

# **Somewhere Between the Subtle and the Sublime: Situating Marsia Alexander-Clarke's Moving Abstractions**

**James MacDevitt**

Though it still seems like just yesterday to me, somehow an entire decade has already elapsed since I had the honor and pleasure of curating Marsia Alexander-Clarke's thirty-five year retrospective, *Marking Time: Selected Works, 1977-2012*, at the Cerritos College Art Gallery. I'd like to think that the intense preparation required to pull off that particular exhibition, notably the long summer months personally spent with Alexander-Clarke in her home studio combing through her archives, affords me a kind of special insight into her unique artistic practice. That summer, just before her retrospective opened in the Fall of 2013, was, for me, a time of exciting and unexpected discovery, as I delved deeper than ever before into her fascinating life and practice (her youthful upbringing in coastal Chile, her early artistic career as a painter and sculptor, and her marriage to, and many travels with, her husband, Oscar Clarke, a renowned botanical scientist).

Together, we spent countless hours poring over old 35mm slides of her early works, many of which were, sadly, no longer extant, and we literally scoured her closets, pulling out a number of old pieces that had, it seemed, been largely forgotten over the years. These included a few small paintings from her apprenticeship in New York with the pioneering Abstract Expressionist Ethel Schwabacher, a large quantity of hand-built three-dimensional forms from her time on the conceptual periphery of the Land Art movement, and, of course, the distinct preliminary phases of her video art work; the more traditional, often-representational, analog video installations, followed by the mature shift into her signature multi-layered moving digital abstractions.

At the time, everything prior to her video work, despite then fifteen years of friendship, was still relatively unknown to me. I had first met Alexander-Clarke in 1999, when I myself was just a young graduate student working part-time in the Digital Studio at the UCR/California Museum of Photography in downtown Riverside. That same year, the museum exhibited her powerful piece, *S-T-R-E-T-C-H-I-N-G*, a fascinating immersive and multi-channel installation designed as an homage to a family member afflicted with a debilitating neurological disorder. Eager to explore alternate modes of production for her work, in particular the flexibility offered by the advanced digital video editing tools that were then being taught at the Digital Studio (especially Final Cut Pro), Alexander-Clarke quickly became a frequent and active participant in our regular artist and community

workshops. It was there, with the assistance of Ted Fisher, the UCR/CMP Curator of Digital Media, that she ultimately developed and mastered the techniques of cropping and layering, which she still uses to assemble her abstract video compositions to this day.

Back in 2013, many years after this initial contact, as I researched the diverse work she had produced prior to our meeting and spent additional time with the growing body of work she had been making ever since, I became more and more convinced of the inherent continuity of her practice, regardless of medium, and effectively settled on this aesthetic and conceptual parallel as the curatorial focus and organizing principal for her upcoming retrospective. There are, in fact, numerous commonalities between the seemingly divergent phases of her career - especially between the fragile geometric sculptures she created in the 1970s and 1980s and her video

abstractions of the last two decades - which I continue to believe provide essential clues towards a deeper understanding of her particular artistic vision and its unique place within the broader history of contemporary art. I would, of course, refer the reader to my in-depth curatorial essay within the retrospective's published catalogue for a fuller accounting of these formal and conceptual similarities. However, for the sake of convenience, I will try to restate the main points here.

Underlying everything, in my view, is Alexander-Clarke's sense memory of the natural world, in particular the sights and sounds of her childhood in Chile, but also her clear appreciation for botanical subjects developed from years of living and traveling with Oscar. This ecological grounding is so profound that it often shapes and colors the other artistic strategies that she commonly deploys. Take, for example, the idealized perfection of the modernist grid, another significant influence on her work, as evidenced by her repeated use of overlapping vertical and horizontal linear forms, seen in both her earlier sculptures and in her more recent video abstractions. In each case, however, instead of the inhuman precision of the machinic grid, Alexander-Clarke favors a grid that reveals, and even revels in, its organic and hand-made imperfections, first by creating woven forms from fragile materials, such as wound paper and tape, and later through the layering of linear elements in her digital videos that vanish as quickly as they emerge and which often appear to undulate internally as well (a byproduct of her close cropping of the source material - generally recorded video of botanic specimens in public gardens, but also human faces and bodies - over which she pans and zooms her camera).

It can safely be said that a sense of liveliness permeates Alexander-Clarke's artistic creations, whether two- or three-dimensional. The compositional forms and temporal

flows invoked in her video abstractions often mimic natural phenomena, from the languid progression of the moon on a windy night and the ephemera of shimmering lights in *Noche* (Night, 2007) to the violent upheaval of rain and flashes of lightning in *Lluvia* (Rain, 2008). Her early sculptural projects had a similar kind of vitality, as well; especially her *Nomadic Sculptures* (1978), *Desert Pieces* (1978), *Reverberations* (1980), and *Canto Primario* (1985), all of which were initially presented in a natural environment (for a limited audience, and sometimes just for the artist herself), only to later be relocated for display in a gallery setting. Additionally, many of these three-dimensional pieces were engineered to migrate internally as well as externally, collapsing in upon themselves to change shape and form - not unlike the *bicho* (critter) sculptures of Brazilian *neoconcreto* artist Lydia Clark - in what Alexander-Clarke has described as a shift from an “active” to a “dormant” state, recalling the familiar sleep/wake cycles of living organisms, including the nastic movements of many flowering plants.

Also reminiscent of patterns innate to biological entities, these sculptural forms were generally iterative by design, with multiple copies typically displayed together and presented as a group, like a forest of trees or a herd of animals. This practice has been carried over into Alexander-Clarke’s more recent videos as well, which literally replicate and repeat individual markings across defined trajectories and even loop whole progressions of elements; mirrored, inverted, and/or at scale. This particularly complex use of iteration, seen extensively in her newer video pieces, is likely also inspired by Alexander-Clarke’s fascination with modernist composers, such as Philip Glass and Morton Feldman, who refined a similar modular technique to generate their own distinctively repetitive soundscapes.

Astonishingly, the work Alexander-Clarke has been producing in the last decade (that is, since the time of her thirty-five year retrospective), is, if anything, the most vital, visually dense, and conceptually complex of her entire career, even as it continues to build on the same formal and thematic patterns she has been exploring throughout the totality of her practice. Her new multi-channel video installations are particularly impressive, many of which were designed to be specifically screened in two unique viewing structures she has had built in her own backyard. Funded in part through a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, these intimate spaces are ideally suited to the immersive, multi-sensory nature of her latest work. To sit in the pitch darkness of these little buildings, surrounded by a semi-circle of high-end flat-screen monitors as they ebb and flow Alexander-Clarke’s visual music of rhythmically-arranged, colorfully-illuminated patterns across their sleek surfaces is the kind of ritualistic experience that seems to transport the viewer

to an alternate, decidedly more spiritual, headspace; no wonder then that she has dubbed these structures her *Video Chapel* and *Video Cathedral*. Both buildings are appropriate forums for Alexander-Clarke's compositions, which are replete with religious associations, intentional or not: her frequent use of crossed lines, compositions resembling light passing through stain-glass windows, and even the common use of choral singing and expressive breathing sounds.

One of these new compositions, *Llamando* (Calling, 2022) unfolds like a panoramic view of a distant landscape before pulling you close to revel in its lovely vistas and verdant jungles. While certainly non-representational, these flickering abstractions still manage to somehow mimic the ephemeral sparkles of fireflies and the shimmering light of the sun as it bounces off cresting waves seen from the ocean shore. An implied horizon line occasionally cuts across the multiple video channels, serving as a ground against which forms variously are born and die, only to later be resurrected elsewhere, part of a process that Alexander-Clarke describes as her 'delayed grid.' As if to announce entry into a new phase of the piece (or a new movement, to use the common musical parlance), entire cycles of previously seen mark-making patterns (visual leitmotifs, as it were) reappear as scaled iterations of themselves within the now virtually-gridded subdivisions of the screen. At first glance, these miniature repetitions might appear reminiscent of the kind of coded infographics that frequently augment the digital interfaces of familiar applications these days; small multiples, Edward Tufte calls them. However, Alexander-Clarke's compositions have no such statistical referent and neither are they automated representations produced from the fusion of programmatic code with dynamically ingested data. Instead, each mark is placed, layered, and sequenced directly by Alexander-Clarke in *Final Cut*, a kind of emergent digital textile assembled across the implied warp and weft of the screen, in the vein of Bauhaus weavers like Gunta Stölzl and Anni Albers or later experimental wire sculptors such as Gego, Eva Hesse, and Ruth Asawa.

The mastery that Alexander-Clarke now has over her own unique linear marks is, to say the very least, remarkable. Over the years, the cropped video elements, which she uses to literally draw in space and time, have become ever smaller, to the point that they now often resemble little bolts of electricity darting across the screen (due to the darker aspects of the panned and/or zoomed video source material hiding within each line disappearing against the blackness of the screen). She has regularly described the extreme cropping technique she uses to extract and build these linear marks as akin to peeping through a keyhole, a bracketed view of the world which obscures much more than it

reveals. Reminiscent of the 'zips' used by the Abstract Expressionist painter, Barnett Newman, these almost gestural linear forms are the basic building blocks of Alexander-Clarke's visual vocabulary, the phonemes from which she creates new morphemes, the subatomic particles from which she builds new molecules, the cellular automata she nudges into action, as if executing her own idiosyncratic version of John Conway's *Game of Life*.

The effectiveness of these linear marks, despite the complexity hiding within, lies in their utter simplicity. Human beings are primed to perceive linear motion. Neural activity in the human brain (in fact, in all brains, regardless of species) has been scientifically linked to visual perception, with line direction a primary visual activator and neural stimulator. As Alexander-Clarke's linear forms weave their way into, and out of, existence, they also trigger neural activity in the mind of the viewer, neurons reflexively firing with each new linear mark on the screen. Perhaps this is why immersing oneself in Alexander-Clarke's multi-channel installations can so fundamentally alter one's very perception of time itself, elongating certain moments outside the bounds of rigidly mechanical clock time; initiating a kind of shamanic trance. Alexander-Clarke uses this magical ability to influence the phenomenological experience of the viewer in the same way that Wassily Kandinsky once analogized the use of color to influence a viewer's emotion, as an artist playing a spiritual keyboard, "touching one key or another, purposely, to cause vibrations in the soul."

Line, in Alexander-Clarke's videos operate as trajectories as well as objects. Yes, they divide space. But they can also imply movement while, for the most part, remaining completely still. Because her lines generally contain a fragmentary cropping of previously recorded source material, they can often appear to be in motion: to rotate, to elongate, and to drip; a kind of gestural *trompe-l'œil* (to fool the eye), an optical effect, as when the propeller of a plane moves so rapidly that it seems to reverse direction. In one of her newer videos, a single-channel piece titled *Escuchando* (Listening, 2021), poetically described in its title card as "a madrigal of shadows for four voices," some of the lines trickle from the top of the frame like stalactites hanging in a cave, their downward trajectory mirroring the sliding pitch of the accompanying music, a subtle combination of flute and vocalizations composed specifically for the piece by musician Stratis Minakakis.

In fact, both the literal and illusory movement of these linear markings make them well suited as sonic accent and punctuation. This is broadly apparent in Alexander-Clarke's new multi-channel suite, *Noche* (Night, 2022), where the linear trajectories, both through the internal *trompe-l'œil* of the cropped source and the iterative emergence of the delayed grid, strategically mimic the aspirational and melodious verticality of the breathy choral accompaniment and, as the tension builds towards a climax, the cacophonous crowding of the phased vocal looping as well. In an even more direct fashion, for the single-channel piece, *Horas de Noche* (Night Hours, 2019), Alexander-Clarke reconstructs, from the collaged bits and pieces of a video recording, a choral performance by the group Local Color under the direction of composer Anna Pechanec Ancheta, commissioned by the artist with lyrics taken from fragments of *Veinte Poemas de Amor y una Cancion Desesperada* (Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair, 1924) by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Unlike most of her other digital abstractions, where the original source material is obscured, here the viewer encounters a recognizable, if still partially cropped, series of close-up shots of the singers' faces, their mouths intoning melodic incantations, including “

“(

). As each new video layer fades into, and out of, view, the accompanying aural register

*De la noche*

*las grandes raíces crecen de súbito desde tu alma*

The great roots of night grow suddenly from

your soul

is also added and/or removed, each one in a slightly phased delay from the next. And yet, everything works in tandem; the panning of the camera in the original video is mirrored by the implied motion of Alexander-Clarke's delayed grid; the fragmentary views of the multiple singers slip together into a Frankenstein's monster of intersecting facial features, mirroring the stuttering harmonies of the overlapping voices. Treating these interconnected visual and sonic fragments from the original recording as singular units to be (re)arranged together, effectively allows Alexander-Clarke to assemble an especially complex form of visual music; identifiably figurative and yet structurally abstract, with

layered chromatics that overwhelm the sensorium through the simultaneous stimulation and syncopation of two distinct modes of perception (i.e. sight and sound).

This base connection between line and rhythm are, of course, integral to Alexander-Clarke's moving abstractions, even when no sound is audibly present. However, the relationship between line and color are equally essential. Many of the linear elements in her videos are themselves colorized, whereby a semi-transparent hue overlay merges with the original video source and the existing contrasting elements therein transform into the associated tints and shades. This process allows Alexander-Clarke to explore some fascinating interactions between her colorized linear markings, occasionally placing them parallel to one another in rows and sometimes overlapping them as perpendicular accents; examples of which can be seen, put to great effect, in the three-channel video *Oyendos* (Hearings, 2022). In this, and in other recent pieces, Alexander-Clarke has perfected not just the use of colorized linear elements, but also their layered interaction with an assortment of multi-colored background elements as well, including a wide range of colorful square and rectangular shapes, creating an effect variously reminiscent of Suprematist paintings and even some Hard-edge abstractions. In a similar vein, one of her latest innovations, seen in both *Oyendos* and *Escuchando*, has been the use of an alpha-channel compositing process that blends and fades colors into one other. In some notable cases, she has used this technique to literally blur the edges around these solid blocks of color, creating an effect not unlike Mark Rothko's Color Field multiforms, adding a further air of mystery to an already elusive aesthetic.

And it is this elusiveness, this sense that one is just approaching the edge of the unknowable, that may be the most consistent element of Alexander-Clarke's practice. Fragmentation of form is everywhere in her work; from the bracketed keyhole cropping of her source material; to the stuttering repetition of her markings, with elements fading into, and out of, sight; to the perpetual motion (and the radical stillness) of her compositions, which never seem to fully stabilize or coalesce. Even her accompanying sound elements are never truly revealed in their entirety; from the alternating blocks of silence and breathy whispers in *Noche* (2022); to the alphabetic transliterations that flash on the screen as the vocalists recite their lyrical mantra in *Escuchando* (es:cu:chan:do), a semi-nonsensical chant in the tradition *Karawane*, the infamous sound poem by Dadaist provocateur, Hugo Ball. In *Poetics of Relation*, the Martinique-born poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant proposes the "right to opacity," whereby the dominant Western

demand for full transparency in all things, ranging from the Enlightenment-era notions of natural

law to the scopophilia of the colonial gaze, is countered by a resistant desire for opaqueness.

Though framed as a socio-political paradigm in Glissant's work, this preference for obfuscation

is also present in the vital materialism of recent post-humanist and object-oriented ontological

philosophies, notably the concept of withdrawal and the recognition that any object must exist in

excess of all its relationships (in other words, that all matter is alive and, therefore, at its heart,

unknowable). That Alexander-Clarke intends for her work to be in dialogue with these particular

contemporary theoretical models is, of course, unlikely, but, it should be noted, that while drawn

from the recognizable models of twentieth-century modernism, her continued expansion beyond

that familiar visual vocabulary - as well as her attempts to preserve, and even surface, the sacred,

the ineffable, and the mysterious in her work - makes Alexander-Clarke one of the most inspiring

and innovative artists working today.

#### **About the Author**

*OVER/FLOW: Horror Vacui in an Age of Information Abundance, Object-Orientation: Bodies and/as Things, Architectural Deinfocement: Constructing Disaster*

*and Decay, Abstracted Visions: Information Mapping from Mystic Diagrams to Data Visualization, and Geo-Ontological: Artists Contemplating Deep Time*



of Meta/Data,” was featured in the catalogue for *MetaDataPhile: The Collapse of Visual Information Algorithmic Culture: How Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Are Transforming Everyday Life*.

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MacDevitt has curated numerous exhibitions for the Cerritos College Art Gallery, including

. His essay, “The User-Archivist and Collective (In)Voluntary Memory: Read/Writing the Networked

Digital Archive,” was included in *Revisualizing Visual Culture*, and his essay, “The Ties That Un/Bind: On the Enigmatic Appeal

Begovich Gallery. His chapter “Generative Adversarial Networks: Contemporary Art and/as Algorithm” appears in the academic

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