

ArtSeen

Dona Nelson: *Stretchers Strung Out On Space*

By [Hearne Pardee](#)



Dona Nelson, *Rain Woman*, 2020. Canvas collage, acrylic, and acrylic mediums on linen, 81 1/2 x 36 x 5 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben, New York.

At a time when paintings are projected on walls or traded as digital tokens, Dona Nelson continues to engage viewers in close interaction with painting's materials: fabric, liquid, and wooden supports. Often free-standing and worked on both sides, the eight works in *Stretchers Strung Out On Space* apply Nelson's signature techniques of pouring, stitching and collaging to the observation of live models, pursuing what David Park called the "sting" of lived experience. Just as her off-beat title complicates our conventional consumption of language, Nelson dispenses with the conventional trope of painting as window and encourages us to move around and look; the works reveal how simple reversals of front and back involve visual memory and implicit assumptions about our position in space. Her endlessly inventive use of materials endows painting's narrative tradition with fresh psychological depth and intersubjective complexity.

As in her previous paintings, allusions to seasons and weather anchor the free-standing works in transient, tactile experiences of time and landscape. Nelson exploits the rawness of Abstract Expressionism but broadens its focus, embracing, as she puts it, "all of Pollock"—including the late works with their landscape and figural imagery. Uninterested in purity, she both invokes and undercuts the optical skin of modernist abstraction. The stained radiance of *Early September* (2020) includes exuberant, gestural marks created by tearing off swaths of resin-soaked cheesecloth, set over a precisely ruled grid punctuated by deliberately hand-painted dots. She allows real light from a window to expose the striated weave of her inexpensive canvas in *WOOD* (2020). The punning title, a bit of *poésie concrète*, combines "WOO," the exuberance of the poured gesture, with "d", the mundane phonetic boundary of its wooden support. Nelson often embellishes the poured stains with colored string, whose stitching suggests precision, even though it's applied in collaboration with an assistant on the opposite side to introduce randomness into the process. Along the contour to *WOOD*'s pour, the stitching suggests Cézanne's transparent shadows, lending an effect of low relief. Elsewhere, the stitching loosely follows a pencilled grid, further referencing the "box" of the support and evoking the hand-made minimalism of Eva Hesse.



Dona Nelson, *Early September*, 2020. Acrylic and acrylic mediums on canvas, 83 x 78 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben, New York.

Rain Woman (2020), a free-standing figure, exploits its two faces to expand conventions of depiction. On one side, a crisply folded, striped piece of canvas provides a handmade “coat” for a woman with a loosely stitched face and foamy, acrylic hair, while on the other, traces of the image compete with irregular patches of raw linen, scars left by torn cheesecloth, and puddles of shiny, bright-colored impasto. This figural landscape with psychological overtones of Clyfford Still includes “rain” in the form of diagonal lines of metallic paint.

Three wall pieces, which arise when Nelson favors one side of a painting and covers the other in muslin, still preserve the physical depth of the free-standing works and extend their process of doubling. *Conversation* (2020), juxtaposes two large sections excised from other paintings, animating a dialogue of churning cheesecloth draperies. Nelson cuts away sections of the face to expose the stretchers and surfaces within, where traces of staining hint at hidden images.

The presence of live models, however, calls forth more formal restraint. The tightly framed pair of figures in *Riley and Olive* (2020), rendered in delicate but roughly exposed stitching, assume the monumentality of an Attic relief, even if their uneasy, partial overlapping, and the sense that a figure is standing on one side and seated on the other, introduce instability. But if this suggestion of movement harks back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1766), a treatise on actions frozen in time, Nelson sets *Riley and Olive*—in her lone concession to technology—on an automated, rotating base. As if reacting to our efforts to compare verso and recto, and to meet the eyes of the figures’ averted gazes, the canvas turns, engaging us in a dance.



Dona Nelson, *Studio Portrait over Time*, 2016. Cheesecloth, muslin, painted string, and acrylic mediums on linen, 81 x 36 x 5 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben, New York.

This dance externalizes the recursive, introspective process underlying Nelson's two-sided works, which goes back to her rubbings of the early 2000s. *Studio Portrait Over Time* (2016), the earliest and most complicated piece in the show, recalls that intimate, tactile involvement with images. Here, she angles two two-sided figure paintings close together on a shared base, creating a narrow interior space, across which images interact. Seated and standing figures, rendered in collage and stitching, extend the infolding by suggesting deeper spaces beyond, where a smaller figure sits beneath a rectangular frame that might be a painting. Unlike the gesturing figures of the wall works, these are mute, stationary presences, like the figures posed with sculptures in Giacometti's studio interiors. Given Nelson's deep roots in American art, a better comparison might be to the inscrutable figures of Edward Hopper. With her playful deployment of intersubjective spaces, Nelson nudges her figures, and us, into social engagement with the world at large with no political or narrative subtext other than the moral injunction to look.

Contributor

Hearne Pardee

Hearne Pardee is an artist and writer based in New York and California, where he teaches at the University of California, Davis.