SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY
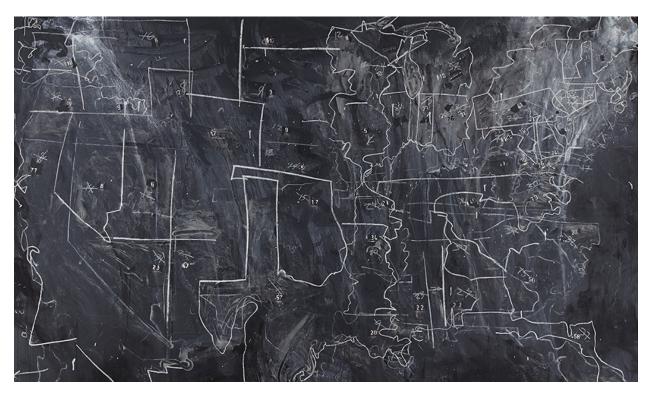
Inside Abstraction: Suzanne McClelland Paints with Data

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS I MARCH 16, 2017

Suzanne McClelland, "Since Oklahoma After Johns Before Tomorrow (splc)," 2015. Chalkboard paint, pastel, and spray paint on linen, 78 x 123 in.

"I have found myself in triangles most of my life, so I'm kind of digging in to find out what they're about," says Suzanne McClelland, somewhat elliptically discussing her 25-year career retrospective, on view at Connecticut's Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum through September 4. One of the few, never-before-exhibited works, which was still being fabricated when I visited her studio in November, is a hanging glass work spelling out the phrase "third party," the associations of which have goaded the artist throughout this quarter-century. It's a reference, McClelland explains, "not just to the phrase's political meaning, but also to what happens in a triangular conversation as opposed to a binary one. I'm thinking about the witness; the listener; the reader; the third wheel, even." While she may work in solitude, the artist always has a multi-sided relationship in mind: "There's the author that made the thing, and then there's the thing itself, and then there's the viewer."

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McClelland is best known for large-scale, data-dense paintings that mingle abstract gestures with a thicket of numbers and text. She began her undergraduate studies in photography at the University of Michigan in the late 1970s, but revolted early on against any figurative impulses and from the realism of photography, feeling that they were too instructive—a way of exerting undue control by telling too much. With abstraction, she could put her viewers to work. "You don't know where to enter the painting," she says. "You have to figure that out for yourself, how to move around inside of it—this is what the reading experience is; it's what seeing is."

A typical McClelland painting is a puzzle, loaded with politically tinged facts and figures that have been obscured or abstracted into sweeping brushstrokes and fragments of legible text or imagery: a salary figure, a dollar sign, the vague outline of the Florida Panhandle. A 2014 work whose title references Chelsea Manning (who was convicted in 2013 for disclosing classified military documents to WikiLeaks) appears to be little more than a storm of slashing red and black lines. The blind contour drawings (a staple exercise of any art school, where the artist constructs a line drawing without being able to see her own marks) that she's been making of the United States contain a smattering of numbers strewn across the canvas or board on which she works, representing the number of hate crimes recorded in each state, as reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Another body of work is devoted to the highest-earning rappers (Dr. Dre, P.Diddy, and Birdman, among them). The ongoing series "Call with Information," exhibited at Team Gallery (which has represented McClelland since 2012), reference individuals on the U.S. Domestic Terrorist list. Those paintings contain the government identification number assigned to each of these now 14 suspects (McClelland has been working to update the series as more names have been added) and little other contextual information; but they each have companion pieces, of sorts, in accompanying collage-style works on paper, which include wanted posters or fragmented newspaper clippings. An in-progress series uses Google satellite images of evangelical pastors' homes as its source material.

A vast amount of quasi-compulsive research informs her practice. 2013's "Ideal Proportions" series takes its numerical figures from the physical measurements of body builders. (Each of these paintings has a small amount of its research material pasted to its back—Internet print-outs, Xeroxes from newspapers—a way of "filing" this corresponding information once a work is finished). "I really have a problem," she jokes, pointing to a stack of papers spread across her work table. "I have these for every painting. And piles and piles of all these pictures. The Internet didn't make it any better —it's all too easy."

In the Brooklyn brownstone that serves as both her workspace and the home she shares with her husband, a sound engineer, and teenage son, McClelland is rarely focused on one series, or even one medium at a time. Instead, she prefers to cycle from the bright, sun-lit studio that occupies much of the first floor to a room upstairs better suited to making works on paper, organizing images and text, or pursuing any of the various other projects stoked by an idea that's come up in the course of her constant

research (for instance, Mergers and Acquisitions, a 2012 calendar made in collaboration with abstract painter Hayal Pozanti, which amalgamated images of billionaires, high-profile businessmen, and religious leaders, with a smattering of arbitrary historical dates littering the calendar boxes of each month). Yet even when she may be paused in her work, she hasn't exactly stopped strategizing and plotting a painting's next move. "As you go further into the painting, your options simultaneously narrow and expand," she says. "It's a really particular way of thinking that I find most challenging. I repeat a number of forms, but I also need to feel as though I'm kind of inventing the wheel each time."

The artist's early work was decidedly more text-driven, with phrases like my pleasure or told you so floating across a composition, or paint occasionally applied atop collaged pieces of newsprint. She likens her painterly gestures to writing, albeit of a more physical variety. That sort of mark making invariably leads to a comparison with the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. McClelland recalls that, after her first few exhibitions, many viewers and critics blithely noted that her paintings looked like they were "made by a man." But contrary to the narrative surrounding Ab-Ex, McClelland credits her gestural style to research and observation, rather than any ego-driven desire to "establish a presence of myself, to put an imprint of myself on the surface." And while text is pared-back or less at the forefront in much of her recent work, the way she thinks about her role is still as that of someone relaying information, "connecting thought to touch; feeling to something visual." The viewer is her reader.

A recent residency at Brooklyn's Urban Glass studio has involved a different kind of reinvention, exploring a medium that she isn't quite comfortable with yet. For a developing series, she is sandblasting silhouetted images she has sourced of people running onto 99 oblong glass rectangles she plans to display in a long line, leaning on a thin shelf at eye level. She hopes that these serial representations of a simple activity will spur varying responses and projections: In these images (as in life) how does one's interpretation change, for instance, depending on the age, race, or gender of the runner in question?

It can be easy to look at McClelland's oeuvre and conclude that the artist's motivations are entirely political, but that is not her strict intention. Rather, she's more like a consummate flaneur—collecting facts, histories, first-hand experiences, and stories, with simple but vigilant astuteness. To her, it's a very active position. "My work is always about observing and responding," she says, "and that is inherently a social act." But by communicating in abstract terms she's found a way of making viewers use their own capabilities to interpret, translate—and perhaps research—further. Always mindful of that invisible person in the conversation between herself and her work, she's determined the third party plays an active part. As in the facts that seem to be missing from a story or the unknown context surrounding a briefly glimpsed scene, it's in what McClelland doesn't tell her viewers that piques curiosity, setting the mind to exercise.