

*It will be more like scratching than writing*

Paintings by Caroline Kent, Sofia Leiby,  
Suzanne McClelland, and Emil Robinson

Curated by Matt Morris

# *It will be more like scratching than writing*

## Matt Morris

Within these paintings, a syntax of abstraction is examined, not only for its potential to organize into language but to question how such language is used. We deal here with surface as a site for incident, working across more than *into* a picture plane.

Taken together, these painters de/construct a psychological logic for how mark-making is accreted, gestures recorded, and spaces of the audience press up against the fronts of their canvases. The title of the exhibition is drawn from a line in Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*<sup>1</sup> in which a domestic existential crisis dismantles the protagonist's relationship to communicability, humanity, selfhood, and matter. While place, text, and means of apprehension are suggested in these works, they are suspended in tension with painting's directness—a scratching that looks past the passing of messages and toward a potential to trouble the structures by which the world around these paintings is organized.

*I have to the extent I designate—  
and this is the splendor of having a language.  
But I have much more to the extent that I cannot  
designate. Reality is the raw material, language is  
the way I go in search of it—and the way I do not  
find it... My destiny is to search and my destiny  
is to return empty handed. But—I return with  
the unsayable. The unsayable can only be given  
to me through the failure of my language. Only  
when the construction fails, can I obtain what it  
could not achieve. (186)*

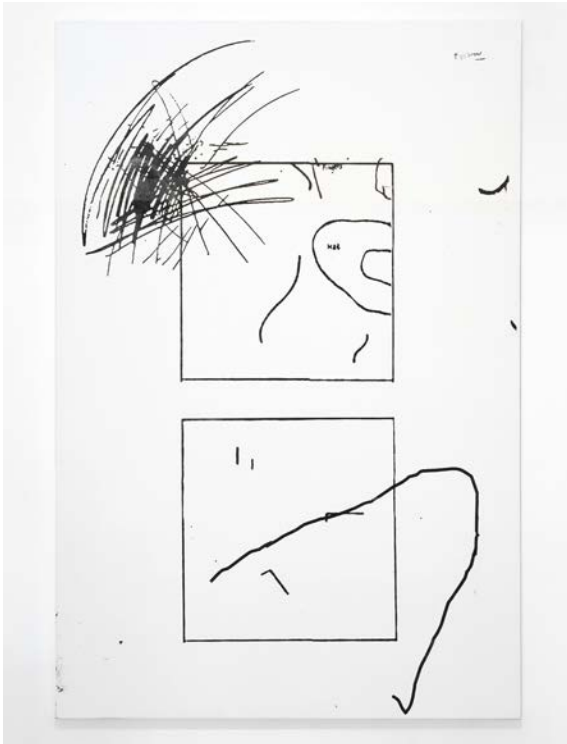


Suzanne McClelland, *Black Sigh (#3)*, 2002-2012, polymer and oil on canvas, 20" x 16" x 1"

For thirty years, Suzanne McClelland's paintings have dismantled words and along with them the cultural spheres (art historical, pop cultural, gender roles, world politics, to name a few) from which they are quoted. Through its physicalization in painting, McClelland tests the comprising forms of language, urging them toward

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<sup>1</sup> All quoted passage are from Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* New York: New Directions Books, 1964. Translated by Idra Novey in 2012.



Sofia Leiby, *EYEBROW*, Torrance test incomplete figure, Franck Completion Test blank, Abbildung 1: Kritzeldarstellungen von Wut, Measurement of Intelligence Drawings, fig. 3, 2016, silkscreen ink on canvas, 60" x 40"

pluralism, breakdown, and visual propositions for liberation. On view here are works in which recognizable graphemes are layered into the action of the paintings being made, spinning away from fixed meanings. Words like "Prick," "DRILL," and "Bore" are worked upon abstractly, bringing up not only their shared penetrative definitions, but other double entendres as well.

Sofia Leiby's paintings likewise complicate and intervene in meaning through layering. Imbrications of diagrams

and responses to various tests of intelligence, creativity, and personality (from sources ranging from Ellis Paul Torrance's Tests of Creative Thinking and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, to the I-Ching) are enlarged and composed into gestural abstractions that pressure constructions of individuality and the codifying systems that abet in such taxonomies. By sampling from the frameworks of these interpretive devices in order to achieve a mode of expression, Leiby collapses theories that would variously characterize selfhood as iterative and mimetic, or unique and original.

*My world today is raw, it is a world of a great, vital difficulty. Because, more than a star, I want the thick and black root of the stars, I want the source that always seems dirty, and is dirty, and that is always incomprehensible. (164)*

In Caroline Kent's paintings, geometries, cryptographies, and delicate [sign] chains variously emerge from and arrange across expanses of unstretched canvas richly painted black. Standing nearly the height of the gallery, these works spatialize not through means of illusionistic perspective but through a scale that commands a body's awareness in relation to the physical and cognitive puzzles erected before them. Their premise is like that of Wile E. Coyote's tunnel entrances painted across a solid face of Loony Toons mountains, flickering between accessibility and flatness. *First You Look So Strong, Then You Fade Away* presents itself thus as a pillar of smoke and an index of painterly moves: scrubby smears, crisply outlined triangles, fluttering aqua patterns, stamping, obscuring, ornamental glyphs. Kent devises a grammar that communicates only its own shifting logic, like forgotten tongues or games of hangman left unresolved.



Emil Robinson, *Window in the Wind*, 2016, oil on panel, 30" x 40"

*Life was taking revenge on me, and its revenge was no more than coming back, nothing more. In every case of madness something came back. The possessed are not possessed by what is coming but by what is coming back. Sometimes life comes back. If everything broke in me as the force passed through, that's not because its function is to break: it just finally needed to come through since it had already become too copious to be contained or diverted—along its way it buried everything. (66)*

Emil Robinson's studio of late has been piled with canvases—a disorderly library of his earnest investigations into the ways paint's materiality and the

traditional uses to represent might be moved into more or less tension with one another. Recently, Robinson has given himself the gift of tempering a bright intelligence with a rowdy impulse to chase down alternative uses for his muscle memories in manipulating this viscous medium. He has taken care to strip bare his facility and finesse in a successful attempt to trust how a stroke, say, of frenetic blue might hold a place and then exceed its bounds, as in *Window in the Wind*. Proofs that pictorial devices disarrayed nonetheless expose some understructure of matter and desire—like a Freudian slip—Robinson's paintings emote, ejaculate, exclaim, and emerge marked with traces of the medium's long history, scratched more than written into them.

# Exhibition Checklist

## Clockwise front gallery:

Suzanne McClelland  
*Bore on Board*, 2010  
Acrylic and oil on board

Sofia Leiby  
*PROFILE DRAWINGS, Measurement of intelligence  
by drawing fig. 8, computer aptitude test, I-Ching (Water)*,  
2015  
Silkscreen ink on canvas

Emil Robinson  
*Decorated Torso*, 2015  
Oil on canvas on panel and wood frame

Suzanne McClelland  
*Prick*, 2010  
Acrylic, charcoal, and oil on linen

Sofia Leiby  
*EYEBROW, Torrance test incomplete figure,  
Franck Completion Test blank, Abbildung 1:  
Kritzeldarstellungen von Wut, Measurement of  
Intelligence by Drawings, fig. 3*, 2016  
Silkscreen ink on canvas

Emil Robinson  
*Greenleaf*, 2016  
Oil on panel

Emil Robinson  
*Picture in a Frame*, 2016  
Oil on panel

Caroline Kent  
*First You Look So Strong, Then You Fade Away*, 2015  
Acrylic on canvas

Suzanne McClelland  
*Black Sigh (#3)*, 2002–2012  
Polymer and oil on canvas

## Clockwise back gallery:

Caroline Kent  
*The Penultimate Step*, 2016  
Acrylic on canvas

Emil Robinson  
*Window in the Wind*, 2015  
Oil on panel

Caroline Kent  
*The Shorthand Typist*, 2016  
Acrylic on canvas

Suzanne McClelland  
*(Little)Drone*, 2013  
Charcoal, gesso, polymer on linen

## Office (left, right):

Emil Robinson  
*Surface*, 2015  
Oil on panel and wood frame

Emil Robinson  
*Surface*, 2016  
Oil on panel and wood frame

Exhibition dates: May 6 – June 10, 2017  
Gallery hours: Saturdays 12–4 pm and by appointment

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<http://goldfinchgallery.org/>

\*Cover: Caroline Kent, *First You Look So Strong, Then You Fade Away*, 2015 (detail), acrylic on canvas, 9' x 6'

Design by Nicole Gardner