## Suzanne McClelland, "mothertongues"

Paul Kasmin Gallery, through Dec 31 (see Soho).

At one point in the early '90s, I championed Suzanne McClelland as the mother of an expressive new word art that went beyond the dryness of Conceptualism. I figured she'd attract many followers, but as it turns out, text-as-art has taken a sabbatical at decade's end, while McClelland herself has accepted the embrace of the abstract-painting crowd.

"Mothertongues," her current show, includes a few small, purely abstract paintings, several drawings in her signature, scriptlike style, and one large work (dare one say masterpiece?) that combines the two tendencies. McClelland's focus here is on immigration and travel and the words we use to create boundaries and borders—as well as the glib terms we use to give directions. Both topics are serious and keep McClelland's paintings honest and rigorous. The real strength of the work, however, remains her Henry Higgins–like linguistic acumen. Some of the watercolors (*land of the free, boo, too far, tit for tat* and others) are McClelland at her best, with voice and style, word and form, composition and expression effortlessly merging into gemlike visual poems. Others—*Home of the Brave,* a mix of stars and stripes in a many-layered composition; and *Tit for Tit*, which resembles geological strata on which the word *sugar* has been scrawled in a creamy paint—are a bit too abstract for my taste.

But it hardly matters, as the main event, *Enough, Enough,* is a show unto itself. This large diptych looks tortured and overdone at first, but it quickly drags you in. The painting describes a sort of room or mental prison, the walls of which aren't so much inscribed with the words *enough, enough* as composed of them. Dictates, laws, rules, oaths—even pointing fingers—swirl around, and the words both create and destroy a sense of space, giving the piece a *Guernica*-like gravity. Of paintings like *Enough, Enough,* I say more, more.—*Robert Mahoney*
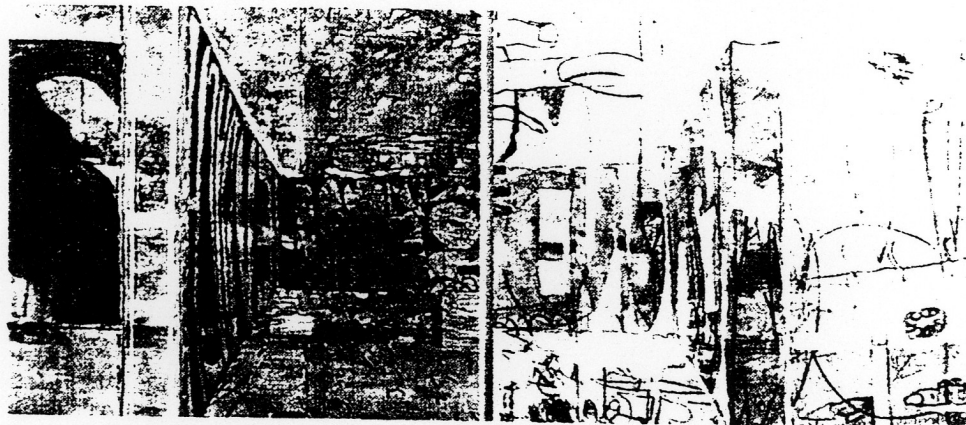
Suzanne McClelland, *Enough, Enough,* 1997–98.