

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Time Out New York
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Suzanne McClelland

by Tim Griffin

Language is a key element of Suzanne McClelland's work: Words—or bit of them—flow across her canvases, swarming, drifting, repeating incessantly, changing in scale or appearing in reverse. Often spelled phonetically (e.g. “snoh job” for snow job), they seem to disappear into or surface from globs of transparent acrylic and lyrically sprayed enamel paint. In its scattershot way, McClelland's calligraphy eschews specific meaning, morphing instead into near-abstractation – an evocation, really, of the kind of utterance that forms on the tip of the tongue or in the back of the throat before being consciously articulated.

In a show about breaking down language, it isn't surprising that McClelland refers to the Tower of Babel. The first piece in the gallery, baybel (3596a), takes Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting of Babel as its inspiration, inverting the original's spiraling ziggurat to allow McClelland's busily scrawled shapes to spread out as they climb skyward. A second painting, baybel (3596b), is more sparsely rendered, with some letters hanging in space and others bunched into dense thickets. The rest of the composition is traced over with skeins of charcoal resembling Arshile Gorky's abstracted flowers.

A favorite technique of McClelland's is to “weather” her canvases, by leaving them outside. This approach is especially apparent in zohnalfloh (3596g) – one of the three works based on sketches made during a winter road trip through North Dakota. Seemingly threadbare, the canvas recalls the murky underwater atmospheres of the Chilean surrealist Matta. (Recurring throughout is the somewhat emotionally laden word “bye.”) The most dramatic works are a series of photo-negatives on acetate. Each depicts the same clay sculpture, which spells the word “purfikt” with otherworldly serenity.

Given McClelland's evident Abstract Expressionist roots, it might be useful to remember de Kooning's description of himself as a “slipping glimser” of content. With her own words slipping in and out of intelligibility, McClelland marvelously conveys the power that underlies language – the primal impulse that prompts speech and, by extension, all expression.

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