

Dona Nelson

THOMAS ERBEN

In an interview twenty years ago, Dona Nelson praised the messiness of late Picasso, describing it as evidence of a “total confidence” that allowed him to do whatever without self-questioning, without looking back. And then she went on to point out that “[Sigmar] Polke has that kind of confidence.” Even before I’d read that old interview, the affinity between Nelson and Polke, one very American and the other *sehr deutsch*, was nonetheless patent. Granted, Nelson lacks Polke’s reach, but both artists tend to throw all caution to the wind in a way that can sometimes induce something close to pure exhilaration. How often is it, really, that you come across a painting that makes you suspect that the person who made it really didn’t give a damn about how it would look? Nelson sometimes goes beyond the merely funky to plumb the depths of the truly gnarly. She delights in textures that grate—for instance, the mess of curdled cheesecloth that tangles up the cheery colors of *Orangey*, 2013, and the pocks of matter strewn across its surface like pimples; or the nastily congealed, hard, and shiny floes of opaque color that float atop the stained-in browns and greens of *Top*, 2014.

Also Polke-esque is Nelson’s use of both sides of a painting. In 1989, the German artist showed a group of freestanding, two-sided paintings at Mary Boone Gallery (none of them are included in his current retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York); five of the eight paintings that were on view in Nelson’s show are similarly bilateral (as are the two she showed in this year’s Whitney Biennial). The presentation’s odd title, “Phigor,” might be an indirect allusion to this: It’s not a word, but this sequence of letters does appear in the midst of the word *amphigory*, which means a piece of rigmarole or nonsense and contains the prefix *amphi-*, to which *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* gives the meanings “both, of both kinds, on both sides, about, around.” But whereas Polke’s duplex paintings were made on translucent material

so that one could see from either side what he had done on the other, Nelson’s are on canvas: Her paint has seeped or been pushed through from one side to the other, but the eye can’t pass through the same membrane. The paintings often seem to promise more information than they really give—they’re tricky that way. For instance, *Phigor*, 2014,



View of “Dona Nelson,” 2014.

is on a canvas with a grid of crossbars on its verso, and the grid is reflected in paint on its front. But the similar stained grids that traverse *Red and Green Noses*, 2013, *March Hare*, 2014, and *Orangey* are false clues to what’s on the other side—there are no corresponding crossbars—whereas *Division Street*, 2013, does have crossbars, but there is little trace of them from the front.

In the 1994 interview, Nelson spoke of how touch is more important to her working process than sight. “My hands are leading me as if I’m blind. I feel that the room is dark while I’m painting.” These days, the double-sidedness of her paintings seems to be a way of upping the ante on her game of blindness. “Soaking paint through the canvas,” she explained in a self-interview this past March, “the painting on the back comes into existence without my seeing it.” Each side of the painting functions as something like a picture of the other side, which one cannot see simultaneously—and the picture always contains both truth and falsehood. She adds, “It’s alarming to me that people look at pictures of cornfields as if the pictures are informative, when the pictures have nothing in common with cornfields at all!” No more than one side of a painting has in common with its reverse, probably.

—Barry Schwabsky