

# Expression of More Struggles and Freedoms



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COURTESY OF THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NYC

Dona Nelson: *Stretchers Strung Out On Space*

Thomas Erben Gallery

Saturday, February 20 - April 3, 2021

Dona Nelson's new show is an expression of more struggles and freedoms.

She's an American modern painter but it's no longer the beginning of modern Art -- like the black line of Franz Kline or the roar of Jimi Hendrix playing "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock. These are fervent times. You might complain if your neighbour has an American flag in their front garden.

Visiting the selections from the Whitney collection took me back to that place and helped me understand Dona as "from" and also "come far from" the breakout of American Art. Going from the room that separates the paintings of the 1940s into those of the '50s, it's like suddenly walking into the light. The Cadmuses and Burchfields are mulchy and intimate, but it's the white room that holds "The" DeFeo, a spectacular Kline, a killer Ed Clarke; like hearing jazz for the first time, dropping off the chorus into the solo. Like one of those GoPro videos of skydiving through the Alps. Painting cut loose for the first time. Free expression become the one true faith.



Perhaps that's why abstraction far from being another "just path" can seem like a truly adult proposal. No longer shackled to mimesis the artist is pitched only against her/his/their desires or lack of vision.

Going into Thomas Erben's gallery is quite different. The path is unbrushed. The strokes are thorny, viewable from both sides of the canvas so that the route through the work feels like negotiating through scenery, backstage.

Abstract painting seems all subjectivity, supposedly all interpretations are valid. When actually this kind of painting is all intention

It's what it does that's important.

However gnarly and cobwebby the injunctions are or how partial, they do want us to feel a certain way, to think of them a certain way.

And the more integrated or unified the system of explanation is the more intentional and "conscious" it is.

One of the new paintings is two lovely long rectangular panels of which one is called "Studio Portrait Over Time" 2020. It's mounted onto a base with the pieces not parallel with each other but fanning out at one side creating a rhomboid negative space on the stand. A space you have to peer into to see the images. One side presenting a figure made from a white fabric dipped in epoxy resin that keeps it hard when it sets.

These bunched areas stand in for impasto paint. Generally Dona prefers the indirect route to bringing out the image. The pour, the bunched fabric, thick thread pulled through the canvas that picks out figures in dots or stitches leaving loose ends hanging. The process might throw up new shapes in a way that the direct stroke hitting a canvas doesn't. As if directness was a fudge, not as brave as letting chance and the character of the materials have its way.

There's figuration here but it's treated as if copying nature was another branch of abstraction. Because narrative and the falling of light on an object are much less important than process. How the thing came to be. For example what looks like deckchair fabric is casually folded and stuck to the outline of a figure. The observance of volume is sacrificed so that graphic impact can happen.



"Olive and Reily" 2020 shows two figures and like most of the paintings in this show is viewable from both sides. But the reality of the people is secondary to the way it comes together. I was told by the gallery assistant that Dona stands behind (well, there is no real behind) with a studio assistant, threading these long, woolly cables through the canvas so that in the end two versions of the figure are available, one from each side.

In the book *The Three Princes of Serendip*, Horace Walpole suggests they are: "making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of..."



WOOD 2020.



It makes painting a foray into an experiment in crafts that's more casual than in a hot house studio. The gallery space has been arranged to feel more communal, like where a group might meet sometimes to do something. The sense of the space in action. Some chairs around a table. A canvas mounted onto a dais that slowly rotates. The use of soap boxes (Soap Boxes!) for the piece "WOOD" 2020

"WOOD" is a perfect Nelson proposal.

A "what if." In this case, a leisurely thrown action painting on one side. Paint splashed.

What if you stood back for a minute? Jumped back in with some loose weaving in one quadrant. And employed what looks like a leisurely "drag" of semi-transparent paint on the other side. After "Action" and "Free" expression, there is a reconsideration.

Dona's pieces are like proposals. Not written ones but visual ones. When you "read" materials, objects, the space, light, and style that paint creates; it's not proposed in a way that can be accepted or rejected. Things unlike words have their own immutability.

It flips it back on you to consider it. To use your time on these "its."

But equally, Dona makes the gallery open and available.

So that you're not put on the spot -- I think -- to create this space she even downplays her own undoubted chops.

It still brings back for me, the cultural moment when America broke with Europe, culminating in the high '60s. The flame not only lighting the way forward but burning the protagonist: think Janis Joplin or Pollock. The artist is still the artist, you have to do this thing alone. But the way through isn't clear like it was. It requires so much more reflection and consideration.

Dona Nelson's toolbox is more full of tools. Spider Stratagems and Oblique Strategies can help us to see beyond our desires and visions. But there is no path that we can instinctually navigate. We may have to talk this through. Go through the wood together.