

ARTslant **New York**

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'rak'rüm (noun);
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Dona Nelson



Dona Nelson, *April*,
2008, cheesecloth and acrylic medium on canvas, 90x60 in
© Courtesy of the Artist and Thomas Erben, NY

Dona Nelson moved to New York City in 1968, after having received her B.F.A. from Ohio State University and attending the Whitney Independent Study Program in her senior year as an undergraduate. Deeply rooted in Abstract Expressionism, Nelson actually came to attention in the 1980's for large-scale figurative work. Overall, her practice has been characterized by a refusal to play it safe - she const...[\[more\]](#)





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Interview with Dona Nelson

New York - Don't give Dona Nelson a razor blade. She might turn it against her own paintings, and that wouldn't be good for business. Nelson's paintings can not be easily classified. Her approach is a constant exploration of her medium - fearlessly pushing paint in ways that would make a mom blush. ArtSlant's writer, Elana Rubinfeld, recently had the opportunity to interview Dona about her current show at the **Thomas Erben Gallery** (on view from April 24 - May 31, 2008). They spoke about how artists shouldn't talk about their work, annoying music, and getting in the ring with Jackson Pollock.

Elana Rubinfeld: You started working in black and white in the 1970's, and now work in a variety of milky tones and neon hues. Can you tell us about your relationship with color through the years?

Dona Nelson: I feel like I don't know anything about color that I can talk about. To me, color is like going out in to the backyard and putting my shovel into the ground. Also, I didn't only paint in black in white in the 1970's. I also worked in color back then. It's just that I actually I had a lot of big paintings in the 1970's, and I've moved so much in my life - I've had about 40 different studios. It's been hard for me to carry my paintings around. I've tended to destroy them instead. I've destroyed decades of work. I liked to destroy a painting when I was younger because I was able to clean out my studio and I was able to go to another place with my art. Just jump, you know? I believe in that. That you can really jump your work. That you don't have to stay with certain talent or intelligence, but you can actually use your work to change as a human being - change your whole identity. I'm kind of an artist for myself, and for my life, and that's it! (laughing). My destroying days are hopefully over. It's a new policy.

ER: Who or what influenced you to start painting?

DN: When I was in second grade, my mother took an art class. I loved her little wooden art box with rows of heavy tubes of oil paint. I would take the tubes out of the box, take the caps off, and smell the paint. I liked it much better than crayons. From then on, I was a painter. I've been painting seriously since I was 11. I used to enter the state fair contests where I lived. I grew up in Ohio, and I'm originally from Nebraska, but that was Indiana where my mother took art classes. Sometimes I would just tag along with her, and her artbox was my main interest. The paints at the time were made in Cincinnati, and they were called Permanent Pigments. They had a lot of pigment in them and they were very heavy tubes. I still remember the weight of the tubes. My mother was a Sunday painter, and we took art classes together at our church. She continued to take adult education classes. Some teacher told her that "if you can't do anything better than that, then you should stop painting," which is outrageous! She would make these characters out of her imagination at that time, and the teacher was probably a bitter old modernist. So she quit painting, and later on in life I would say, "Mom. I'm an actual artist, and I think you're really good!" But you know, it's funny, I was telling that story to a student of mine recently. He's very honest. He's from Egypt, and I like him a lot. He said, "She probably didn't like your paintings, Dona." I thought his answer was great.

ER: Your current exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery is a survey of your paintings from the early 1970's through the present, and reflects various styles of painting and material use. What makes you shift your approach?

DN: When I'm working well, without distractions, the paintings kind of make themselves. Why would they all be the same when life is full of such a variety of experience? My paintings are not separate from my life. This show is a very small survey. I have some really very large paintings that wouldn't fit in the gallery. People say that the paintings on view are different, but I think there is something very similar in everything (walking over to paintings). Except for this one (points to *The Palmist Reveals the Future of Painting*). They're all an identification with the canvas and the body. I feel like Abstract Expressionism, you know, they like their canvases very big to address the body experience. But I do think that in a certain way that sight - what you see - is what you see with the body. I feel like all these paintings have that in common.

ER: A 2006 *Art in America* review of your exhibition "*Brain Stain*" said that you're "one of the very few painters with the fortitude to confront Pollock head-on." Could you take him on?

DN: (Laughing) Well, I think the man who wrote that review may not be that familiar with my work. I don't feel like I have that much in common with Pollock except I've sometimes used enamel paint and sometimes work on the floor. I don't think of myself as competing with other artists. I'm much less competitive than I was when I was young. As I've gotten older, I see younger artists and I'm scared of how competitive they are with each other. As I've gotten older I feel it's very misguided to be competitive with other artists. I think a lot of times it derails you and gets you off the development of your own path. It also means that if you're going to be competitive with other artists, then you're going to be influenced by them, or accept their premises. And contest those premises. You're reacting to those premises when you're competitive with them. You're not free. I don't want to take anyone on. I just want to wander around in my garden.

(Image: Dona Nelson, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, NY)

