



**Essential Gestures:**

Udomsak Krisanamis, Jonathan Lasker,  
Suzanne McClelland, James Nares, Dona Nelson

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## Essential Gestures and Fundamental Signs

The title *Essential Gestures* could be construed as a challenge to us to recognize what at this moment constitutes the significant qualities of abstract painting. Yet this is not as simple or straightforward as one might think. While abstract painting has become associated with certain symbolic acts and compositional devices by which its spiritual and formalist meanings are differentiated and established, the relationship between these has never been fixed. The very diversity of abstract painting, both in terms of style and content, is a result of the fact that at various times certain combinations of its qualities gain prominence over others. The consequence of such shifts is that new identities and potentials are articulated, while what was once thought essential becomes displaced. Forty years ago, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, what was thought an essential feature of abstract painting was its ability to affirm the individuality of the painter; the symbol of this was the painterly gesture that recorded not only bodily movement but was thought to be an emotional seismograph. Ten years later, Minimalism and conceptual art replaced this concern for self-expression with an investigation into the nature of the "painting" as a literal object. Recently, various post-Modernist critiques of the practice of abstract painting have sought to deprive it of any dominant subject or agenda, thus bringing to the fore a focus on the conceptual and textual issues that surround its survival.

In looking at the paintings of James Nares, Jonathan Lasker, Udomsak Krisanamis, Dona Nelson and Suzanne McClelland, it would seem initially that their intention is to have us focus on the significant role that the painterly marks, gestural brush strokes and drips play in forming the appearance of their respective paintings. Since the disposition and effects of their work provoke a strong association to Abstract Expressionism by emphasizing these characteristic forms, can we surmise that they wish to recuperate the aesthetic linked to these devices? There is a problem, though: the brush strokes, marks, gestures and processes that make up these paintings appear to be empty, merely mimicking and caricaturing the ethos of Abstract Expressionism. If these elements now represent anything, it is emotions stoically held in check, signifying the absence of the painter's body. Such a state of affairs



Dona Nelson, *Paradox Lake*, 1994, latex enamel on canvas, 70" x 78", courtesy private collection, New York

indicates that another type of criteria must be at play. If the "essential gesture" of the past is no longer a sign of the authentic, then perhaps it now represents a gambit that signifies a state of doubtful magnanimity or resolute insincerity toward their subjects: abstract painting and the authority of the self.

The modest assault that these artists' works represent diverges from the age-old modernist goal of producing an anti-art, an art about art or an endgame. Their aims are more complex than merely demonstrating the meaninglessness of self-expression or the vacuousness of abstract painting, after all, this has demonstrated itself to be too easy. Within their self-conscious manners, repressed qualities and emotional restraint, we find them raising questions concerning historicity (Nares), repetition and variation (Lasker), the cumulative effect of negativity (Krisanamis), the vicariousness of materiality (Nelson) and reference to nature and artifice (McClelland). These issues reflect not only the circumstances of abstract painting in our times, but metaphorically of our own condition.

### Suzanne McClelland: Language Matters

In the context of discerning what is essential to abstract painting and what it may mean for us, Suzanne McClelland's

paintings are like postcards. Her messages are open to all, yet they reach out beyond the typical text of "Wish you were here" or "Arrived safe, no aliens sighted yet." Her messages consist of marks, gestures, drips, squiggles and assorted unnameable effects whose configurations approach and then veer from the recognizable letter forms, dissolving them into references to Abstract Expressionism and the *L' Informale*. Language in McClelland's paintings functions as a sign of consciousness as it foregrounds itself against the field of the undetermined and unfathomable real.

Scrawled into the painterly, process-laden surfaces of her paintings, we discover an obsessive "so" or "here." These words, repeated, extended or exaggerated, oscillate between concrete poetry and near hysteria. These are messages that demand that their recipient be a cryptographer. How else are we to decode them, turn them back toward language, retrieve them from their defacement and make them once again into phonetic signs that we will hear ourselves mouth? The quality of their appearance is almost like an instruction as to how we expressively pronounce or read the word. It is within this process of reconstructing these signs that we are made aware of

the differentiation between what the aural and the visual respectively represent. This intersection of visual representation of language and painterly effect records the body's extension of itself into the world.

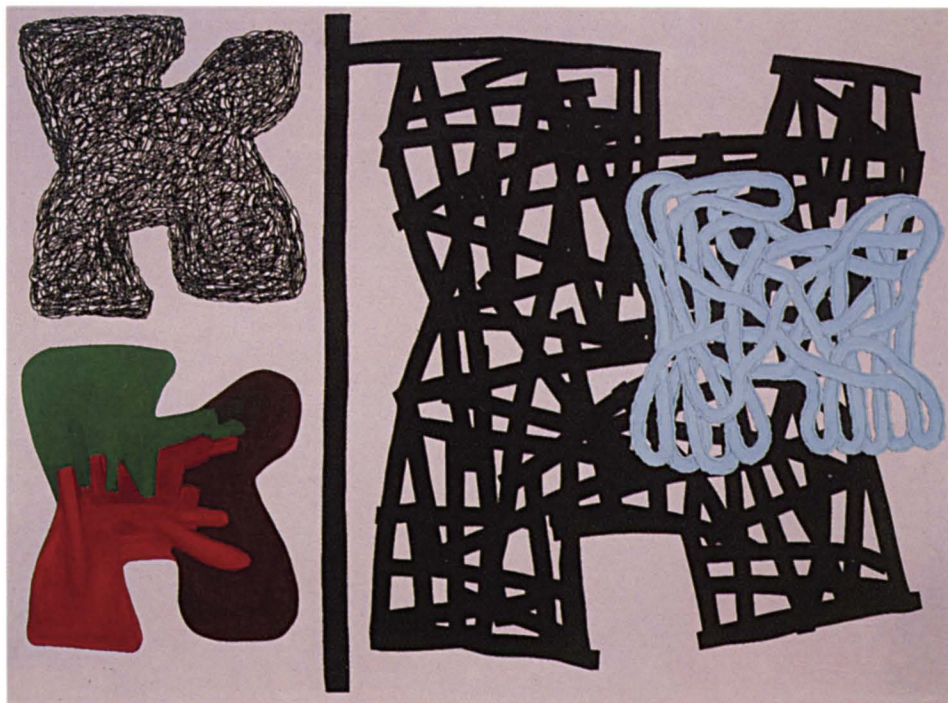
In a work such as *Then*, McClelland simultaneously paints in and out language. Painted onto sheets of newspaper, her marks edit, displace and call attention to the language and images used to record and report everyday events. What she leaves behind in her wake is a nonlinear and nonhierarchical integration of the nameless and the nameable, a residue of pictorial elements, painterly effects, printed words and images. The effect of this interplay is that it produces its own contradictory effects – at one moment we find ourselves seduced into a mindless state in which tactility and desire triumph over reason. This is immediately countered by the resistance of the mind as it searches to re-establish dominance. Process is what is both induced and recorded by McClelland's work.

#### Jonathan Lasker: Ground Rules

If McClelland's painting calls attention to the division of the senses by means of the poetic and the aestheticized, Jonathan Lasker is her antithesis. He presents the work of abstract painting as inscribed by



James Nares, #14 Take 95, 1997, oil on canvas, 60" x 34", courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York



Jonathan Lasker, *Stable Aberrance*, 1995, oil on canvas, 80" x 110", collection of the artist, New York

the factual and matter-of-fact. His work is calculated like a minimalist; nothing has been left to chance, and process and painterliness never put in an appearance, though they are referenced by their absence. What is flat is flat; all else is in relief; nothing exists between depiction and corporeality.

The appearance of his work is at once distanced, intellectually shrewd, dispassionate and dumb. This latter quality is due in part to his unmodulated, almost mechanical, drawing of irregular (invented) shapes and flat-footed application of paint. Lasker avoids the marks of self-expression or the signs by which an artist might indicate an intent to affirm himself or seduce the viewer. Instead, Lasker's paintings are aesthetically confrontational – a test of both the nature of our taste and of logic.

In paring down painting to a vocabulary of eccentric shapes, expansive and idiosyncratic color and a fixed handling of materials, Lasker has set aside everything that would indicate the sentimental, indeterminate or vena. For him, painting is not an arena of struggle nor a place where one records his thinking process; painting is instead the means to present conclusions. Where McClelland paints language trying to alleviate its muteness by giving its voice texture, Lasker paints painting's language. Rather than reflecting the formalist practices of the '60s and '70s that this project calls to mind, Lasker shuns the ideal of the "thing in itself" or "pure opticality" and seems intent on

using abstract painting's qualities to metaphorically depict those abstract relationships that are to be found in the lived world. Essential to this endeavor, he has developed his own brand of symbolic logic.

In *Stable Aberrance* Lasker plays out the terms of identity and comparison. Composed of four variations of boxy, "x-like" shapes, each shape in this painting has been given a different internal logic, forming its personality. By means of placement, scale and spatial relationship, each is supplied with its own pictorial function. They form a cast of characters which interacts and defines one another by contrast. For example, the two most similar in scale and placement are the most dissimilar in character. In this manner, Lasker uses the qualities of his "objects" to call to our attention, in a non-didactic fashion, how we distinguish one object from another in our everyday world.

#### Dona Nelson: Signifying Effects

If behind the studied and comic appearance of Lasker's paintings lurks the terms of the pictorial logic of realism, Dona Nelson aspires to a corporeal aesthetic. While in some manner all the work in this exhibition references some aspect of Abstract Expressionism, Nelson's work more than any others actually partakes of its ethos in her search for expression within the physical qualities of paint and chance events. Nelson, though, is not without control; hers is an editorial hand that lifts and twists the canvas, encouraging



Suzanne McClelland, *Then*, 1993, acrylic and enamel paint on newspaper, 94" x 152" (overall), courtesy LA Louver Gallery, Venice, Calif.

gravity to give the gooey-fluid substance of her paint its final form. Judgment and restraint are exercised, for Nelson seeks a balance between process and the effect of color.

Retaining something of the existentialism that was so central to another generation's understanding of Abstract Expressionism, the play of certainty and doubt, intervention and chance that Nelson offers up to us is the result of her engagement with the painting's material processes. For Nelson, unlike Lasker, intuition is an operative term – yet she uses it to very different ends than McClelland. Nelson is not interested in the look of the intuitive, but aspires to confirm within it those conscious and unconscious decisions that constitute her work's expression.

In *Paradox Lake*, the very acts of acceptance and intrusion become the means by which Nelson transforms the puddles of purple and green paint into a "gesture" capable of communicating, of offering up something more than the artist's aesthetic decisions or willfulness. What such works represent is the point where Nelson can make the claim that the paint has reached a persuasive state, indicating something broader than her taste. In this manner, she seeks affirmation of our ability to signify the precepts of our perception.

#### Krisanamis: Derisive Accumulations

Within Udomsak Krisanamis' work, the mark and what abstract painting may indicate both come to reside in the space between the look and the fact, between origins and artifice. Two events are conjoined in the acts of cancellation and

concealment within his work, yet they are not reduced to a singularity as the character of each is retained. In part, this is because of our ability to distinguish between the gesture as a sign of human presence, judgment or labor and when it insinuates its own meaning. It is in the fissure between the bearing of one and the reference of the other that Krisanamis' aesthetic manifests itself.

These paintings pointedly call up the act of painting as both mechanical and mindless as well as a result of endless preparation and decisions. Krisanamis begins by pasting down a collage of newspaper strips – single lines of dismembered text. Once again, we are given the media by which the everyday is recorded and brought to us from afar. These he defaces and transforms by using a black magic marker. Here and there we are left with a clue, a memento of what is no longer available to us.

By giving himself limits and clearly defined tasks, the works' appearance is not a question of his personal judgment, but a product of the cumulative effect of each obsessive act as it impacts on another. The surfaces of Krisanamis' paintings become more battered and worn, giving them a sad and abject quality. However, it is not this finished state that we are intended to read, but what is retrievable from the symbolic acts he has engaged in – from the choice of material to self-imposed task. For as we reconstruct the attributes of each, we find ourselves describing not only the literal and physical qualities of his work, but the metaphorical state of our culture and subjectivity.

#### James Nares: Imaging Iconic Means

If Nelson's work represents a faith in judgment, Lasker's gives a hopefulness that meaning is still possible and Krisanamis and McClelland each in their own way hold out the possibility of a meaningful trace of sentiment, then for James Nares, painting offers the possibility of its own glorious past. There is the memory of a time when painting was heroic, grand and eloquent in his work. The dilemma, though, is that in this day and age, it is useless to emulate such past glories.

Nares' paintings are pictures of the lush, decorative husk left in the wake of the depletion of Abstract Expressionism and the assault of mechanical reproduction on our senses. Their beauty and virtuosity appeal to us, being all that we would want. But as these iconic images twist and turn in on themselves, they become mere shadows, cut off from any claim to authenticity. All that is left to us is a world in which appearances are everything and seduction constitutes both content and concept. Their photographic quality evokes the spirit of the original, but does not attempt to embody it. It is in the effects of their stylization and seeming repeatability that the meaning of these calligraphic brushstrokes appears. Through these paintings, Nares seemingly insists that we confront the fact that the authentic can only be called up by its absence and that the simulacrum, rather than satisfying us, stimulates our desire for the real.

Perhaps the "essential gesture" to be discerned in the work of these painters and in abstract painting in general, is its continued challenge to Western societies' philosophical preoccupation with the conceptual over the perceptual, the quantifiable over the qualitative and meaning over understanding. The general effect of these works is that they bring subjectivity and self-reflexivity back to center stage by their emphasis on the inter-relationship between consciousness and experience. This is what allows abstract painting to be a vehicle to give representation to a complex and heterogeneous reality.

Saul Ostrow, New York

*Saul Ostrow is an artist, critic, curator and art editor of Bomb Magazine.*

Cover: Udomsak Krisanamis, *We Never Kiss*, 1996, marker and collage on canvas, 72" x 48", collection Alexandra Bowes and Stephen Williamson, San Francisco