Thoughts on *STrAY*
Found Poems from a Lost Time

by Jennifer Farrell
Curator of Exhibitions and Contemporary Art

"Language," the artist Mel Bochner famously noted in a 1970 work, "is not transparent."[1] Throughout his career, Bochner has addressed the ways in which information and, by extension, knowledge, is fundamentally dependent on language, despite its opacity and the ways in which it conveys, and is structured by, inherent subjectivities and prejudices. Language has also been a career-long concern for Suzanne McClelland and something she has engaged in painting, print, drawing, and video in ways that make reference to, but also deviate from, the work and praxis of conceptual artists such as Bochner.[2] Whereas Bochner questions the authoritative nature of language by using words and statements either derived from, or that mimic, sources such as philosophical treatises and thesauruses, McClelland has focused on the various forms of language—whether written or spoken, official or unofficial, anonymous or credited, refined in literature or casual in personal notes—and how each functions or, perhaps more accurately, fails to function as a method of communication. Such a concern is central to *STrAY: Found Poems from a Lost Time* (2007 – present) in particular. In this project, which she refers to as "a travelling unbound book," McClelland examines the nuances of words and the multiple meanings and connotations they may possess; the slippages that occur when they are transferred from one context, form, or era to another; and the resultant possibility for altered meanings and misunderstandings.[3]

The ability of words to possess phonetic and visual similarities yet have vastly different, even contradictory, meanings is exemplified by the title of the project itself. *STrAY*—with all letters capitalized except the lowercase "r"—plays off the connections between "stray" and "stay" and the role that a single letter makes in the former, disrupting the unity and stability implied by the latter. McClelland's project centers on this divide, namely the decision of whether to stay or stray, be it from a place, group, society, or other unifying element.

In this regard, *STrAY* engages the tenuous links that hold communities ranging from nations to families together, while at the same time hinting at internal divisions and fragmentations that could lead to conflicts, such as separations and civil wars.

McClelland initially began *STrAY,* an in situ project comprising works on paper, videos, and paintings, in 2006 as a reaction to "Found Poems from a Lost Time: A Short History of the Civil War," twelve epistolary poems written by George Garrett (1929–2008), the renowned poet and esteemed professor of creative writing at the University of Virginia (as well as McClelland's uncle), between 2002 and 2003.[4] Garrett's poems, which describe the physical and psychological horrors of war, are constructed from passages found in letters written by two soldiers—in Garrett's words, "blood kin"—who fought on opposite sides of the American Civil War. The letters of Toomer Porter of South Carolina (a chaplain in the Confederate army) and Colonel Oliver Hazard Palmer (a lawyer who, during the war, became a commanding officer of the 108th New York Volunteers) provide the basic text from which Garrett "lifted" passages to construct his poems. The poems convey what each solider took as his experience, his "truth." By alternating voices, omitting large passages of text, and disregarding chronological order, Garrett challenged notions of narrative structure, progression, and authorship. Despite the two voices and the differing ideologies, however, there is a remarkable consistency to the letters. Rather than heroism, Garrett's poems describe periods of waiting, conversations about food and hunger, alcoholism, fear, resentment, and doubt, which express the writers' confused and conflicted feelings about both their duties and the larger mission for which they had volunteered.

McClelland created thirteen portfolios comprising drawings, printed matter, and photographs that derive from Garrett's poems. In these compendiums of work, she lifted passages from his text, much as he did from the original letters; she also copied the physical shape of the poems themselves. The three distinct groups that resulted—*Poem Shapes with Words, Poem Shapes with Light,* and *Poem Units*—follow the order Garrett established, allowing one to see both the connections between and the gaps that separate the poems from McClelland's art.
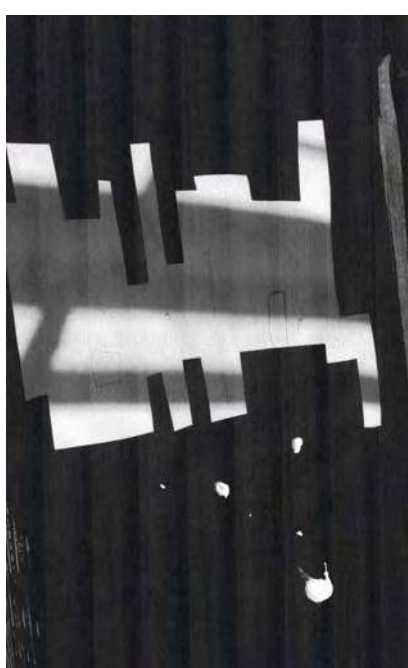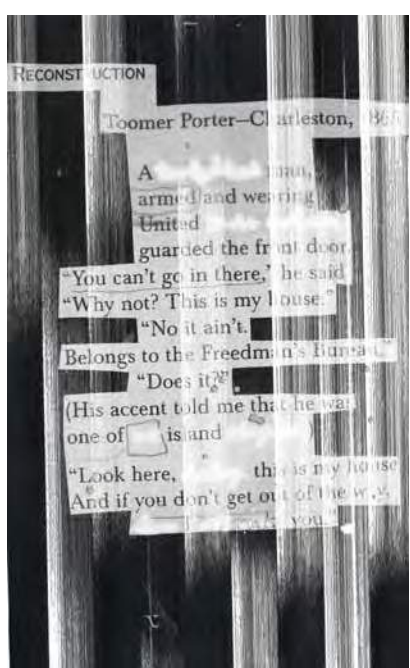
Poem Shape with Words (Reconstruction), 2007–2012 and *Poem Shape with Light (Reconstruction),*
2007–2012. Digital inkjet prints of black-and-white photographs
Courtesy of the artist. © Suzanne McClelland

The *Poem Shapes with Words* adhere most closely to Garrett's poems. In this series, cut lines of
text interact with, and are interrupted by, marks that range from horizontal and
vertical bands of thin white lines in various gradations of tone, to spots of paint
splattered across the surface and over portions of the poem, to diagrammatic
circles and patches of ink that highlight and cover selected sections of the text,
such as the ink-covered words in *Speech, Reconstruction,* and *Sermon.* In *Poem
Shapes with Light,* the texts are removed, allowing one to concentrate on the
form itself, i.e. how it appeared on the page.[5] McClelland reproduces the
jagged and irregular lines, yet reverses them, much like in printmaking, so that
they are the opposite of the poems. Contrasting with the stark outlines of
the text are painterly smears, splotches, and drips, largely in gray and white.
The white lines are generally absent, allowing for a greater distinction between
black-and-white tones.
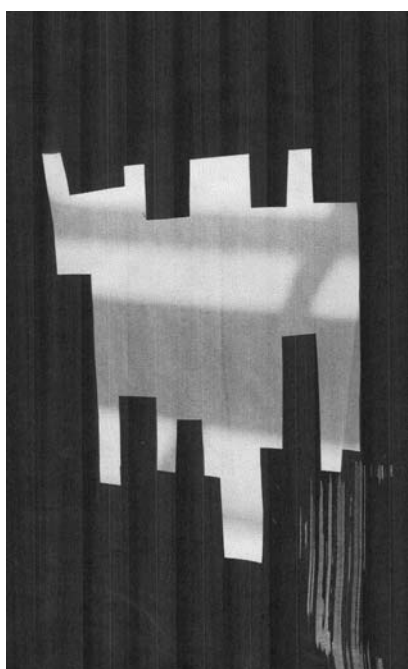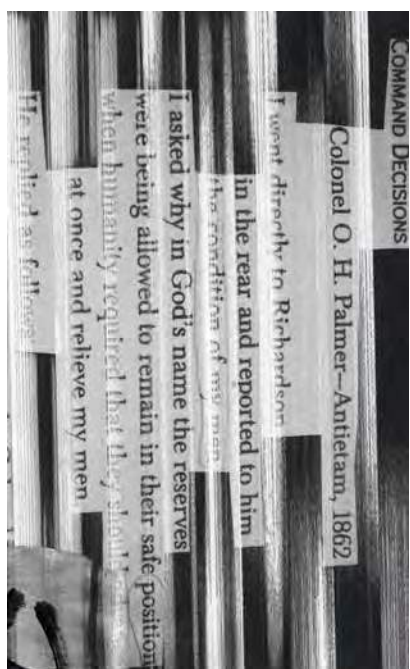
Poem Shape with Words (Command Decisions), 2007–2012 and *Poem Shape with Light
(Command Decisions),* 2007–2012. Digital inkjet prints of black-and-white photographs
Courtesy of the artist. © Suzanne McClelland

Poem Units are perhaps the most removed from the content and form of Garrett's poems. In these
works, McClelland focuses on fragments of text and isolated words, which
often correspond to the marked passages shown in *Poem Shapes with Words.*
The typed lines and forms of Garrett's poems are absent, replaced by fragments
of text and individual words. By decontextualizing and isolating words and
phrases, McClelland is able to expand meaning beyond both the original context
(the letters) and Garrett's poems. She creates a kind of rupture that makes the
words' meaning—and the gaps between what is written and omitted—more
ambiguous and open to associations beyond their original source. For instance,
in *Command Decisions,* Garrett quoted Colonel O. H. Palmer's report of the
weakened and vulnerable "condition of my men" and his request for relief from
the reserve soldiers, only to be informed of the incapacitated state of their
leader: "To tell you the Truth, Colonel, the General is dead drunk." In the *Poem
Unit* for *Command Decision,* McClelland depicts the words "condition" and "
general," which are shown in a light, almost sketchy form floating across an
ornate surface framed by thin washes and drips of paint. Rather than a
reference to a specific general and the condition of his soldiers, the work can
now be read as a question about the General's condition or, even more
universally, a comment about the "general condition" broadly considered.

Although McClelland encountered the poems in written form, in several works she hints at the sounds the words would make if spoken. In *Active Duty,* for instance, the word "melt" seems to fall across the paper's surface, the letters' fluidity echoing both the word's meaning as well as the soft, lilting sound one associates with it when gently spoken, perhaps whispered under one's breath. By contrast, in *Short Rations* the letters have an almost staccato rhythm, which serves to reinforce a sense of urgency and paucity found in the poem—"Time came soon enough when a lone sweet potato would have been pure luxury"—from which the words derived.

Accompanying the *Poem Shapes with Words, Poem Shapes with Light,* and *Poem Units* are drawings, photographs, and prints that also engage various themes, words, and ideas found in the poems. These pieces are displayed with the poem pieces in loose, layered configurations directly on the wall, as if on a bulletin board, a form that provides an alternative method for reading and, in turn, for interpretation. Because *STrAY* is an in situ project (as opposed to a site-specific exhibition), it is constantly evolving, and both dependent on and in dialogue with the context—the time, space, and conditions—under which it is shown. Therefore, it is in a slightly different form each time it is encountered. The structure of the installation, as well as the very nature of *STrAY* itself, can perhaps best be described as what Umberto Eco termed

"an open work," a work that can be understood more as a field of possibilities with various pieces providing layers of information, as opposed to one with a more constant and consistent message less affected by the situation in which it is encountered and less available to a variety of meanings.[6]

Although letters written during the American Civil War are the source material for Garrett's poems and, by extension, McClelland's project, both Garrett and McClelland viewed the original texts as a point of departure. Each believed that the material could be "lifted" and used in the context of their own work in order to reflect their experiences and perceptions rather than functioning as a straightforward account of the Civil War. It is perhaps no coincidence that Garrett wrote the poems after September 11th, the beginning of military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the genocide in the former Yugoslavia.[7] Perhaps even more than Garrett's poems, McClelland's *STrAY* addresses conflict broadly defined, encompassing wars and armed fighting between nation-states and within nations, as well as internal tensions that simmer within groups, societies, families, and even oneself. *STrAY* also reflects the impact of imagery from, and reports of, military engagements and domestic strife that she initially encountered during the time of the Vietnam War (described as the first "living-room war") and which have only intensified due to the twenty-four-hour news cycle, blogs, and other such forums with their near-constant stream of information. The corresponding "cuts" in regards to what is included and what is omitted from each report, broadcast, account, history, or letter as well as questions as to who is speaking, are all reflected in *STrAY.*

Shock, 2003 and *Awe,* 2003. Acrylic paint on tissue paper
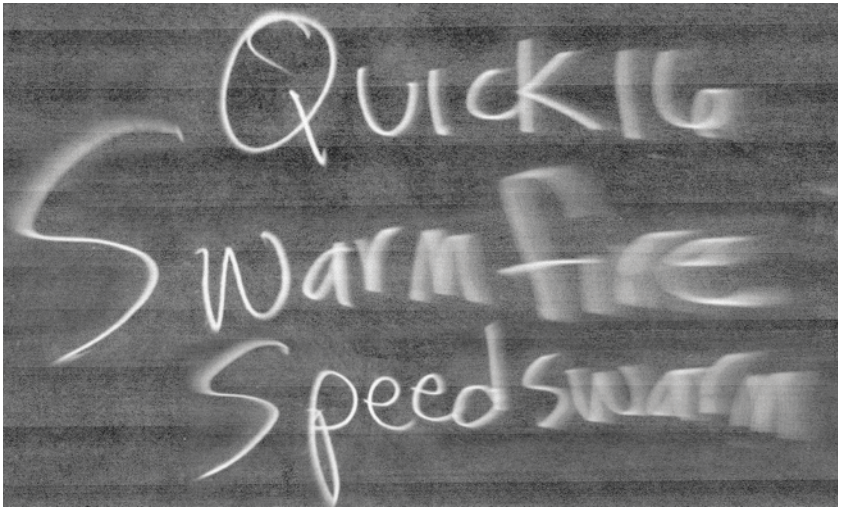Courtesy of the artist. © Suzanne McClelland

Due to her subtle play with language and skillful manipulation of materials in a variety of media, critics often concentrate on the formal aspects of McClelland's work, linking it to that of artists associated with gestural abstraction, for instance, while overlooking the ways in which her art is informed by, and a response to, contemporary social and political events. The work *Soft Partition,* for example, which in *STrAY* is both a group of acrylic paintings on velvet (2007–2012) and a drawing in ink and graphite on Yupo paper (2012), makes reference to the discussion that came to prominence around 2006 regarding the tripartite division of Iraq. Frequently linked to the then-Senator Joseph Biden, the plan would involve creating "one Iraq with three regions," each corresponding to a different ethno-religious group. Although the country would be physically divided, all citizens would share revenues from oil production.[8]
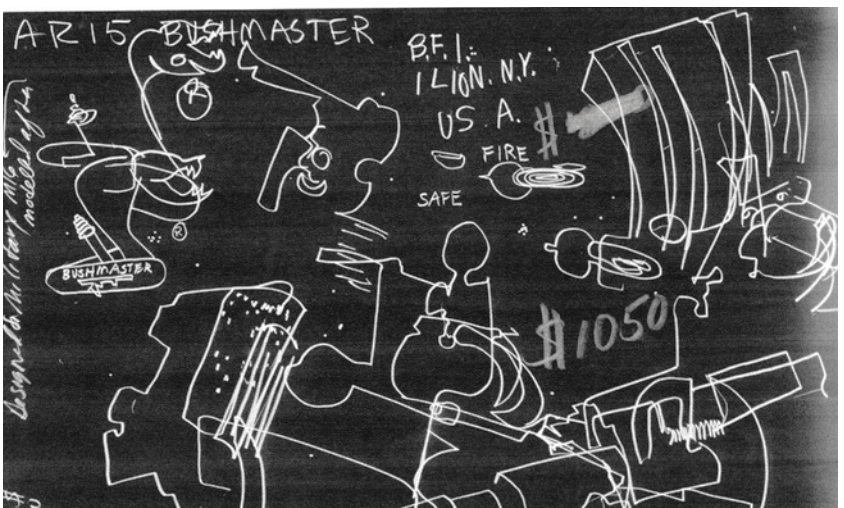
Blind Contour at Tobey's Pawn Shop (AR15 Bushmaster), 2012. Digital video still
Courtesy of the artist. © Suzanne McClelland

The *Soft Partition* paintings are loose and malleable, with lush scrawls of light-colored paint that play off the rich texture of the velvet support and its purple, black, and deep blue tones. As their title implies, they create a flexible, fluid border, as opposed to more defined and impenetrable barriers, ranging from walls to frames to territorial divisions, which serve to establish and maintain boundaries between spaces, objects, and people. Other than through their name, the paintings and drawings do not make a direct reference to the political discussion, yet the engagement with the conjoined concepts of unity and division resulting from artificial boundaries imposed by external forces—both in 1920 when the borders for Iraq were initially constructed and the continuing suggestion of dividing the country—clearly inspired McClelland. McClelland has created other works that make reference to military engagements, such as *Shock* and *Awe* (both 2003), two drawings composed of thick lines of poured gold paint on black tissue paper. Their elegant, nearly abstract forms and the delicacy of the materials stand in contrast to imagery evoked by the controversial military doctrine to which their titles allude.

More directly linked to armed combat are the works *Blind Contour at Tobey's Pawn Shop* (2012) and *Current Models* (2012), which focus on the shapes and names of guns, some of which are deadly weapons, others children's toys. McClelland created graphite on paper drawings and then reversed the images and words in two deliberately raw, silent videos. At first glance, the *Blind Contours* evoke the scrawls and notations found in Cy Twombly's celebrated blackboard paintings,

yet the observational method of blind contour drawing and the gun shapes, as well as information about the make, model, and price of each weapon as determined by a Virginia pawnshop, distinguish McClelland's drawings from Twombly's more abstract imagery. *Current Models* is more ambiguous, as it is composed solely of a series of names, such as *Quick 16, Stampede,* and *Ruger,* all of which derive from Nerf guns marketed primarily to children and adolescents, which are shown blurred and distended, gradually coming into and out of focus.[9] By employing a specific, almost coded, language that few recognize, *Current Models* engages language in a different manner than other pieces in *STrAY* in which text, although decontextualized, carries more recognizable meanings and associations.

Tear (2007), for instance, evokes both meanings the title implies—to rip or separate, often with force, and a sign of weeping or emotional distress—and so is more readily understood than *Current Models.*[10] The video includes clips showing one of the most heartbreaking moments from animated film—the separation of Dumbo from his mother, who was deemed mad after protecting him from bullies—intercut with video shot by McClelland in South Africa of a mother and her calf in the wild, both alone and with the herd. It shows the profound links that comprise social units—ranging from the family to the community— and, at the same time, how vulnerable such connections are, evoking the thin line to which McClelland refers throughout the exhibition, that which runs between "stray" and "stay."
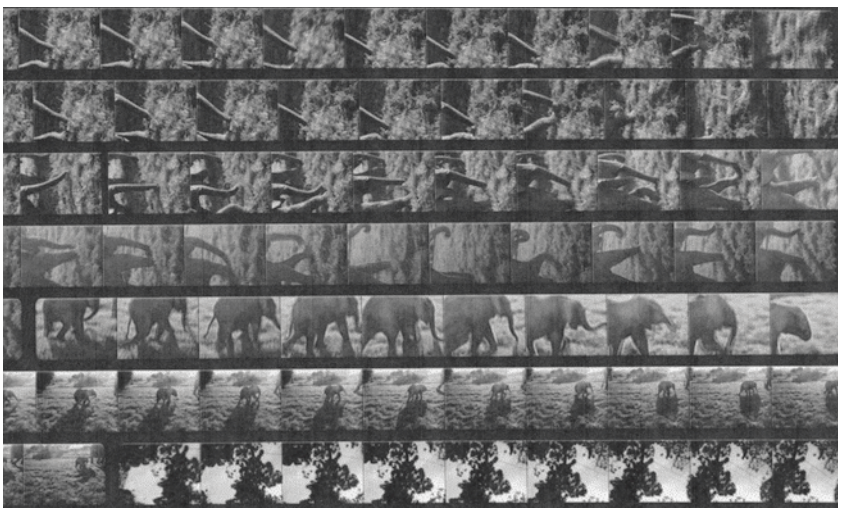
1   Mel Bochner, *Language Is Not Transparent,* 1970, chalk on paint on wall.

2   Almost two decades later, McClelland began a body of work entitled "Speech is Transparent," which makes reference to Bochner's language-based work. Her 2009 series *Heap,* a group of works that make reference to Robert Smithson's drawing *A Heap of Language* (1966) is even more directly linked to the engagement with language that numerous post-minimalist and conceptual artists embraced. Also influential is the work of Mary Kelly, who employed methodology derived from conceptualism to engage domestic and political issues. Links between McClelland's art and that of these artists, and their respective engagements with forms of language, are critical to understanding her production.

3   Interview with the artist, November 14, 2012.

4   When Garrett gave the poems to McClelland, they were titled "Found Poems from a Lost Time: A Short History of the Civil War." However, when published, they appeared as "A Short History of the Civil War." See George Garrett, *Empty Bed Blues: Stories,* Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006, pp. 67–73.

5   Only in *Poem Shape with Light (Active Duty)* do ghostly traces of words appear, yet because they are essentially illegible, without knowledge of the poems themselves, any connections to Garrett's writing is lost.

6   "Certain forms of communication demand meaning, order, obviousness—namely, all those forms which, having a practical function…[they] need to be understood univocally, with no possibility for misunderstanding or individual interpretation. Others, instead, seek to convey to their readers sheer information, an unchecked abundance of possible meanings. This is the case with all sorts of artistic communications and aesthetic effects." Umberto Eco, *The Open Work,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 93–4.

7   During this period, Slobodan Milošević was on trial for war crimes; terrorist activities were reported in places that included Chechnya, Pakistan, and Nigeria; and, domestically, the "Beltway sniper" was active in the Washington DC area. Several shootings occurred in Virginia and the University of Virginia significantly increased campus security during this time.

8   The Kurds were to be given land in the north, the Sunnis in the west, and the Shiites in the central and southern regions.

9   In her video *Open Arms—Paintball Party* (2012), McClelland shows the violent way such guns are used in the context of a game or "party."

10 *Tear* was made in 2007. *Tear Two* (2012) derives from the earlier video and is included in the exhibition.