

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Art in Review

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Suzanne McClelland: Painting Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris Park Avenue at 42d Street Through Dec. 31

Suzanne McClelland has avoided one of the signal problems of installation art -- that it often seems more staged than made -- by creating an emphatically hand-drawn and hand-painted environment covering three walls and spilling onto bits and pieces of drywall propped around the gallery. This walk-in painting is executed in Ms. McClelland's characteristic style, in which letters and words emerge from the chaos of an assured Abstract Expressionist-inspired gesturalism. It has a terrific improvisational energy, something like a good studio visit when a great deal of promising work is under way. The floor, covered with paint-smearred cardboard, enhances the impression that artistic activity may resume any second.

One takes in this work in extended visual bounces that send the eye ricocheting from surface to surface, reading and looking, sorting sense from nonsense. Study any scrawled mark or odd painted shape long enough, and it usually metamorphoses into a letter or word fragment. Eventually the word "Right," which is the work's title, emerges from the tumult, beginning with waves of fat R's in the far left corner, and culminating in the end wall, a surging Pollock-style sea of G's and H's. The fact that beneath their markings, the three walls are painted red, white and blue (in that order, left to right) imparts political meaning to the work's subject and title -- far right, civil right, human right. (The show's brochure confirms the association, noting that the artist began formulating the piece during last summer's political conventions.)

The piece has its weak moments. In certain areas, it seems as if some low-quality Abstract Expressionist painting has simply escaped from its canvas; one starts wishing that Ms. McClelland would really return and bring the entire effort up to the level of its best parts. Nonetheless, the best parts, stuttering and tumbling down and across the wall, are sustaining, and the rest provides a rare window on the creative process.

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