



Enough Enough, 1997-98, acrylic, oil and charcoal on canvas, 75" x 168.5"

A c o u s t i c A e s t h e t i c

a response to *Suzanne McClelland: Enough Enough*
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Rene Magritte aptly defined painting as "playful physics". The recent works by painter Suzanne McClelland proves his point. McClelland uses painting to test conventional attributes of physics - gravity, weight, density, and inertia among them. She thankfully refuses Clement Greenberg's advice to drain the drawing and space out of painting. For McClelland, space can never be void. She sets out to obsessively map each molecule of pictorial space, inch by inch. In a specific challenge to the formal plasticity of painting, McClelland transposes the aural into the spatial, making paintings whose subject is sound waves as they reverberate between two speaking parties. She renders the invisible waves visible.

Though McClelland's paintings are constructed of wriggling text, she sidesteps the more predictable inquiry into language as symbol, instead, creating a topography of *speech* as physicality - asserting the acoustic over the linguistic. This transposition of the audible to the visual topples the viewer into a unique new "scape" to wander around in. Awkward and exultant, like silent moviegoers assimilating the novelty of the first talking motion pictures, we wonder what to do with all this sound/text in a picture. Formerly in painting, we could imagine the lips moving. Now our eyes get to trace the paths taken by all those sounds released willy-nilly into the atmosphere.

Speech is McClelland's breakthrough subject, gleaned through real life conversations. Her most exciting works record verbatim conversations between mothers and their teenage daughters, taped in her studio. In paintings *Frankie and Tallulah* and *Cynthia and Angela*, McClelland has invented a kind of typographic life drawing. Her loopy, undulating, irregular letterforms exhibit curving contours that caress and careen around unpredictable edges and folds. Her drawing elicits a warm subjectivity - a sensuality, even - generally reserved for life studies of the human figure. In the conversation of *Frankie and Tallulah*, McClelland divides the canvas into two simple corners of a room, like the corners of a boxing ring in which opponents square off at each other - your space/my space.

Enter *Enough Enough* and the space gets really claustrophobic. A command or a refusal, rather than a conversation, the letters spelling "Enough Enough" apply themselves to the walls, resembling the logo for "Sensurround" that flash-in-the-pan breakthrough surround-sound technology in 70s cinema. The individual characters, writ large and balloon-like (loud?), rhyme maximum tolerance emotionally with the bloated boundaries of the enclosed space. We've reached our limit, literally and figuratively.

The work *Cynthia and Angela* makes eloquent use of transparency in paint media, perhaps suggesting the possibility of transparency in understanding between the two parties. At times McClelland invites us to consider words whole, to decipher their conventional meaning. On other occasions, we are submitted to verbiage as a light-handed assault, battered by Seussian splats of syllables, phonemes, any visual equivalents of a sound bite. Throwing her voices around

instead of “pushing the paint around”, McClelland is a polymath ventriloquist. She is by turns intense, then sing-songy, then again potent and gripping.

Looking at (listening to) McClelland’s paintings is to be drawn into a one-act play. The pervasive proscenium structure and other similar shallow architectural spaces indicated on the canvases reinforces the sensation of being seated in an intimate theatre, close to the stage. Their large size (75” x 168”) even suggests a habitable human scale. McClelland titled these works by naming the various couples of mothers and daughters who contributed the libretto for each, again emphasizing her interest in character development. We are expected to suffer the pun: the “characters” are the characters.

Of the smaller works in the exhibition which use letter forms to structure the space, the most fascinating are those that reflect upon themselves in mirror fashion. As visual facts lobbed at a mirror rebound with an odd distortion, sounds bumping against walls are redirected, sent away altered. Snippets of text are subjected to this near-symmetry, suggesting slightly skewed palindromic phrases, endlessly repeating or contradicting one another. The sound of one hand clapping, or one hand painting.