

As the show progresses, the central confrontation that emerges is less between black and white than between political art and the absent narrative of a hermetic modernism. Philip Guston, who left behind Abstract Expressionism for imagery like that in *City Limits* (1969)—which shows a trio of KKK-style hooded men in a car—emblemizes the irruption of social content within establishment art. Displayed near Guston's work are Norman W. Lewis's *Double Cross* (1971) and Sam Gilliam's *Red April* (1970), two ostensibly abstract paintings whose titles and surfaces challenge the neutrality of seemingly nonreferential forms. The Warholian indifference characteristic of much Pop art is similarly subjected to subversion, with Joe Overstreet transforming Aunt Jemima into a machine-gun-wielding militant, Robert Indiana dubbing Alabama the "hind part" of the USA in a text-based painting and Faith Ringgold weaving a racial threat into an image of the American flag.

A section called "Sisterhood" contains works by female artists such as Emma Amos and Yoko Ono as well as painter Bob Thompson's *Homage to Nina Simone* (1965), a Fauve-like riff on Poussin. The soul singer also appears in an adjoining screening room, where a rousing film shows her performing her politically charged "Mississippi Goddam."

Other affecting works in the exhibition include an Allan D'Arcangelo assemblage about the John F. Kennedy assassination, a piece by Betye Saar that lays bare the perversity of racist tchotchkes and a painting by May Stevens in which her racist father is stripped of both clothing and paternal authority. Barkley L. Hendricks's *Icon for My Man Superman* (*Superman never saved any black people—Bobby Seale*), 1969, depicts Black Panther cofounder Bobby Seale against a metallic silver background, referencing Eastern Orthodox icon painting. The work calls to mind the paintings of contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley (one of which is displayed in the museum's lobby), although the latter seem derivative and complacent by comparison.

Regrettably, the exhibition does not adequately explore the theme of economic inequality—a focus not only of the Panthers but also of King and many of his contemporaries. The same would appear to hold true for the Brooklyn Museum's ongoing "Activism Season" as a whole, which has highlighted liberal causes while skirting the source of the nation's most significant protests today.

—David Markus

## DONA NELSON Thomas Erben

Dona Nelson pushes her paintings hard. They're doused in thinned acrylics, splattered with goeey tar gel medium, festooned with wads and strips of cheesecloth (that are sometimes then ripped off) and, occasionally, stabbed with ice picks. She's even invented a solution for a problem we didn't know existed for the medium: how to make paintings so that they can be seen from all sides without losing the flatness of the image.

Nelson cites Pollock's late paintings and Miró's anti-paintings as inspiration, and like the efforts of Pollock and Miró, her wrestling with the medium brings up its dark side. Acknowledging a violent impulse in the making, she flirts with painting's destruction yet expands its definition ever further. Paintings have been installed freestanding before (e.g., the Nicolas Poussin at Philip Johnson's Glass House, or all those double-sided Renaissance panels), but the double-sided freestanding format has become Nelson's trademark as surely as the squeegee is Gerhard Richter's or the curved stretcher Elizabeth Murray's.

Of the eight paintings in the show, five are two-sided. These all begin with a thin stain tracing the crossbar and stretcher grids on the back. The largest, *Phigor* (2014), at 117 by 70 inches, was suspended a few inches above the floor on a metal stand and pushed out a couple of feet from the wall by two black tubes that attached to the stretcher near its top. The white crossbars, two vertical and four horizontal, partially obscure the exuberant dark splashes on the back of the canvas. Controlled pours on the front cover most of the red-stained crossbar grid, and resolve into a central, ghostly, blue-and-ocher shape that is pushed into place by a white veil wrapping around the edges of the painting. The front surface is crusted with dried residue of bubbles and smears of medium.

In *March Hare* (2014), the most all-over composition in the show, a blue tic-tac-toe grid is faintly visible on both sides. As with two other freestanding paintings, Nelson has removed the crossbars so that both sides can be seen unobscured. The trail of viscous tar gel on the front records where cheesecloth was applied and, once dry, scraped off. The resulting zig-zag web keeps the composition from settling into a clear shape. In *Top* (2014), pigment-rich opaque pours float like contiguous countries (separated by walls of thick medium) on top of the stained forest-colored surface—a nod, perhaps, to Miró's shapes as much as to aerial views of land. The clashing materials—earth-hued stains, translucent tar gel borders and plasticky, artificial-colored spills—shock with their utter incompatibility, as surprising as the small holes that punctuate *Orangey* (2011).

Nelson has long been known as a painter's painter, and the risks she takes with her work have had enormous



View of Dona Nelson's exhibition "Phigor," showing (left to right) *Orangey*, 2011, *Red and Green Noses*, 2013, and *March Hare*, 2014; at Thomas Erben.



influence among the many young painters whose renewed interest in unorthodox processes has been so prominent in the last five to 10 years. There is no overarching explanation for why each painting here compels the viewer's attention. Often the works' very brazenness is hard to look away from. Nelson's commitment to trying anything, and her openness to wildly unexpected definitions of how a painting might "succeed," makes her work a model of a form of art-making that demands much of its audience. At a moment when we are faced with unprecedented challenges, both ecological and social, Nelson's work provides a resonant example of how radical experimentation can be combined with rigorous process to redefine our sense of what's possible.

—Julian Kreimer

## KELLEY WALKER

### Paula Cooper

Kelley Walker is no stranger to the perversities of advertising. One of his earlier subjects was the notorious 1995 Benetton ad that hawked its goods via a reproduction of an airline crash, another a 1974 Pioneer stereo ad featuring the master ad man, Andy Warhol. In two recent series using Volkswagen Beetle ads from 1950 to 1970, Walker exploits the brilliant graphics of a redemptive campaign, deepening his decade-long reflection on the implications of printed matter. More than sharp design and good engineering, it was brilliant advertising that allowed the Beetle to shed its Nazi-tainted past and become the friendly "people's car" beloved of the entire earth.

At Paula Cooper, Walker installed on three walls a single untitled piece (2013) consisting of 196 MDF panels silkscreened with full- and double-page VW ads, flipped, rotated and folded. Occasional snippets of backward texts and curled-back pages clue us in to reversals. Of two sizes (16 or 24 inches square), and printed in both Pantone and CMYK printers' colors, the panels are perforated with holes that toy with flatness and materiality while choreographing a playful visual dance across the entire installation. The "Bug" appears in a range of settings, in close-up or on snowy country roads and city streets, only to have its curved profile cut off by actual holes. The panels were installed irregularly, with larger and smaller gaps between; together, the gaps and holes echo the blank spaces that Walker has elsewhere built into his work as a (modernist) trope of resistance and negation. Pushing the ad further, he deployed the digital imaging program Rhino in a series of aluminum sculptures displayed on a tabletop ("Bug," 2014). This time the ads are screened onto both sides—indistinguishable due to the torquing—of hole-perforated aluminum sheets, which twist and curl as paper might in a fire. Yet they remain silvery and cool, their conceptual tricks and paradoxes beguiling.

Still handsome but edging into pretentiousness was "Pioneer PL-518 Series (TVRY)," 2014. Interleaving images of vinyl records and their covers, Walker printed them onto 24-inch-square MVP panels that were then laid flat and



Detail of Kelley Walker's untitled suite of 196 panels, 2013, Pantone and four-color process silkscreen with acrylic ink on MDF, 167 panels: 16 inches square, 29 panels: 24 inches square; at Paula Cooper.

raised slightly above 2-foot-tall pedestals. The records are reproduced to scale, and indeed the floating panels feel a little like turntables. From Kraftwerk to Little Richard and Edgard Varèse, the album choices are just too, too hip. You feel like you've landed at a party with a show-off dee-jay hogging the mix; Walker is nothing if not conscious of image.

At the other end of the scale—from rigorous control to engineered accident—a large group of rectangular, wall-hung works consisted of actual, superimposed screens of Walker's many leftover projects stretched on aluminum or wood frames. Aptly, the series is titled "Screen to Screen 30x40," since the ground itself is always a screen, its layered imagery an abstract muddle in which vignettes of Walker's works float into visibility like the prognostications of a Magic 8 Ball—here a Beetle wheel, there a record. In this series one feels vividly the presence of Rauschenberg and Warhol—the former in the look of the work, and the latter quite literally, since among the image scraps is the Pioneer stereo ad. Is the series a catharsis of sorts? If so, Walker updates the timeworn practice of plate cancellation, spinning it into his ongoing meditation on image recycling and dissemination. Here, though, the recycling exhausts itself, and dissemination is stopped dead in its tracks.

—Faye Hirsch

## FRED LONIDIER

### Essex Street

The motto "an injury to one is an injury to all" has been used by the Industrial Workers of the World since the early 1900s. It also seems to underpin San Diego-based artist and union activist Fred Lonidier's seminal work *The Health and Safety Game* (1976/78). Composed of 26 wall panels and a 20-minute black-and-white video, the installation elaborates upon the job-related medical conditions of workers in various fields. Specifically, it outlines the bureaucratic barbed wire that these laborers—who are portrayed anonymously, identified solely by