

# SHARON BUTLER TWO COATS OF PAINT

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## Political violence and abstraction: Suzanne McClelland

12:07 PM Sharon Butler



Recalling Warhol's [13 Most Wanted Men](#) project, which debuted controversially at the 1964 World's Fair, [Suzanne McClelland](#) in "[Call With Information](#)," her latest show at [Team Gallery](#) continues her series about a kindred subject: Americans citizens wanted by the government for *domestic* terrorism. For the past several years McClelland has been compiling information about seven US citizens, each wanted for domestic terrorist activities that led to murder; some have been on the lam for more than fifty years. Silkscreened images of wanted posters, cut and embedded in paper pulp made during a residency at [Dieu Donn ](#), and copies of news reports (filed into dossiers for each missing person) form the basis for the work in this compelling exhibition that, unlike much recent abstraction, weds gestural painting with political content.



Suzanne McClelland installation at Team. At right, embedded pulp pieces created at Dieu Donn  are pinned on top of the timeline wallpaper.

McClelland began the series (each painting is labeled with the numbers assigned to the corresponding case by the FBI's [National Crime Information Center](#)) in 2014; four are included in the exhibition and three more are in the works. An installation of wallpaper printed with a timeline created and maintained by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) document the domestic terrorist acts recorded since the [Oklahoma bombing](#) in April 1995—a parallel history to the timeline maintained by the FBI.



Suzanne McClelland, installation view of the back gallery where the materials from McClelland's research dossiers for each person are installed as wall pieces.

McClelland isn't trying to assess whether the wanted are innocent or guilty, and she seeks neither to demonize nor to lionize them. Rather, she is illuminating the discomfiting reality that we may never know what really happened in their respective cases. In all of them, passionate belief led to physical action that produced heinous consequences, but given the sketchy existing information about each crime and the ever-shrinking probability that much more can be substantiated due to the erosion of evidence and the mortality of witnesses, closure is practically impossible. The victims' survivors – and, more broadly, society – must endure the ambiguity. "We live with the constant search ... the notion that data is the most important material we have," McClelland told me as we walked through the exhibition last week. "Much like the lives we lead now on the internet ... everything is text-based—the primary connection to our activity is maintained through *data*."



Suzanne McClelland, installation view. All images courtesy of Team.

From the snippets of truncated text and obscured imagery to the shades of gray and washy brushwork, the work in McClelland's exhibition aptly conveys in her own visual language the uncertainty of the fugitives' stories. The matter-of-fact authoritativeness of the typeset text and photographic imagery that appears in the timeline poster gives way in the large-scale paintings to less grounded and more intuitive gesture, drawing, and writing. The resulting layered surfaces and shifting, mysterious spaces reflect both McClelland's searching and the inevitable erasure of information that happens over time. Thus, as she examines the news reports, texts, and images that constitute her research materials (they are also the basis for the work-on-paper installations in the back gallery), McClelland seems to understand less and less, and to become more anguished by the fact that she will never know what happened.

In this absorbing exhibition, McClelland has tackled—incisively and expansively, parochially and universally—the elusiveness of justice and explanation in an age of political polarization, when violence is all too easily rationalized by fervent ideology.

"[Suzanne McClelland: Call With Information](#)," Team, Soho, New York, NY. Through March 22, 2015.