

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Suzanne McClelland at K.S. Arts

Stephen Westfall

This wonderful show could not have been the 10-year survey of works on paper promised by the chronology. K.S. Arts is too small a gallery, the selection was limited to works the size of stationery, and there was a six-year gap between 1993 and 1999. Nevertheless, it was a tremendously exciting body of work.

Suzanne McClelland garnered recognition in the late '80s and early '90s for ferocious abstract-expressionist paintings that were crammed with letters, mostly forming vowels that sounded out in the ear, such as "eeeeee." And "oooooo." She used off-the-wall techniques, like blowtorching her paintings to get the surfaces to interpenetrate the linear tangle of proliferating letters. From a distance the paintings looked like Pollocks scuffed up by Yves Klein; up close they bubbled and silently screamed or moaned.

The compositions still feature letters, now spelling out complete words and phrases. The texts, painted in a gestural cursive, also function as "abstract," calligraphic marks. The earliest works, from 1993, are graphically the simplest: the word "fast" scrawled in dripping red paint over a black wash, or "forever" in a dry-brushed black ink against a warm gray field expanding into the lower foreground from a vanishing point in the top center. The support is sandpaper, an unconventional material that somehow makes the drippy red seem all the more disturbingly sticky in one work and enhances the abrasiveness of the dry-brushed "characters" in another.

McClelland uses more conventional papers elsewhere, but retains her physical expressionism. The general gnarliness of her graphic style plays off the luscious green and salmon pink colorations of a 1999 series of words loaded with aggressive sexual innuendo, like "tool" (the T looks like some prehistoric weapon) and "dickhead." Another such group, from 2003, is fleshed out in black on swirls of a hotter pink. The funniest one may be the tamest: the word "HUNK" in elongated letters stretching like a late-afternoon shadow from the top of the page. The auxiliaries "would," "should" and "could" also get their sherbet-colored, sarcastic due.

But the showstoppers are a group from 2002 collectively titled "thank you note to a genius." These consist of longer texts, knottier in construction, with more colors. Their compositions have some of the lift and buoyancy of Kandinsky's early Blue Rider watercolors that look like circus posters, or of Arthur Dove's first abstracted symbolist landscapes. Here I noticed that McClelland had primed each paper sheet with what seems to be a clear matte sizing, so that the gouache appears to float a bit, furthering the sense of space.

If language, or at least sound, was a graphic effect in McClelland's early paintings, here she sets her texts free in a pictorial and symbolist universe in which letters and words are the principal actors, and material and color are metaphors for complex feelings that overwhelm the purely literal connotations of language. At the same time, that language is enlisted as a puckish expeditor of meaning for formal elements. This is extremely smart, playful art with an expressionist wallop packed in its heart. I'm looking forward to an overdue exhibition of McClelland's bigger paintings.

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