

# Galleries



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ADAM REICH, THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

## DONA NELSON

Through May 20. Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-8701, thomaserben.com.

The painter Dona Nelson has never been one to set limits. For years now, she has made some of the toughest paintings around, articulating her medium with dissonant techniques, surfaces and colors; freely mixing figuration and abstraction into elaborate narratives of process, art and life while regularly trespassing into three dimensions. But these tendencies have rarely been stated as elaborately, intensely or joyously as in “Models Stand Close to the Paintings,” at Thomas Erben in Chelsea, a show of nine new works accompanied by two earlier ones serving as their footnotes.

The installation forms a loose, kaleidoscopic maze of contrasting viewpoints. Especially complicated are two free-standing pieces made on two door-size panels. Verging on architecture, “By the Yard” (which has wonderful areas of coarse, crazed embroidery) and “Passengers” almost require wedging yourself between the panels to see the four-sided progressions of linked images. Sometimes evoking the blocky figures of the Russian Constructivists, the exceptional “Platform” presents two panels side by side, with contrasting figurative styles, types of material and degrees of abstraction on four surfaces.

Ms. Nelson began working both sides of free-standing canvases long before it became a craze among younger painters. A prime example here is “Lavender Lion,” whose thick pours or stains of lavender, purple and yellow continue her longtime dialogue with Jackson Pollock — growling at his painting “Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)?” Ms. Nelson’s signature cheesecloth is used here, creating looping skeins of stenciled lines on one side and an orderly grid on the other. In “Autumn Andrew,” green cheesecloth suggests tall grass behind a larger-than-life portrait of a seated man with a thoughtful face and a blue-checked shirt, both wonderfully painted. This is a great show.

ROBERTA SMITH

Works from the Dona Nelson exhibition “Models Stand Close to the Paintings,” above, at Thomas Erben Gallery. At left, Sara Cwynar’s “Tracy (Grid 2).” Below left, Rochelle Goldberg’s sculpture “Sun anchor of origin, are you?” Below right, one of Peter Dreher’s early untitled skull works from 1947.