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Shared Spaces: Dona Nelson Brings Back The Figure

by Hearne Pardee

Dona Nelson: *models stand close to the paintings* at Thomas Erben Gallery

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West 26th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, thomaserben.com



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Dona Nelson's new works excite not just with their vigorous improvisation and inventive use of materials but with a new interactivity among the paintings themselves. After deconstructing conventional painting with her two-sided, free-standing canvases, Nelson has pursued an investigation of painting as a material surface, as a subject in its own right. Previously, she has compared her two-sided paintings to figures, because of their assertion of presence in the gallery. Now, by literally depicting figures in her new works, she re-emphasizes their participation in an interplay of posing and composing that integrates painting into everyday life. The exhibition's title refers not to the models she depicts but to the fashion models photographed in front of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings in a famous 1951 spread from *Vogue*, which in retrospect prefigures art's shift away from painting, from the individual work to the interactive space of the gallery. As Nelson revisits that moment of tension, her new works stubbornly resist any reduction to decorative backdrops.

In the 1950s, Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica sought to make paintings more participatory by setting them apart from the wall as free-standing or hanging objects, which later grew into containers viewers could enter – not too different from the combined, free-standing panels of Nelson's new work. While Oiticica used solid, monochrome panels, Nelson employs a material vernacular all her own: poured paint and gels, cheesecloth collage, and stitching with colored strings, all set within a formal syntax that exploits the interaction of front and back. Her works operate like cell membranes; stains permeate them, but with strong distinctions of inside and out, as in *Lavender Lion* (2016), where improvisatory pourings of green and purple seep through into a cheese-cloth reinforced grid on the opposite side. Across from it, *Hägar* (2017), mounted on the wall, echoes its grid and sustains the dialogue between structure and random process. Its squares of fabric are filled with stitches of colored strings that hang out the back and down the wall behind it, suggesting a hidden interior. Alluding to the cartoon character Hagar the Horrible, it recalls the anthropomorphic objects of Eva Hesse and the deconstructed paintings of other post-minimalists like Alvin Loving and Alan Shields.

Nelson herself begins her works from models in the yard outside her studio, on large, vertical panels, which offer an architectural frame for the figure. Standing figures in *Platform* (2017) are directly identified with their vertical panels, like archaic architectural reliefs, solidly anchored in the interactive gallery space. The more crisply detailed seated figures seem directly observed, like *Autumn Andrew* (2016), or the man with sunglasses in *Passengers* (2016), as does the delicately shaded bearded figure who emerges behind them in both panels. Softer forms, recalling Claes Oldenburg's early work, take over in further iterations of these figures on other panels: in the parallel walls of *Passengers*, the seated figure recurs, once abstracted in colored shapes and again freely formed from gel-infused cheesecloth, set across from a standing figure made from sheets of fabric. Combined in pairs, the works offer no overall view but rather a cinematic montage. Nelson generates the sort of casual interactivity and distracted attention we encounter on our daily commutes. She immerses herself as well, painting her model in *Passengers* from within the narrow corridor between the two canvases, like a contemporary cave painter.



Dona Nelson, *Passengers*, 2016. Collage, dyed cheesecloth, muslin, and acrylic mediums on linen panel mounted on plywood base, 81.5 x 36 inches. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Confined like her within our frontally oriented heads, we navigate around the paintings, trying to remember images from the opposite sides.

Nelson includes an early painting, *Cold Busy Street* (1984), to recall her earlier work from the figure; its densely compressed, erratically cropped fragments prefigure the abrupt juxtapositions of the new work. Although *Autumn Andrew* (2016) might recall *American Gothic*, Nelson is more indebted to Bonnard's eccentric compositions, and to the early influence of abstract painter Myron Stout's tautly balanced positive and negative shapes, than to Grant Wood's frontal rigidity. Nonetheless, her emphasis on materials partakes of a stolid, Midwestern pragmatism that does indeed connect with Wood. The seated figure actually derives from another early influence, Cézanne's full-scale portrait of his father reading the newspaper. This recalcitrant work, built out of thickly applied paint and depicting the man who opposed Cézanne's study of art, represents the sort of primitive realism that defines Nelson's modernist stance. Cézanne's father reappears, quoted more specifically in distant views, in *By the Yard* (2016), a more pictorial composition in which stitched strings portray tree branches, and the portrait's material density also seems to inform that of the monumental standing woman in *Mountain Passengers* (2017). Although probably painted from life, the figure in profile might nonetheless serve as an image of the artist herself, inserted into the everyday context in a spirit of participation in the gallery experience. Dona Nelson came to New York City fifty years ago; as the only woman in the Whitney Program, she learned early on to take a broad perspective and cultivate an independent path, and she continues to inspire reflection on painting's long history with walls.



Dona Nelson, *Autumn Andrew*, 2016. Collage, dyed cheesecloth, muslin, and acrylic mediums on linen panel mounted on plywood base, 81.5 x 36 inches. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery