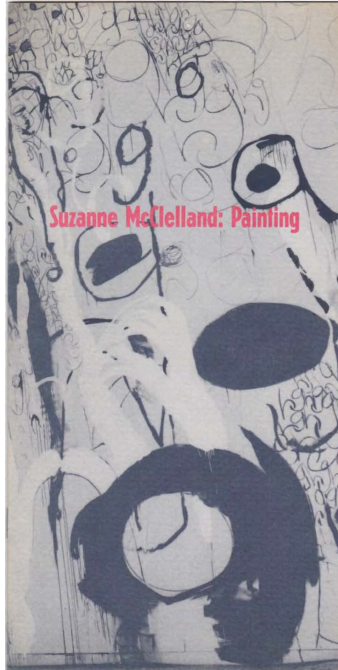


WHITNEY



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SUZANNE MCCLELLAND: PAINTING

BY THELMA GOLDEN
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All this talk about the new abstraction is leaving me cold. Endlessly discussed at panels, symposia, and at a spate of exhibitions on the subject, the term still doesn't make sense. It almost seems like a code word used to position and distinguish a kind of art practice in an increasingly acrimonious turf war over quality, power, and privilege. Abstract painting had always been the site associated with a utopian longing for universality and purity. In the middle of this century, however, many artists working in abstract modes disassociated themselves from these claims with the result that cultural, gender-based, and aesthetic hybridity became a primary component of abstraction. Both the personal and the political could now be part of an abstract vocabulary.

This, following some definitions, is the "new" abstraction. But in other views the "new" abstractionists are those who want to abandon content and return to more utopian pursuits. I am skeptical and confused by the semantics.

Suzanne McClelland's work had been positioned on both sides of this polemic. But the polemic has become both too simple and too complex to adequately discuss her ideas, her paintings, and their process. This project evolved from a desire to explore the process of painting—the process by which an idea becomes a work of art and manifests the artist's struggle along the route.

The discussion of the "new" abstraction is foremost in my mind in relation to process. An ongoing installation seems to be the most effective way to explore process. Installation, however, is often seen as the domain of three-dimensional and conceptually based artists, whose practices are sometimes called "new" forms. In this system, painting and particularly abstract painting are relegated to the traditional exhibition format. To banish some of the assumptions hidden in the discussion of media and site (the insidious assumptions about who makes what, what it is about, and how it should be shown), this project would explore painting as installation, with the museum as its site. New York-

based painter Suzanne McClelland had been confronting these arguments in her work and our concerns as artist and curator collided in what seemed like a perfect collaboration.

Often mystified and hidden behind the studio doors, process is generally kept from the viewer. The pristine presence of the museum renders process invisible. Hanging on the walls implies that the work is finished; the viewer, moreover, experiences it through the mediation of a curator's vision. This project, by contrast, would engage the audience in the very creation by having Suzanne work in the gallery for the first three weeks in October; the opening date of the "exhibition" would merely be a marker in the process—not necessarily an indication of completion.

Naming becomes important. We need a title for the calendar, a concept for the press release, a design for the invitation. It is interesting how a title somehow makes things seem more concrete. Suzanne has decided to work with the word "right."

We (me) decide to call the project *Painting* because it allows us (Suzanne) the flexibility to play with the ideas. And painting truly implies what will take place. Working on the three walls of the Philip Morris gallery, the idea (my idea) was to allow Suzanne an indefinite amount of time to paint. Although we spoke about her concepts, the piece took shape entirely on-site. After painting one wall red, one blue, and leaving the other white, Suzanne began boldly marking the walls. Eruptions of marks claimed the space. Then, as if working backwards, she began to draw. Like her paintings, the walls began to coalesce around the marks, creating some areas which read as paintings, others as drawing, still others that veer toward three-dimensional sculpture or border on pure graffiti, there for the sheer pleasure of color and line. Instead of working directly on the gallery walls, Suzanne began painting on large sheets of drywall, which she leaned against the structural walls. Stacked and restacked, they are obscured, partially hidden, somewhat incidental but a completely integral aspect of the work.

When the paint arrived, the colors were not right; ironic because "right" is the word Suzanne has chosen to work with. When she originally tells me this choice, it comes in the midst of a discussion of Murphy Brown, Dan Quayle, single motherhood, and the Los Angeles insurrection, so I think *rights*, as in Bill of... Suzanne is thinking of the obvious political connotation as well, but the choice is also much more personal. As in her earlier work, it is also about the ambiguous meanings of response. Suzanne's art to this point has been involved in creating an abstract vocabulary with linguistic connotations. The work somehow straddled the epochal shift between abstraction and figuration. The paintings were about the struggle to render language visible, and the language is tinged with the emotion conveyed by tone and circumstance.

Just as words connote responses in Suzanne's other paintings (always = I love you, never mind = what did you say?), right signals affirmative response, correctness, and approval. On the walls, Suzanne plays with the varying meanings of the word as well as its visual possibilities. She breaks it up into parts. The R stands alone. The I and the T become linked. The urge is to read it; but that's wrong, it's purely a visual association. The GH are also linked and marked by their silence. So the viewer is forced to read. Not text in perfectly typeset lines, but letter by letter like a preschool phonics exercise. It is a struggle. Intervening with the passages of color is a small field of A's and two dissonant L's. Suzanne's opening the word to its other associations. Alright.

Color is also important. Suzanne has selected a range of reds, blacks, whites, and blues with names like Navy Wool, Carnival, and Scarlet; so they become far more complex than their generic titles. The red and blue could be perceived as patriotic, but they are both hybrids and Suzanne has intervened further, mixing them with other colors to produce a range of pinks, mud browns, teals, and blue blacks. The black and the white are her staples since they echo the most typical experience with the printed word. The color choices also create a hot-cold, near-far viewing experience inside this work.



We covered the floor with cardboard. It was a purely practical move to protect the floor, but its industrial presence also signaled to our audience that work was going on. When the work was finished the floor would come *off*. Through the course of the installation it became a journal of the project. It serves as the initial surface on which to test color. It shows the spills, both purposeful and unintentioned. It has patches of yellow and green tempera left by the schoolchildren who visited Suzanne while she worked and made paintings of their own. It shows Suzanne's footprints as she actively worked, it shows *my* footprints as I actively paced. In a gallery talk a week before the installation opened, Suzanne and I wonder aloud whether or not the floor should remain. We (she) wonders if it is too revealing. We (me) wonder if leaving it is a little too transgressive. But then, that is what the project *is* about, painting and process and product and site. So the floor stays; it seems right.