

ARTNEWS

Vasari Diary: The Poetic Politics of Stefana McClure and Annabel Daou, and James Ivory Interprets Vermeer

BY Barbara A. MacAdam

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Stefana McClure, *Protest Jackets: A New Siege (for Bernadette Devlin)*: a poem by John Montague, *Punishment*: a poem by Seamus Heaney, *Viking Dublin*: a poem by Seamus Heaney, *The Ministry of Fear*: a poem by Seamus Heaney, *Ulster Names*: a poem by John Hewitt, *Derry*: a poem by Seamus Deane, *Procession*: a poem by John Montague *Funeral Rites*: a poem by Seamus Heaney (detail), 2018, installation view.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JOSÉE BIENVENU GALLERY, NEW YORK

Living with Politics

We live in a world today of complex and often unfathomable politics, and we have many ways of circumnavigating the subject, passively or actively, angrily or thoughtfully. We can react with bloody depictions or reflect with poetry and nuance. Which is the more effective or satisfying expression is debatable, although the thinking ones allow for reason and greater balance. Call that Poetic Politics, a stance exemplified by artists like Stefana McClure and Annabel Daou.

The Irish-born and –raised McClure has staged her battles elegantly and compulsively using words as her forceful and enigmatic tools of expression and catharsis. Most recently, for her show at Josée Bienvenu gallery in New York, titled “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” she typed out famous poems, letting her fingers appropriate them and shape them.

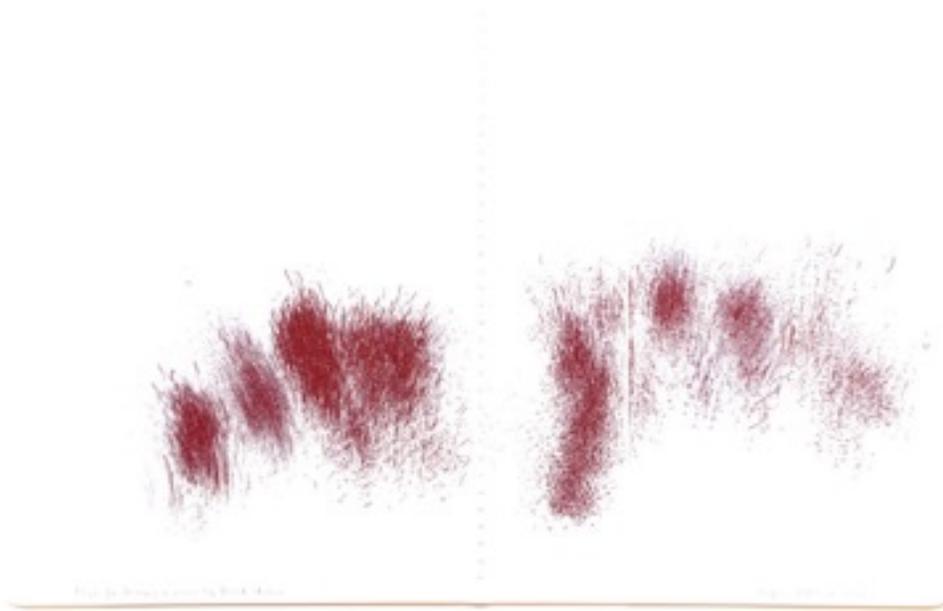
McClure’s practice has almost always involved a precise, elegantly compulsive investigation of subject and medium, working through action and translation by means of handcraft and literature. In the past

she has copied by hand the complete subtitles from foreign films one line atop the last so that the meaning remains deeply embedded in the mass of graphite—literal, weighty, but indecipherable.

For her latest project, she said, “I thought I’d tackle something closer to home. I grew up in Belfast at the height of the ‘Troubles.’” McClure’s installation involved “drawings” based on typing out poems—by Irish authors—using IBM Selectric letter keys detached from the ball and then applied onto the fingers of gloves connected by ribbons and typed onto a Teflon surface. “The poems were typed by different people. Everyone has a different style,” she said, “and that accounts for the shape of the image.”

“The result,” she explained, has “nothing to do with the aesthetic.” There’s a performative quality, a percussive one. The “collaborators” included people from Craigslist and stenographers.

As a backdrop for all this there was a wall of wooden pegs serving as hooks for little boys’ school jackets. Inside the pockets of each jacket is a rock wrapped in crumpled paper with the typed poem, whose configuration, though randomly applied, nevertheless looks like a landscape. The rock is ready to be tossed when needed. The poetic missiles are waiting in pockets.



Stefana McClure, *Rage For Order: a poem by Derek Mahon*, 2018, teflon mounted on notebook cover.

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Among the poems are Philip Larkin’s “The Importance of Elsewhere” and Seamus Heaney’s “Whatever You Say Say Nothing.”

From Larkin:

Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,
Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,
Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:
Once that was recognised, we were in touch

Their draughty streets, end-on to hills, the faint

Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable,
The herring-hawker's cry, dwindling, went
To prove me separate, not unworkable.

Living in England has no such excuse:
These are my customs and establishments
It would be much more serious to refuse.
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

From Heaney:

And I'm writing just after an encounter
With an English journalist in search of 'views
On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter
Quarters where bad news is no longer news,

Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,
Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads
Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint
But I incline as much to rosary beads

As to the jottings and analyses
Of politicians and newspapermen
Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas
And protest to gelignite and Sten,

Who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',
'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'the provisional wing',
'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'.
Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing, . . .

Meanwhile, closer to home, in Brooklyn, McClure reacted to other disturbances: "I wrote the first of the poems and knocked the corners off the paper," McClure told me. "I got stones from my garden. We had a stone basement, and I threw stones against the wall." Her anger was inspired not only by politics and the state of the world, but it was also in large part a response to the noise of construction being done across the street.

"I put my whole body into it," she said. "A big stone being thrown hard has a percussive quality to it."

"As kids," she added, "we always had a stone in each pocket. I've made works like Beckett's sucking stones passing from pocket to pocket so that each stone is sucked. There's a sense of safety in having them."

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