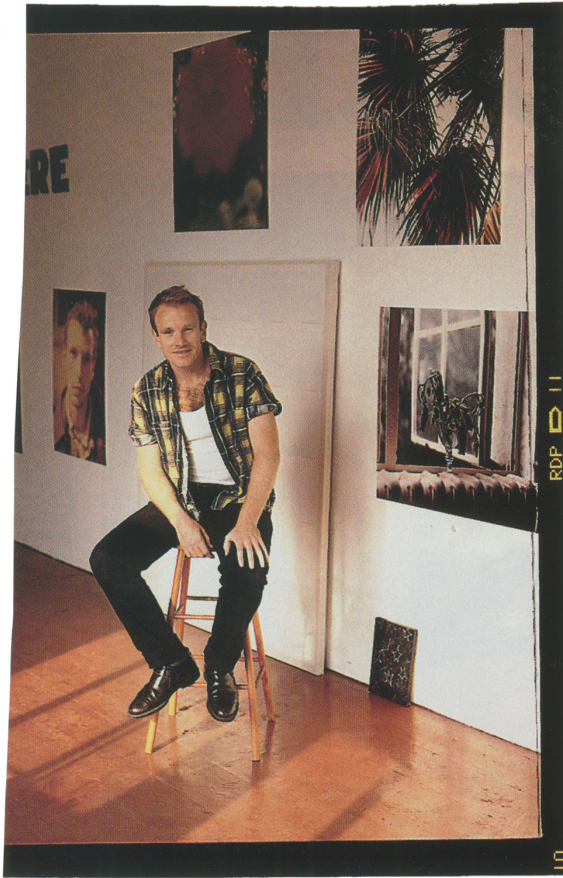


Fanfare



THREE ARTISTS FOR THE '90s

Newcomers Jack Pierson,
Suzanne McClelland, and Peter Cain
turn the facts and flotsam of
ordinary lives into vivid new art

KLAUS KERTESS; PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD EBERLE

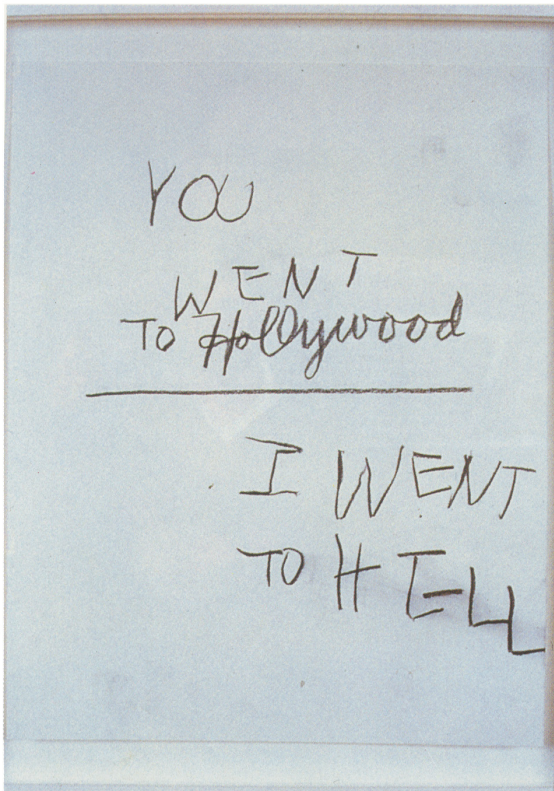


Far left: Jack Pierson and recent color photographs—"I haven't figured out a title for them yet." Center left: In her studio, Suzanne McClelland creates "a weather condition for the word," charting a landscape that ranges from churning vortices to ruffled stillnesses. Left: Peter Cain's *Prelude #5* (1991-92). Above, the artist and *500SL #1* (1992).

Ambivalent about their rapid rise to prominence, many of the young artists who came to the fore in the late '80s struck Faustian contracts with those twin devils of the decade, consumerism and high-tech. Their counterparts in the generation now emerging in New York and across the country appear instead to be seeking new means to validate the idiosyncracies of personal experience.

What they are trying to do is more likely to entrain vulnerability than irony in its wake, more likely to give rise to mystification than demystification. Three members of this generation, Peter Cain, Suzanne McClelland,

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The throwaway elegance of Jack Pierson's *You Went to Hollywood* (1991; graphite on paper) and *Stay* (1991; recycled movie marquee letters) rescues his endeavors from the merely camp.

and Jack Pierson, none of them much over 30, have already snared the startled attention of observers of Manhattan's contemporary art scene with the precocious strength and prescience of their vision.

Born in New Jersey and educated in New York, Peter Cain has been at work in a Bridgehampton potato barn for the past six months, engaged in transformations of the consumer culture's central icon, the automobile. In his first exhibitions—Los Angeles, 1990;

New York, 1991—Cain showed paintings of seamlessly elided and spliced sections of the side profiles of the Mazda Miata and the Porsche. The resulting configurations, sometimes upended, balance precariously over a single tire. Appropriating the glossy photography style of manufacturers' promotional brochures and early Super-

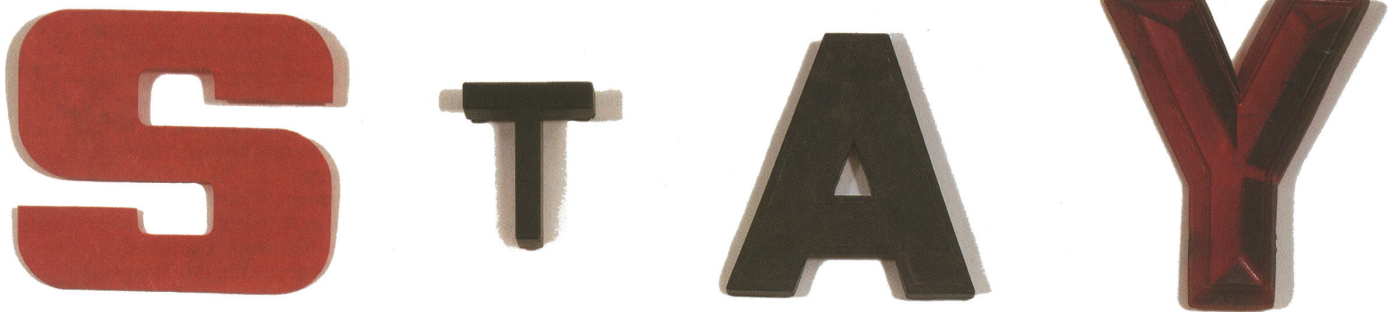
Realist painting, Cain short-circuits the expectations his realist techniques arouse. The shapes in his paintings hover somewhere between the memories of cars that his cues spur our automatic reflexes to anticipate, and his strivings toward a purely invented abstract wholeness. The mirror of Cain's imagination distorts and reinvents the car, transforming it into a vehicle for exploring sensual consciousness. At once sinister and seductive, Cain's work gives new meaning to auto-eroticism.

The latest variations on his theme, the product of his stint in the potato barn, are based on the Mercedes 500 SL. The new paintings compact and distort the front end of the 500 SL in a tour de force of radical foreshortening. Cain flattens the body into a series of curved rectangles (grill, headlights, windshield), transforming them into abstractions of the rectangular plane of the canvas itself. The size and format of his canvases also determine the size and shape of what could be called Cain's "auto-motives." For this artist, the mass-produced has become a singular and unique obsession. His hybrid realism harks back through the geometrically reductionist abstractions of the 1960s to the mechano-sexuality that

first appeared, early in the century, in the work of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia.

Suzanne McClelland's paintings, on the other hand, are an attempt to reinvigorate the traditions of American gestural abstraction as pioneered by Jackson Pollock and his peers in the late '40s. McClelland's arcs and pirouettes, her improvised strokes and gritty surfaces, her combinations of clay and charcoal with acrylics, all conspire to produce a bracing, lyrical unruliness. Her art is more likely to court chaos than serenity. The self-effacing grace of Cy Twombly's graffiti-studded paintings has influenced her work, but so have the early strivings of her daughter, now aged seven, to extrude speech from pure sound.

McClelland seeks a kind of synthesis of writing and drawing, of the spoken and the seen. Her paintings are inspired by single words or short phrases, most of which can be read as simple but ultimately elusive responses to questions: *Forever, Always, Someday, Now*. So go the answers, and in their tumbled quest for meaning, the letters of these words or phrases, now hidden, now scrambled, now clearly retrievable, become analogues to the act of painting. Like

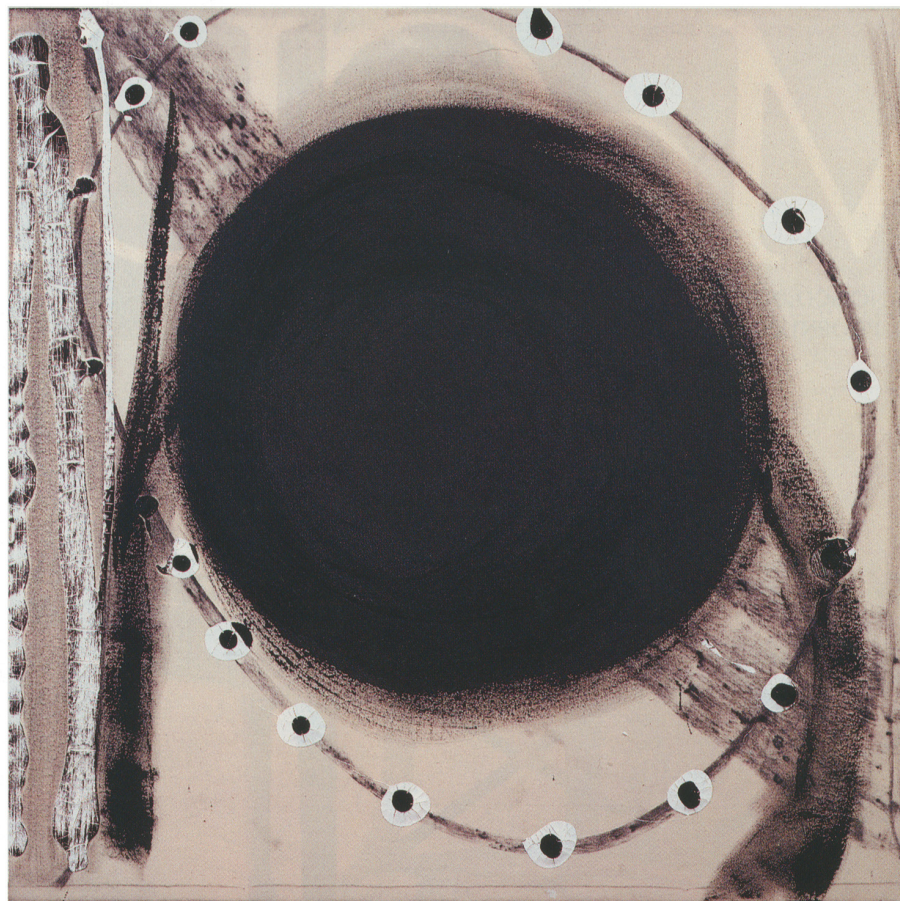


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Suzanne McClelland responds to a couple of metaphoric questions with *No* (1992; acrylic, gesso, charcoal, pigment on canvas) and *Hurry Up* (1992; acrylic, gesso, charcoal, clay).

the word or words that engender them—and that they “become”—each of her paintings invites the viewer into its definition. Take the “forever” in *Forever*—it doesn’t denote a firmly defined period, and therefore remains open to a number of interpretations. McClelland literally and figuratively draws the letters of her word or phrase into the currents of her painting.

In each of her works she attempts to create what she calls “a weather condition for the word,” charting spaces and movements that range from churning vortices to ruffled stillnesses. Though scarcely a year has gone by since her first solo exhibition, the vivid translucencies of her abstractions have already given her admirers much to ponder.



In Jack Pierson’s midtown Manhattan studio, the word “paradise” is traced in the nearly opaque grime of a window that looks out over West 42nd Street. Like Pierson’s work, the window overlays the boulevard of broken dreams below with a silvery

haze. Pierson shares McClelland’s interest in words, but his aims and methods are quite different. With incisive humor, open empathy, and throwaway elegance, Pierson salvages, mourns, and celebrates the physical and emotional debris of a culture that has come to be dominated by the disposable.

Almost everything the artist does, in a wide variety of media, carries a patina of distress, evoking the risk (or acknowledgment) of loss. *Stay*, pleads one work made up of plastic letters.

On his studio’s white walls, he arranges mismatched, discarded letters, once displayed on theater marquees and shop signs, into a new coherence, dark with the brooding anxiety of displacement. Sometimes the letters only allude to a possible meaning; sometimes they spell out words worn with emotion. Pierson may also blow up a casual snapshot to turn the blurred closeup of a crimson rose into a smudged smear of lipstick. Or he’ll strand a goblet of deep purple blossoms on a windowsill behind a rusty radiator. In a collage Pierson made up of pages from old pulp magazines, he resuscitates fame’s losers—faded entertainers like

Diane MacBain, George Maharis, and Connie Stevens—rather than celebrate, Warhol-style, the apparent winners.

Pierson’s precision and restraint rescue his endeavors from the merely maudlin or camp. This is particularly apparent in his exquisitely nonchalant drawings. Disembodied phrases and images drift through them like smoke on the verge of vanishing. Part Beat, part dandy, he croons the tunes of his own dispossession.

Cain, McClelland, and Pierson all ground their work in our culture’s prosaic givens: automobiles, common words and phrases, run-of-the-mill commercial detritus, amateur snapshots. Yet each has found a way to transform life’s secular facts and flotsam into a vivid physicality that resonates with a richly ambiguous autographic vulnerability. ♣