

ARTFORUM



Suzanne McClelland, *Mute W*, 2018–19, mixed media on canvas, 40 × 30 inches

SUZANNE MCCLELLAND

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A painter known for her exuberant and restless style of gestural abstraction, Suzanne McClelland orchestrated a major sea change with “MUTE,” a series of twenty-six paintings (all works 2018–19) that made up her show at Team. The radiating centripetal force that frequently propels her field effects were sucked in and reconfigured here, presented as forms against relatively empty monochromatic grounds. No extravagant inventory of paint-mushed marks, numbers, and lists of things—which have appeared in previous bodies of work—kept us busy reading, counting, and navigating her nonobjective surfaces. All that effort of striving for legibility and always falling short—on the part of the painter as well as of the viewer—was here constrained, as if she temporarily put the genie back in the bottle, only to let it out again.

One soft-edged configuration appeared on each vertically oriented canvas. Emerging from corners, pushing upward or downward, or massing into central axes, the forms could be envisioned as plumes or eruptions of elemental formations in medias res. Their efflorescence was abetted by smudges of vibrant color and textures

built from dry pigments as well as mica, glitter, sand, and probably more than a few mystery ingredients, suggesting an alchemist's hand at work. The looming morphological forms might have been abstract, but they mimicked actions in the material world as gaseous sprays, monolithic stones, comets with luminous tails, fish fins, and rainstorms. They not only looked earthy, but their mineral substances also belong genetically to the natural world. Before we knew it, we'd landed in the vicinity of conditional landscape, much in the manner that we might with Sigmar Polke's meteorite-speckled paintings.

In *Mute U*, a blurry, indistinct wedge rendered in browns and blacks moves diagonally from the lower-right edge into the canvas's midzone, maintaining its contours while simultaneously shedding them. Here and elsewhere, no intrinsic one-to-one relationship exists between the work and its title, drawn from a character of the alphabet; no morphological similarity connects the form and its assigned letter. McClelland has a long-standing interest in the space where drawing, writing, and painting overlap—but in matching letters to images she plunges us into the conceptual terrain of language. While the possibility of succinct meaning is forever occulted, the alphabet does function as an index and delivers the idea of something so elemental and rudimentary that it represents nothing but itself. Lacking any relational power as the title of an abstract painting, each individual letter leverages the idea of a sustained lacuna that makes closure impossible.

More than half a dozen of the series' canvases present as crude human faces. Some, such as *Mute W*, resemble a partially composed Mr. Potato Head. Silhouetted against an inky dark ground, its white oval shape has distinctly large ears, a small dark mouth, and a rather square jawbone. In *Mute Q*, a similar prototype—high bald forehead, prominent eyes and brows—lies on its side in a pool of its own pigment. The subject of *Mute O* is large and black, with glitter embedded in its heavily caked surface—it looks out at us with beady white, yellow, and red eyes. There are others, each distinct from one another. But the pressing question is, Where did this all come from?

Look back and one sees evidence that nebulous heads have rolled around inside McClelland's paintings for decades. They peer out at us—quizzically, lackadaisically, indifferently, and, indeed, mutely. These characters have moved cyclically in and out of view as footnotes—or, at the very least, as minor elements—within grander schemes of things. Now, they are undeniably front and center. You can't dismiss them, but then again, you can't defer to them, either. McClelland's cynosures point to possibilities only to purposely foreclose on them. Nothing is stable or complete. She has performed this maneuver time and again, taking on doubt and working through the essence of fundamental lacks—of clarity, of communication, of sense, of self—while being perennially drawn to the periphery of an impenetrable core. This is the journey she takes us on: In her hands, it's a very productive one.