

Renee Gladman: *Narrative of Magnitude*

by Cassie Packard



Installation view: Renee Gladman: *Narratives of Magnitude*, Artists Space, New York, 2023. Photo: Filip Wolak. Image courtesy Artists Space, New York.

Sentence diagrams were a regular exercise in my childhood education. Confronted with a sentence, we were tasked with breaking it down to its constituent units—subject, verb, object—and arranging them along a line like little shipping containers, from which prepositions and adverbs dangled. While these schematics were instructive as spatial visualizations of language’s incredible modularity, their neat, comprehensible logic belied the infinite weirdness of a lived experience of language. Language, a protean and embodied thing, is more like a place we go—a secret city within a city, where the maps keep changing—and the way we move through it, the people we meet there, and the people we are when we meet them, the shared air we breathe there. How might one chart something as boundless and strange as that?

Since 2006, experimental poet-novelist Renee Gladman has been making drawings, often characterized by diagrammatic or architectural elements, that tap into language’s rich capaciousness. Gladman garnered acclaim for her *Ravicka* novels (2010–17), fictions in which bodies move through a shifting city-state with its own language. In 2017, she published *Prose Architectures*, a book that similarly built worlds through lines—only, these were skittering asemic lines that hovered between writing and drawing. “This is language with its skin pulled back,” explained Gladman in the book’s introduction. “This was an inner syntax we were seeing; maps or diagrams of the way the mind goes, how thoughts form or approach language, perhaps how imagination reaches into language.”¹ This book was followed by *One Long Black Sentence* (2020), in which white tangles unfurl across black paper—what theorist Fred Moten called “the blackground: that nonrepresentational capacity that lets all representation take place”²—and *Plans for Sentences* (2022), an ekphrastic *mise en abyme* of words and drawings that seem to produce one another.



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Moving from working on the page to making works on paper, Gladman is beginning to scale up her drawings and present them in gallery contexts. Her first New York solo show, *Narratives of Magnitude*, features twenty-five new and recent wall-mounted works on paper. Throughout, her electric scrawl—executed in writerly graphite on white grounds, and bright white pigment on black ones—simulates sentences that double, with varying degrees of explicitness, as architectures and cityscapes. Made on an oversized black sheet, *Untitled (black city)* (2022) intersperses white lines with geometric shapes rendered in colorful oil pastel. The pale scribbles form thickets of illegible text, mysterious mathematical equations, and strange urban skylines made of teetering towers and floating ladders. Akin to Gladman's novels, which are also composed of "lines," these drawn lines produce a city made of language, where thought takes the form of architecture.

Other works more closely resemble the written page. *Their Sleep* (2022) features repeated lines of intricately glitched white handwriting that form a paragraphic block on a black sheet. What is already inscrutable to us is concealed further: small sections of "text" are whited out with gouache, evoking secrets, mistakes, or changes of course. *Their Sleep* recalls the work of Henri Michaux (1899-1984), a Belgian-French poet-turned-artist who painted asemic calligraphy likewise located at the threshold of text and image. At the same time, Gladman's embrace of opacity and illegibility, as well as the improvisational and choreographic qualities of her idiosyncratic line, situate her project within the Black radical tradition. Among contemporary artists working in this mode, there is a rich dialogue between Gladman's language-drawings and painted glyphs by Steffani Jemison, who told *Artforum* in 2019 that she was "looking for a route to drawing, and a route to writing, that does not pass through any masters at all, old or otherwise."³

Gladman, whom Moten observed takes "notation itself [as] aesthetic material,"⁴ integrates explorations of writing with considerations of other notational systems. *Slowly We Have the Feeling: Scores* (2019-22) is a grid of nine pastel and pigment drawings on black paper, which pair white diagrammatic markings with soft streaks of color. Gladman's abstract "scores" allude to musical and dance notation, with marks that act as potential vectors of sound and motion. In one image, white arrows push open an acute angle that abuts lush strata of purple, pink, and brown; in another, lines that evoke musical bars or lined writing paper, awash with color, rest atop a fulcrum. These pictures hum with possibilities for movement, expansion, contraction, and other forms of transformation.



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An orientation toward not only potentiality but also futurity manifests in drawings like *Untitled (space station space cloud)* (2020–22) and *Untitled (moon math)* (2022), in which circles become moons and planets amid scribbles that suggest complex physics equations and space stations constructed from language-like loops. Gladman’s worldbuilding—which in these instances seems to be in dialogue with Afrofuturism—is not outrightly utopic, but it is robustly propositional. Even in those works without a spacecraft in sight, her rethinking of symbolic systems is a way of rethinking the world.

1. Renee Gladman, “Introduction: Writing Drawing, Drawn Writings,” in *Prose Architectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017).
2. Fred Moten, “Anindex,” in Renee Gladman, *One Long Black Sentence* (Ithaca: Image Text Ithaca Press, 2020).
3. Steffani Jemison, “Drafts: Steffani Jemison on the Stroke, the Glyph, and the Mark,” *Artforum*, April 2019.
4. Moten, “Afterword” in Renee Gladman, *Prose Architectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017).