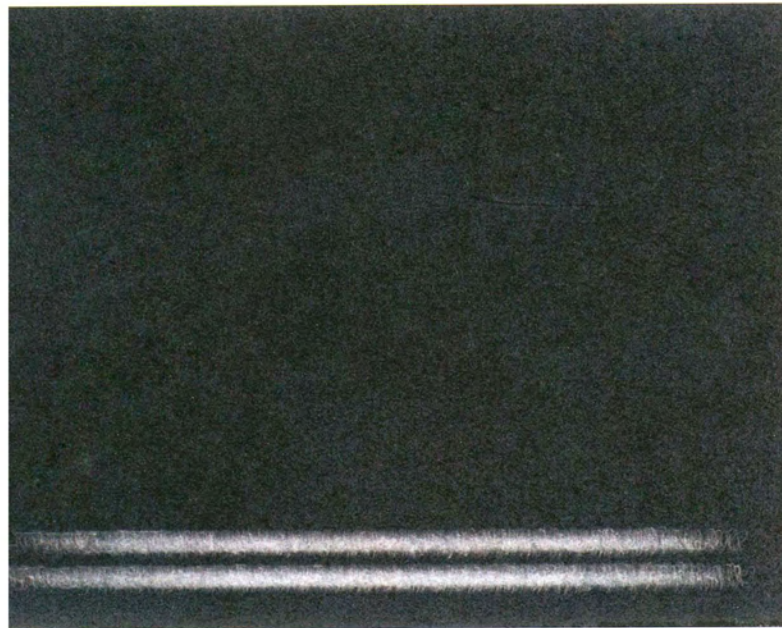


how it was done / Reena Jana

Found in Translation

Stefana McClure's subtle abstract drawings spring from an unlikely source: subtitles



Stefana McClure has the international background that requires her to be highly attuned to subtle cultural differences. She grew up in Northern Ireland, lived in Japan for more than a decade, and currently resides in New York City. Seven years ago, while still living in Japan, she grew fascinated by Japanese subtitles in English-language movies. What she was seeing on television was that subtitles weren't necessarily direct translations, but instead were edited to reflect a type of behavior that was more "Japanese" than "Western."

"I could hear American or European characters speaking very confidently or directly," she says, "but the subtitles would be written using indefinite terms. It was as if their behavior was edited to reflect Japanese personalities. For example, someone would use words like 'maybe' and 'perhaps' in the Japanese subtitles, but not be speaking

them." The discrepancy intrigued her.

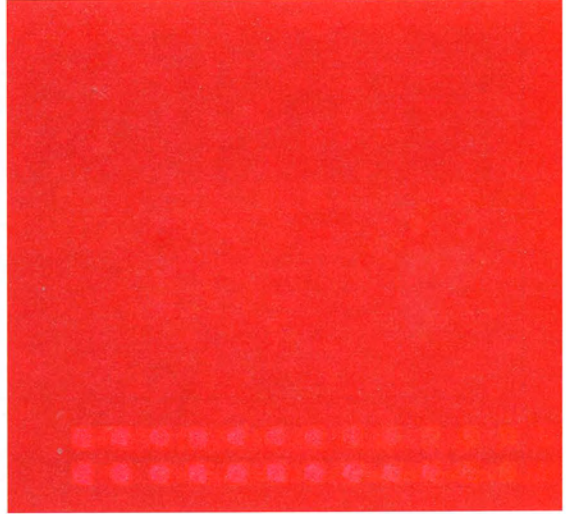
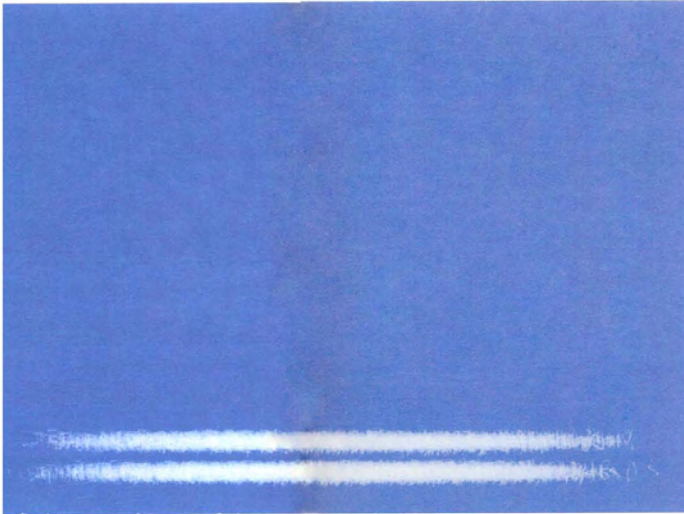
McClure started to pay attention to the overall rhythms of the subtitles and decided to translate the words and phrases into marks or lines that she would layer to form compositions. The first drawings she made were from English-language movies with Japanese subtitles. She then experimented with the same movies with English subtitles or closed captions. "I can tell when watching a movie how it will work out. I choose movies I really like, because I have to spend three weeks with each one," she says. She knows, for instance, that intertitles from silent Japanese movies produce a certain minimalistic and symmetrical effect. And she'll often watch a film on different sized monitors because a wide screen will produce a different effect than one on a mini DVD player, even if it's the same movie.

She begins her "films into paper," as she calls them, simply by watching a DVD on

Far Left: Stefana McClure, *The Mirror*, graphite transfer paper mounted on rag (8 x 9 1/2 in.), 2004. All images courtesy Josée Bienvenu Gallery, New York

Below: *Helen of Troy*, blue transfer paper mounted on rag (18 1/4 x 27 in.), 2004

Right: *Tokyo-ga*, 2003, wax transfer paper mounted on rag, (8 1/4 x 9 1/2 in.), 2003



a monitor. She pauses each time a subtitle pops up, and then transcribes it by hand, maintaining the typos. Then, she records the distance between the subtitle and bottom of the monitor's screen, as well as the subtitle's font size, the kerning, how a phrase breaks when it continues on a second line. "Formally, it's important that these are exactly as they appear on screen," she says. Otherwise, the translation, or transposition, will not be accurate.

The next step is typing text into a computer word-processing program, creating a different page for each subtitle. After printing out the document on standard white paper, she draws a line under each subtitle to record the distance between it and the bottom of the screen, and then uses the line as a register to align the many sheets. Where and how the subtitles appear on the screen will have an enormous effect on the final artwork, so she will often

watch a film on different monitors of varying sizes. "A film-into-paper that I make from a film viewed on a widescreen monitor will look very different from one I see on a mini DVD player, even if it's the same movie," she says.

McClure then hand-copies the text from the regular paper onto the top surface of Japanese wax transfer paper—employed, like carbon paper, to create words or images by pressing it against a sheet of paper and writing or drawing on top of it. When writing she uses a variety of tools, ranging from a fine-tipped mechanical pencil to a large stylus. She layers the *entire* text of a film to achieve elegant patterns and carefully measures to ensure that the distance between the subtitle and the bottom of the paper is maintained. Traditionally, the waxy surface is transposed onto regular paper, and the transfer paper is discarded. But McClure

throws out the white paper instead, and the transfer paper (with the layers of letters removed) is preserved as the final work. "I write carefully over each layer," McClure says. "I'm technically removing information from the transfer paper, but it becomes my base. I'm using transfer paper the other way around from how it is intended to be used." She prefers the General brand of wax-transfer paper, a common type of transfer paper found in stationery-supply stores in Japan. Although she first started with A4 sheets (a European standard letter size), she now purchases wider rolls directly from General. She likes this brand best because it is "very richly pigmented and it holds so much information."

McClure won't reject a damaged roll of transfer paper, though. "They're great for certain movies," she says. For instance, she decided to use, rather than throw out, a

dinged-up supply of Saral paper to make a drawing based on the subtitles for the 1934 film *Man of Aran*, starring Robert Flaherty. Set on the island of Aran, off Ireland's northwest coast, the atmospheric early movie features dramatic landscapes. "There's lots of wind and rain, and the plot involves people getting swept out to sea," McClure says. "So the scratched texture evoked the weather and the fact that it was an old film."

Sometimes, however, McClure uses a light blue or pink American water-based transfer paper from Saral, or a higher-end, graphite-colored type from Sally's. But she prefers the more dramatic effects of the Japanese brand. "The colors of Saral or Sally's are great, but they don't hold as much information," she says. Regardless of which papers she uses, the results are the same: mysterious, ethereal drawings.