

# BROOKLYN RAIL



Portrait of Suzanne McClelland, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

## SUZANNE MCCLELLAND WITH NANCY PRINCENTHAL BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL MAY, 2024

Suzanne McClelland has been exploring relationships among visual, written, and spoken language figures and their coded representation throughout her career as a painter. Her subjects, or prompts, have ranged from the names of female rap artists to the proportions of body builders, and have included material with explicit political content. Always, there is a deep involvement with material, process and form, and the pleasures they offer. This conversation took place in the artist's studio.

**Nancy Princenthal (NP:):** Let's begin with what we've just been talking about, which is your reluctance to put a representation of yourself in your paintings.

**Suzanne McClelland (SM):** My concern is with the voice—what the body has to say. What starts all of my work is that gap between what you see and what you hear—that disconnect. The question of believability. When you hear something, do you trust it? Are you hearing the same thing that somebody else is hearing? Making sense of things through our senses is what we do every day, and we don't do it the same way. But there are tools or codes that we use to measure reality so that hopefully we can all come to some agreement. That's where I like to play. I find sources that snag my interest and irritate me and repeatedly stay interesting. The paintings I just showed you, those larger field paintings, were made outdoors, and I was working with the form of infinity and the form of zero.

**NP:** What are the dimensions of those big new paintings?

**SM:** They're all slightly different: roughly 108 or 100 high by about 77 inches.

**NP:** Have you worked at this scale before?

**SM:** Yes. Some of the works from the early nineties were 8 by 8 feet, roughly. And I was working mostly on squares. Now I never use the square because I want whatever help I can get in creating some kind of direction. I also don't mind if something tries to be landscape or tries to be a figure, just through orientation. I do lean a little bit towards the vertical. I have a habit of reading up and down more than left to right.

**NP:** But when you're working outdoors, you're working with the canvases flat, right on the ground?

**SM:** I'm working on them unstretched on uneven ground. I have this big two-car garage—bigger than the house it came with—we laid down gravel over the grass. Gravel moves around to create puddles of color. I use a hose and the sun dries the color up. It's easy to deal with the center because I can walk across the canvas.

**NP:** So you're working wet on wet, literally hosing the paintings with water?



Suzanne McClelland, *Infinity's Twin - earth*, 2024. Mixed media on canvas, 98 x 78 inches. © Suzanne McClelland. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.  
Photo: Lance Brewer.

**SM:** Yes, some paintings are made outdoors, en plein air. I like hunting for a kind of energy flow or gravitational force in the field, figuring out where something might lean, pile up, or develop, basically reflecting things that go on physically in the world.

**NP:** And the prompt is figures of zero and infinity. I'm looking at a painting that has very buoyant donut shapes in the lower corner, an abstracted notion—or maybe a materialized vision, actually—of zero. There are all sorts of questions I want to ask you about the relationship between abstraction and mathematics. I think I'm going to start with, is there a kind of cosmos in this canvas, or a sense of the cosmic? And, is that something that happened in the process of painting, or was that also a prompt?

**SM:** Well, they're bigger than us. Cosmic implies something—out there. Two of the words that I've used to begin the paintings are "beyond" and "away." They're words that I've reached for a lot in recent years. In Timothy Morton's book *Humankind* he brings up the idea of "away" having changed its meaning. We used to throw things away, we used to think things would go away. And now we really know where everything and everyone is. Elsewhere.

**NP:** That's such an interesting idea.

**SM:** That was something that got me back to the notion of the “out there.” I grew up in rural places, so I spent a lot of time “out there,” in places that didn’t have paths, weren’t laid out—the woods, water. This exhibition was going to be called “Tea Leaves: The World of Laters and Nows,” which is based on an article that Alan Lightman wrote for the Op Ed page of the *New York Times* in 1993. Now the show is *A Highland Seer*. An anonymously authored Scottish guide to reading tea leaves. I’m interested in the need for predictions. There’s a disconnect, and also maybe interdependence, between knowing that there is a lot out there that we can’t touch or see or feel or know and having the same limits to knowing our interiority. We never can really know any whole person, even ourselves. So I guess this gathering of paintings has some connection to my interest in premonitions and omens. Right now, a lot of people close to me are getting charts done—trying to figure out how to predict the future.

**NP:** And by charts you mean?

**SM:** Astrological guidance that I’ve not always taken seriously. I’ve never embraced it, but people close to me have. I don’t want to say they rely on or depend on it. It’s more like they’ve opened certain doors for me in terms of belief, and it’s made me question my spirituality. I am not religious, I can’t believe in leadership. I tend to find truth in fragments, or in aspects of people. I don’t have heroes, I don’t have particular artists that I totally follow but I see specific gestures or works they do as valuable. Many people will join a clique, or a cult, a team or a religious organization. I’ve never really done that. As soon as I start to feel an exclusionary fortress forming, I usually depart. Maybe because I moved so much when I was young. Every three years, I would enter a new school and you could just see the cliques on the playground, you could see who the leader was, and who the henchmen were. And you could see the people that wanted to be a part of it. When I met Clement Greenberg in 1982 with Peter Bradley he was surrounded by people who barely read him but loved power...even his waning influence. His contributions were dismissed at that time and his depth was balanced by a narrowness. It seems that people talk a lot about the socialization of an artist and who they hang around with and what economic world they function inside of. I think that for women or anyone who survives only through oral histories, that is a really different kind of experience than for artists who are written into the history.

**NP:** Are you talking about women being marginalized?

**SM:** Yes. Female identified people who are written into history have often gotten there by being associated with male artists. Newer contributions to history are changing that. People are still grouping each other through what feels like similar identities but now it’s also similar economic status. Wealthy artists become a social group unto themselves. This was a shock for me to discover.

**NP:** When you were talking about the social configurations of the art world, I was thinking that when we entered it—which we did at roughly the same point—I was really embarrassed by the term “art world.” It seemed so pretentious. And then after a certain number of years, I just accepted that there is an art world and it has its own language, its own concerns. But so much of what you’ve always done has been challenging that language—about looking at the very movable distinctions between what is abstract and what is not abstract. And about going back to basic kinds of language, like mathematical notation.

**SM:** The codes we use are abstractions and they are drawings. They are forms. That’s where they become satisfying material to begin with in a painting to inscribe and then to submerge and reconfigure.

**NP:** And look, we’ve moved straight to a painting that’s got a big version of Road Runner in it, which is not abstract at all.

**SM:** I’ve done a series of drawings and paintings of predators that through erasure become prey to themselves

**NP:** To themselves?

**SM:** Yes. There’s a lot of social cannibalism that goes on now, people of similar ilk eating each other. This subject was something that I grew up with as a stereotypical version of the American landscape. I think Chuck Jones is brilliant at reducing experience down to the chase, gravity and a series of mishaps—traps are set. There’s an engagement between the predator and the prey, and the thing that takes the predator down is gravity almost every time. There is

a goofiness in the desperation of the coyote, because the desire to consume or capture that Road Runner just causes complete self-annihilation. There's a lot of self-erasure and evaporation, which is also something that's really fun to work with in a painting: questioning perception and leaving a trace of what might have been there.



Suzanne McClelland, *PREY (heads or tails)*, 2024. Charcoal and oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. © Suzanne McClelland. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.  
Photo: Lance Brewer.

**NP:** There's so much graphic energy in these, and also in the blind contour paintings.

**SM:** I definitely work around and through what's nameable. Where's the edge? Where's the gravity? Where's the thing that stays fixed and where does it become mutable? Or, where is it shifting physically in the painting and where is it shifting in our eyes? Do we believe what we're looking at?

**NP:** Are you suggesting we should not? Are you talking about illusion?

**SM:** I guess so. The graphic promises to be real or concrete. Paint can slow down the graphic read.

**NP:** Your work has always seemed very tactile to me, even though you've described these new paintings as being very dry, physically, because you're working with water-based paint. But your bodily gesture—which is where we began—can be felt so powerfully in this work. That says something about credibility, right?

**SM:** One set of 1-9 paintings is water-based and one set is oil. These division-problem paintings contain a solution which is the same as the factors in the problem, they are all wrong—this one is five divided by five equals five. Certain forms, like four, and one, have been difficult because they are perpendicular to the edge. I thought about Agnes Martin dealing with these perpendicular lines, which are an extension of the frame. There's a rhythm within them that is, I think, very comforting and also very disconcerting, because it's hard to know where to enter. The reason I use a lot of what people call gesture is probably my desire to make a line or a form or shape that fits and 's a little bit of a vibration or disturbance in the frame-within-the-frame. Numbers provide a certain rhythm. I live with Drew Vogelmann, who's a percussionist, and our son Lucas, also a percussionist. I live in a house where people are practicing the same measures over and over again, and it never is tiresome to me because one can feel their thinking through a problem; the changes are apparent if using analog instruments.

**NP:** These questions of rhythm and the relationship between music and numbers, or between visual art and auditory experience, are another through line in your work.

**SM:** Yes, there's that code, whether it's language or numbers, that tries to give us a place of agreement—a place to connect or engage. I guess that to me is the reason for even making art: you're providing a place for other people to meet and read together, and maybe connect because they read the thing in a similar way, or connect because they can talk about the *differences* in how they see things.

**NP:** For me, that brings up the issue of legibility. With the word and letter paintings, you don't make it simple. We know there are numbers in the ones that are more clearly visible, or suggest it by their title. For instance, the "Ideal Proportions" paintings, with body builders' dimensions. But of course, if it's letters, our alphabet isn't universal—it's not literacy for everyone. So there is this problem of, where do we meet? Is it in the visual richness of the experience, independent of the conceptual basis, or the political basis? And when we're talking about numbers in particular, there's the question, are numbers a key to the way the world was made? That's sort of a theological, or faith-based, way of thinking about numbers: that they reveal a divine design. Or are numbers just the way we describe things, because that's the way human brains are made? It may give us only a very fractional understanding of the world, to organize it this way, numerically, to formulate the physics of things. I feel your work gets right in there with these questions, like that wonderful early series where you analyzed the space between Gabriel and Mary across a range of early paintings of the Annunciation.

**SM:** Mary is usually reading, somehow she is impregnated, interrupted. In 1999 during a talk I gave at Skowhegan, I showed the drawings I made of the spaces between those bodies—tracings from postcards of Annunciations I collected while traveling in Europe in 1980. Jenny Monick pointed out Leo Steinberg's writing on this subject, which digs deep. It's been written that the Immaculate Conception, which is this impossible thing—it's mythology—clearly feeds into everything that's necessary for misogyny, which is to make sure a leader is born, and not of a woman's body. The role of the woman is erased and especially the mother's body. I risk making a generalization here, but: something I have found in white Protestant American cultures is that there is a disdain for the mother—the little old lady, the "hag."

**NP:** Another through line in your work is that there's politics to it, and not just a gender politics. I'm thinking of the project "Call with Information," about political extremists—domestic terrorists—which I can't believe was ten years ago. Before Trump

**SM:** That started in 2012. I got interested in what we do with missing bodies, how we project onto the void to comprehend the disappearance and how we make predictions—economists, or weathermen, pollsters—trying to figure out what's going to happen, anticipation, expectation, an aim for satisfaction. I was obsessed with missing "criminal" bodies, out there on the lam. Did they do it or do we fill the void with fantasies? I used concrete descriptions of people from the FBI's "most wanted" posters. This was one of the reasons I was interested in the body builders and did that series around how they measure themselves. They will bury their own bodies by obsessing over building their bodies. They bury their own framework, erase their own real body, through drugs and chemicals and all that excessive exercise, just to build this "ideal proportion," which is what that series is called. "Domestic" terrorists: it still baffles me that even after January 6, the FBI has just a very tiny little list of people they call domestic terrorists, and focuses all its energies on people from other parts of the world. I saw that the Southern Poverty Law Center kept better track of this nation's history of terrorism than the FBI does. I felt rage growing in the air.

**NP:** You weren't wrong! The level of violence in this country is maybe not a thing we want to talk about, when one thing that this work seems about is amazing buoyancy.

**SM:** Always look outward and now inward. Many of these paintings have a consistent settling at the bottom of the frame. We know we can levitate and float, and we can get on an airplane and fly. We can do things that are beyond what our body is capable of doing. But we're always left with the weight of gravity. That is not a tragic thing, it's just a concrete reality.

This country was built on terrible violence—genocide, slavery—and I think there's a huge reckoning happening right now. This history isn't a newflash. It's just that now there's an openness, something in the culture that is allowing people to hear and see it, and maybe a national self-reflection is going on.

It was one reason I returned to the basic blind contour method of observation in these paintings. There are all these parts of our bodies that we never see without tools like a mirror or camera. I haven't drawn myself since I was a teenager. These paintings are working against my own rules. I have always resisted depiction of the human body because it felt redundant. The frame is done, it is what it is; no point in reframing. But I did exactly that in these two paintings. I thought in terms of a frame within a frame. So, these are like double—I don't want to call them self-portraits, but I am using my own body to measure my reach. The marks are a trace of this limited relationship between me and the frame—action drawing with both hands, only drawing what I can see. I just drew myself drawing.



Suzanne McClelland, *Blind Contour-Why do you Wait in the Upper Air?*, 2024. Mixed media on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. © Suzanne McClelland. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.  
Photo: Lance Brewer.

**NP:** I'm seeing the outline of a figure. I see you with your arms out and your legs and feet, though they are very much flying off the surface.

**SM:** I wouldn't try to reflect my own body, or illustrate somebody else's body in a painting, because my gesture is already there. That closes down the possibilities for locating an unknown or "beyond" in a painting. But now this body is aging, slipping away, and it's more interesting to me. Maybe because I've been working nomadically, traveling so much and working in different places, I decided it was an interesting time to face that all I had was myself, and not try to place these works in a regional sense but to reflect internal weather or climate.

Sometimes I work in Brooklyn, sometimes by the water on Long Island. Sometimes I work in Los Angeles. I've been going there since 1978 when I took my first cross-country road trip. I was still primarily a photographer and life was portable. We drove a Triumph Spitfire that broke down regularly. Laura Karpman is still a close friend, a film composer now who works with her wife Nora in their home recording studio on the beach. They are so generous, and it's very communal living. I have never tried to integrate into any of the various LA art worlds; it's more like a retreat. These paintings in front of you were made there.

**NP:** They seem to have metallic paint, which creates changes when the light shifts.

**SM:** Yes, there's some iridescence in these paintings. I wanted the forms to slightly shift when you pass by them so shapes are not fixed but mutable. I dissect the material in a way that allows the binders and the pigments to function separately even though they depend on each other. When it's a water-based painting the staining has a dry look—it's both opaque and transparent and the medium is less present. In oil-based sections of the work the walnut-oil medium disperses the pigment in a creamier way. These two "Ghost" paintings obliterate the blind contour

underpinnings with sprays and pours. These expand upon the “Mute” paintings—an alphabet series I made and showed at Team gallery in New York and then with Marianne Boesky at Unlimited in Basel last year.

**NP:** Do you want to talk about why you were traveling so much?

**SM:** There is something invigorating about a temporary space in an empty studio. I can just say that COVID hit, and a lot of our income went away pretty quickly. Then Drew got into that motorcycle accident, which he’s totally fine from now. But everything just turned upside down. We had to move out of our house, which had been my studio for fifteen years. I thought we were going to have to sell it. And then we slowly turned the barge around and were lucky enough to have secured studios near the water in Orient, a place I had visited twenty years ago. It was dreamy to be able to work outside again. And it took me to my childhood of leaving places every few years. It feels natural. Drew and I both can work where the light and wind are moving constantly. The landscape changes rapidly throughout the day.

**NP:** Both of you both have studios there?

**SM:** Yes, Drew has a recording studio called Electric Garden with partner Ben Kane. But he has always kept his own studio for percussion in our place. After 9/11, we had to move from lower Manhattan and into Brooklyn. I loved working upstate in Clermont, but for musicians at that time it was too quiet. I really loved working in places that are unfamiliar to me, where I bring rolls of linen or canvas and work portably.

**NP:** On the big paintings?

**SM:** Yes, unstretched, so it’s like working on paper.

**NP:** That’s funny, because you think of portable work as something small, but these are pretty grand. But I interrupted you; you were saying more about how you do the contour drawings and what the process and medium are.

**SM:** Well, it’s like you said, you used the word gesture. It’s moving. I try to paint with my whole body as opposed to just my hand. That’s part of the pleasure for me, actually moving with the painting and not necessarily thinking in terms of what my fingers can do.

**NP:** I do see that. And there’s a kind of athleticism in some of these paintings. But then there’s also a handwriting hand that I think is always lurking in your work.

**SM:** Yes, it’s there because the hand is close to the mind.

**NP:** Can you talk about the differences between the LA paintings and the Orient or Brooklyn paintings?

**SM:** The outdoor paintings from Orient have a softer quality because they spent time outdoors, so the sun got to them and I allow the water to make forms created by the uneven gravel they rest on. There is a lot more time for the pigment to soak into the surface, like watercolor, which can release itself from the gesture. They’re not gessoed, they don’t have a ground. The LA paintings have various grounds and are constructed or built more overtly.

**NP:** The Orient paintings are Color Field-ish.

**SM:** Well, after being a photographer and spending time in the darkroom, I did learn about the possibilities in stain painting from Peter Bradley and Al Loving, and I was around a lot of artists that were working that way when I was 22–28 years old.

**NP:** And Peter is now painting outdoors, too.

**SM:** When we were together in the eighties, we weren’t working outdoors, but in the firehouse on White Street we lived had a huge floor plan, very open and bright, no heat, no insulation, but Peter had built a platform to work on, which he shared with me for a short time. Then I went up to Triangle, which was a residency that Anthony Caro started with his wife, Sheila Girling. Canadian, British, and South African artists gathered in Pine Plains—apartheid

made it difficult for the South African artists to attend; those who did often stayed with us in the firehouse. David Koloane I remember well because he actually organized artists during apartheid, along with Bill Ainslie. At Triangle, all of these artists worked in big barns, which were about as close to being outdoors as you can get. They were completely open to the elements. I have always enjoyed working outdoors. I did that with my mom—watercolors outdoors when I was a kid.

**NP:** How wonderful! I didn't know she was a painter.

**SM:** Yes, she's a watercolorist.

**NP:** Your mother is alive?

**SM:** Yes, she's eighty-seven.

**NP:** And does she still paint?

**SM:** We hung all of her work last time I visited, but she isn't painting now and I wonder if it's because she is surrounded by her own work. Does that hinder one's desire to make more? Her landscapes are beautiful. I love her animal paintings and she's made some children's books that she's self-published. She was really big on naming things; she taught us all the names of local birds. She grew up in central Florida where there are a lot of things to be afraid of, reptiles and alligators, which were in the lake right down the street, many poisonous snakes. Imagine being a kid and trying to play outdoors in a place like that—I get her desire to name those sounds in the night. I spent my whole childhood outdoors in the northern woods and lakes, and I can't imagine having to think about stepping on a snake that might hinder exploration. So many fears in the tropical landscape and so much beauty. She talked a lot about blackening the windows of their beach cottage because the German submarines would see the coastline and crawl up the sand dunes. The Nazis were like the alligators to her.

**NP:** With your work outdoors, do you wake up in the morning and wonder what happened overnight?

**SM:** Actually yes, I'm glad you asked that, because one of the pleasures of painting this way for me is in not really knowing how things are going to settle in once I leave them. It's unpredictable, like outdoor petri dishes. But the paintings made indoors, they tell you what they are pretty quickly. The color is the color. It isn't going to change much. Whereas these stained paintings look really different as they're drying in the sun.

**NP:** This brings up a question I meant to ask earlier. These stained paintings seem to have a relationship to old-fashioned analog photography, where you wait for the picture to come up in the developer.

**SM:** Yes, I loved the way those images arrived slowly in the darkroom. It probably is, in some ways, a little bit more in sync with how I think—to look outward, so I'm not making my work *about* myself because it already is. I've wanted to see what's out there, what is unfamiliar in the world. The camera becomes a really fantastic intermediary. When I couldn't find a darkroom situation in New York City in 1981, I tried to make a kind of painting that gives me a shock, a surprise. You were asking me about the iridescence, and the dried pigments. I want to see the thing that happens when you're right there with it, but then when it dries, it's another thing.

The thing that I do miss is when you take a photograph, it feels a little safer than making a painting. I'm not making a general evaluation of that for other people. But for me, a photograph is always clean, it's usually shiny, or matte and framed. It's not going to be embarrassing in the room. The image itself might embarrass somebody or might humiliate somebody, but the object itself is always clean. Paintings can be dirty.

**NP:** And there's a remove—the camera—between you and the image when you make a photograph. When you're painting, not so much.

**SM:** Then there is sculpture. My teachers, besides Joanne Leonard, the photographer, were Judy Pfaff, Ursula von Rydingsvard and Jackie Winsor.

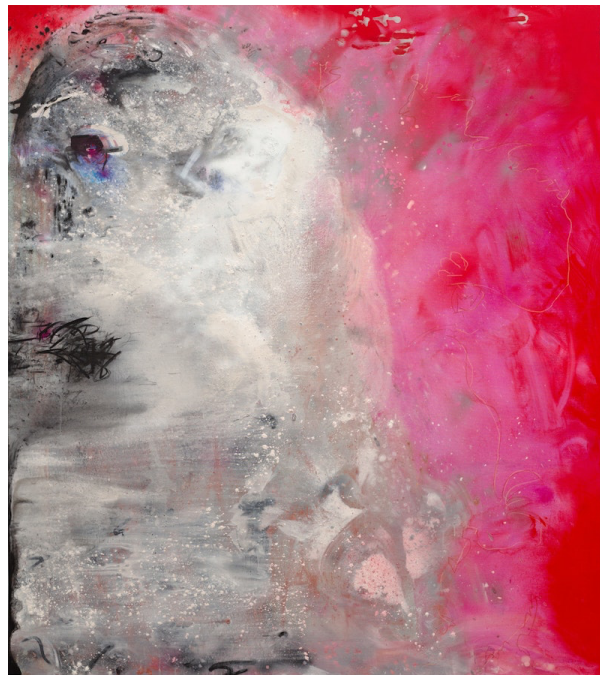


NP: Wow.

SM: I went to graduate school after I had Garrett, by the way. She was two years old, and I was breaking up with Peter and trying to get a divorce and I went to grad school. SVA in those days gave you a studio. I looked at Yale, and I looked at Columbia, but the guys running the admissions, I could see that there was just absolutely no way they were going to tolerate a single mother, so I only applied to SVA where those women were present.

NP: Did you choose a sculpture program, or were those instructors just who you wound up with?

SM: No, those were the people I wanted. I actually thought Elizabeth Murray was there—you know how grad schools say that people are there and then they're not. And Elizabeth, it turns out, wasn't. I met her later, when we were making prints at ULAE. But those instructors were the people I wanted to study with. I learned a lot from Judy Pfaff because she was working as a sculptor who dealt with the wall in an expansive way, and she defied gravity, which is something that I've always done everything. But I was interested in her work that you could move through and around. And Ursula—you asked me about process earlier—Ursula does this kind of building and then excavating, in her work. I look to do the same thing in painting. I make something and then I usually dig into it, doubt it and destroy it in some way, not just for the sake of destruction, but to understand it better, dissect it. I don't celebrate labor for the sake of labor. I don't think that's at all interesting. But I do think there's some messing with one's own expectations that must happen. And Jackie Winsor—I admired how she took materials that were useful out in the world and made them into form.



Suzanne McClelland, *tealeaves (could would should)*, 2023. Polymer and oil on linen, 90 x 77 inches. © Suzanne McClelland. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.  
Photo: Lance Brewer.

NP: Were you painting when you were in SVA? Were you the only painter in the room?

SM: No, there were other painters there but we still had conceptual art as our foundation. A lot of people wanted to make installations. I thought that to do installation work, one should probably know something about architecture and design, and really deal with the room. I did do a big painting that ended up being an installation, because Thelma Golden invited me to do a project in the 42nd Street space that was a branch of the Whitney Museum, in 1992. It was one painting, but it ended up taking up a whole room. It was a way of using the word "right." That's a term that people use when they're trying to make something work, as they say, in a painting, but without really defining what that means. Thelma did a series of interesting exhibitions in that space, which was a big cube right across from Grand Central Station and sort of a midtown refuge. She let me work in there for a month. We did some workshops with

teenagers from family shelters. I was also working on newspapers then, and on wood. The high school kids would make something literally on the newspaper in response to it. I showed one of the projects made in the space, a grid of newspaper pages, at PS1 around then. Letters to the editor so to speak.

**NP:** That sounds like such a great project. Before we end, is there someplace we haven't gone in this conversation that you'd like to get to?

**SM:** The only thing I can maybe add—we've kind of gone in a spiral rather than a circle—is that my original thought of calling this body of work *Tea Leaves* goes back to an exhibition that I did in 1996 in LA called *Tea Leaves*, based on that article I mentioned by Alan Lightman, who says so eloquently "some of us are Now people and some Later." The question is whether we live our lives in terms of the finite. I wanted to revisit that now—some of the paintings here are from the would/should/could "Language of the Past" series. And the zeros and infinities are sort of a language of no-time. Twins of nothingness.

**NP:** I'm so glad you got back to that. Of course, now I see there was an S and an O in this *Should* painting, but I wasn't reading the whole word. I was very focused on the infinities and zeros.

**SM:** I cannot remember numbers. I don't have dyslexia with letter forms, but numbers I switch around constantly. Numbers and letters are both just inscriptions that measure time and space. Would/should/could are of the past—the roads we could have taken.

**NP:** Zero is such a transformative concept. I see you have a couple of books about mathematics on your shelves.

**SM:** I think zero was a Hindu concept, from Mesopotamian or Arabic cultures, and a little later Mayan, all really early and resisted by European cultures. I can't begin to talk about the numerical mysticisms—why certain number forms have a connection to our bodies and how we measure ourselves and the space and time we live in. I love to see how we measure space so differently.

**NP:** It is such a huge field. I think most religions have numerological elements.

**SM:** The Kabbalah, for instance. My friend the artist Ardele Lister has told me a lot about it. It's endlessly satisfying to see how in various parts of the world and throughout history people have used numbers to guide us away from our fears. Our heartbeat and breath are controllable to an extent and they have rhythm. If we lose one of them, we lose our lives on this earth.

**NP:** Or we use numbers just to make things add up, which can lead so easily to seeing conspiracies—to believing everything is connected by some occult logic. It's sinister but can feel like a kind of safety.

**SM:** Yes, there is a desire to prove things—to make them "add up." And then it never stays the same. It's always fragmented and slipping away.