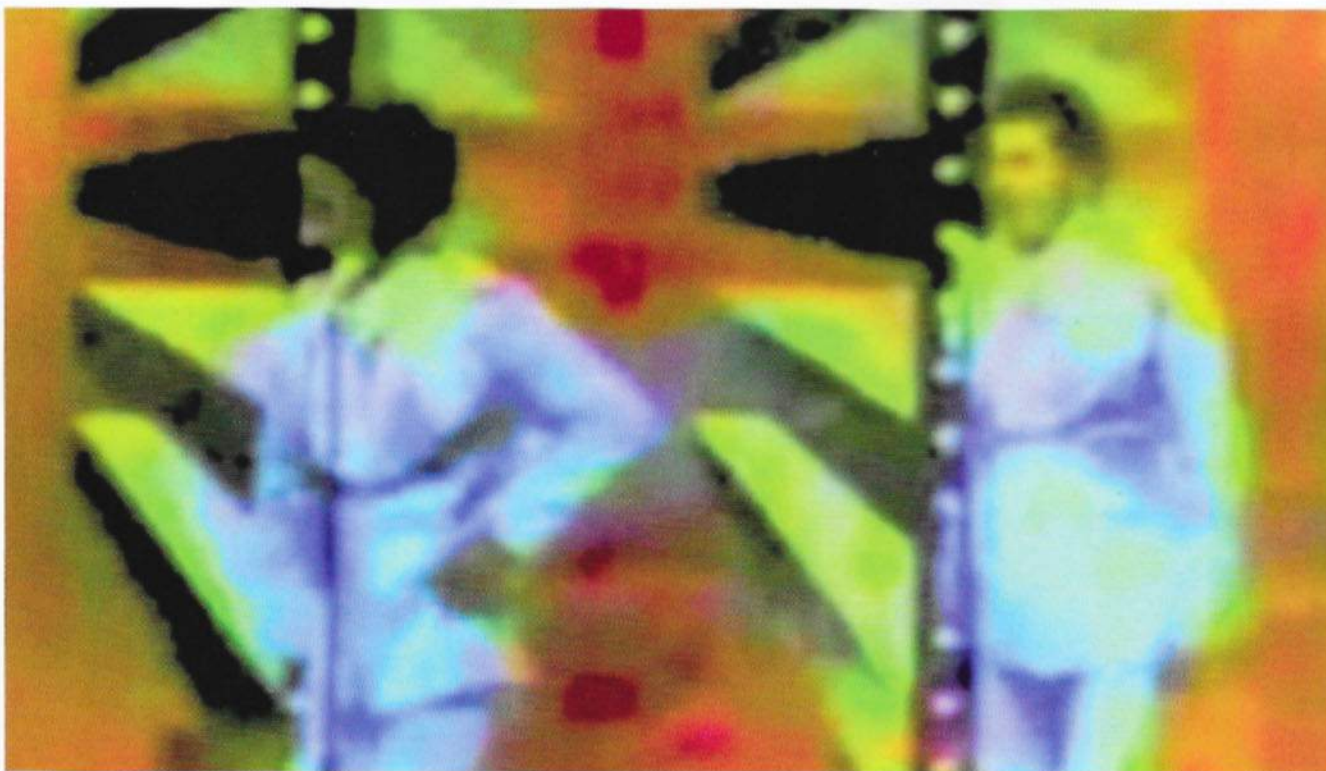


the encounters thus documented were handclasps between Donald Rumsfeld and Saddam Hussein, Nixon and Castro, Gorbachev and Reagan. There were ceremonial hugs, kisses and other forms of what McClelland calls “sign language” as well. Images of furtive gestures were harder to find on the Internet, and harder still for McClelland to identify or confirm. Illicit or poorly defined forms of contact, and postures or gestures indicating risk, interest McClelland; they are also newsworthy. The question of how body language is determined to be threatening or suspiciously covert—“furtive”—is tied to Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” legislation, and New York City’s “Stop and Frisk” police tactic; in both, such judgments have had fairly grave ramifications. Indeed the *New York Times* front page bearing the headline “Zimmerman Is Acquitted In Trayvon Martin Killing” was among the material pinned to the chalkboard band. (These concerns also shadow the “Ideal Proportions” series: the big but faint letters “SK,” last traces, perhaps, of the phrase Stop and Frisk, lurk in the painting *Frank*. A ghostly inscription of the word “grope” haunts *Arnold*.)

For the most part, civilians in daily life distinguish innocent forms of physical contact from malevolent ones in an instant, and with logic that is more emotional than legal. The kind of perception involved is the psychic equivalent of peripheral vision, which is where McClelland’s attention is often drawn. She is after the things you can’t quite see—postures of threat, or of suspicious flight—and tries to freeze them at the

moment where you think you know what’s going on, and then realize the sense of comprehension is illusory. A handshake can be an example of that, too: of concordance that is in fact often staged, its falsity betrayed by the principals’ glances, or by unidentified onlookers whose expressions give their game away.

AS SHE DID IN “STrAY: Found Poems from a Lost Time,” a 2013 solo exhibition at the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, McClelland included in the SUNY Albany show blind contour drawings she’d made at a Charlottesville pawn shop (where guns feature prominently), along with drawings of weapons by her 11-year-old son Lucas. *Blind Contours at Tobey’s Pawn Shop* (2012) was among several videos presented in Albany, in a room separate from the chalkboard-strip installation. The longest, *Carry On* (2011; nearly 9 minutes), combines footage from a music video by the rap group Bytches With Problems; elements of Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg’s famous film of Jackson Pollock painting; and material from the 1962 Italian cult classic documentary *Mondo Cane* (A Dog’s World). The video *BWP SWIPE* (2011) is one of two riffs on popular television shows of the 1960s and ’70s, this one assembled from clips of Wonder Woman before she transforms into a super-heroine. (*BWP SWIPE* also pays respect to Dara Birnbaum’s widely beloved *Technology/Transformation* of 1978-79, which focuses on Wonder Woman in full blaze.) *Erase You* (2011) samples TV shows in which female



BWP SWIPE,
2011, video,
approx. 2-minute
loop.

stars magically make people disappear. (The protagonist of “Bewitched,” most famously, could do so by wiggling her nose.)

These videos were originally shown in a 2011 exhibition at New York’s Sue Scott Gallery, in which McClelland augmented paintings presented in the usual way—on stretched canvas—with painted sections of Sheetrock leaning against the wall that could be shifted like sliding doors. The Fralin exhibition included work first shown at New York’s David Krut Projects in 2007; in both cases, poetry (about the Civil War, written by McClelland’s uncle George Garrett), typed and handwritten, as well as original and reproduced imagery, was hung in a great wall-to-ceiling profusion; in Virginia, there were also artworks from the museum’s collection, ranging from Dürer and Goya to Larry Clark and Nancy Burson. Both exhibitions resulted in artist’s books; *CEDE*, the publication created in Virginia, was on view in Albany. A preference for excess, and for spillage—between mediums, disciplines, one project and the next—is an essential part of McClelland’s sensibility.

Born in Florida in 1959, McClelland arrived in New York in 1981 and completed an MFA there at the School of Visual Arts in 1989. By the time she graduated, she was doing photography, documenting events at the Storefront for Art and Architecture as a day job and, by night, making rubbings of Chinatown streets with canvases, buckets of color and a roller. Recalling this work ruefully, she said it connected her to aspects of Color Field painting, which she understood as a “rejection of drawing and of language”²—that is, a rejection of precisely the things in which she was most interested, even then. But the rogue character of the Chinatown work, its headlong pursuit of imagery and meaning just emerging, still wet, from the turbid waters of urban life, has been sustained ever since. The sense of

velocity her work produces has less to do with hasty execution than with the expression of a state that can feel like onrushing music; it can also feel like barely controlled chaos.

In his new book *24/7*, art historian Jonathan Crary sounds an urgent alarm concerning our unresisting submission to the nonstop, never sleeping world of digital technology, a corporate world that has made us its subjects. “In spite of the omnipresent proclamations of the compatibility, even harmonization, between human time and the temporalities of networked systems,” Crary writes, “the lived realities of this relationship are disjunctions, fractures and continual disequilibrium”—or, worse, a false sense of perfect comfort.³ McClelland shares this (widespread) wariness of life lived nonstop at the speed—and even the behest—of digital connectivity. But there is nothing in her work to suggest she believes, as Crary does, that human experience is on the verge of irremediable degradation. Slaloming through Internet sites, careening among mediums and producing disastrous pileups of imagery, McClelland works, by choice, at the cusp of resolution. There is real anxiety in working this way, and anxiety is one of the sensations—again, all too real—that the work delivers. But it delivers exhilaration, too, in abundance. ○

1. All unattributed quotes and statements by McClelland are from two conversations with the author, on Aug. 30 and Oct. 14, 2013.

2. Suzanne McClelland interviewed by Barry Schwabsky, *Bomb* 118, Winter 2012, accessible at bombsite.com.

3. Jonathan Crary, *24/7*, London and New York, Verso, 2013, p. 31.

“STRAY: Found Poems from a Lost Time,” Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Jan. 25–May 26, 2013; “Every Inch of My Love,” Team Gallery, New York, Oct. 10–Nov. 17, 2013; “Furtive Gesture_CEDepart2,” University Art Museum, State University of New York at Albany, Oct. 18–Dec. 14, 2013.

Opposite,
Internal Sensations
(*Broad*), 2013, dry
pigment, gesso,
polymer and oil
paint on portrait
linen, 59 by 49
inches.

