

## Art in Review

### Dona Nelson

'Phigor'

Thomas Erben Gallery  
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea  
Through May 24

Incrementally and without nearly the attention she deserves, Dona Nelson has become one of the best artists working today, partly by spending over two decades wrestling with the idea of a painting as a free-standing object with two distinct sides and, in many ways, a mind of its own.

Just as the Minimalists plunked sculpture into the viewer's space, minus pedestal, Ms. Nelson has liberated painting from the wall. She may not be the first to do so — Rauschenberg, Ryman and Polke are precedents — but she does it with her own specific flamboyant rigor, a noun that is both evoked and possibly ridiculed in "Phigor," the show's title. The dropcloth look so endemic in contemporary auction art may be buried in these works, but Ms. Nelson's results are the opposite of zombie formalism — quite alive, distinct and infused with an adamant, difficult beauty.

Ms. Nelson also builds on the Abstract Expressionist tradition, in Harold Rosenberg's words, of treating the canvas as "an arena in which to act." For her it's an arena in which different painting materials are forced to interact with help from gravity, chance and intermittent control, while

taking full advantage of the facts of canvas, stretcher, color, contrasting viscosities and paint-dipped string and strips of cheesecloth. What develops in the arena of each work is so physically present and visually complicated that issues of abstraction and representation fade away.

The paintings simply are, and they demand that you deal with how they came to be that way. What happened first, and which side was she working on when it did? Was the canvas on or off the stretcher at the time? What seeped through, what was prevented from doing so, and how? What was stained, what was thrown, what was carefully outlined? What was added or removed, and when? How many previous paintings has that stretcher served under? Among the profusion of colors, textures, punctures, drips and coarse needlework (that paint-dipped string), the mysteries mount, re-

solve and mount again. You keep looking.

In the current Whitney Biennial, Ms. Nelson's paintings are among the two or three standouts in the large, crowded, color-crazed fourth-floor gallery that is its beating heart. And this show is among the strongest of her career.

ROBERTA SMITH



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ANDREAS VESTERLUND/THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Interrogative: Dona Nelson's "Orangey," left; "Red and Green Noses," rear; and "March Hare."



As the show progresses, the central confrontation that emerges is less between black and white than between political art and the absent narrative of a hermetic modernism. Philip Guston, who left behind Abstract Expressionism for imagery like that in *City Limits* (1969)—which shows a trio of KKK-style hooded men in a car—emblemizes the irruption of social content within establishment art. Displayed near Guston's work are Norman W. Lewis's *Double Cross* (1971) and Sam Gilliam's *Red April* (1970), two ostensibly abstract paintings whose titles and surfaces challenge the neutrality of seemingly nonreferential forms. The Warholian indifference characteristic of much Pop art is similarly subjected to subversion, with Joe Overstreet transforming Aunt Jemima into a machine-gun-wielding militant, Robert Indiana dubbing Alabama the "hind part" of the USA in a text-based painting and Faith Ringgold weaving a racial threat into an image of the American flag.

A section called "Sisterhood" contains works by female artists such as Emma Amos and Yoko Ono as well as painter Bob Thompson's *Homage to Nina Simone* (1965), a Fauve-like riff on Poussin. The soul singer also appears in an adjoining screening room, where a rousing film shows her performing her politically charged "Mississippi Goddam."

Other affecting works in the exhibition include an Allan D'Arcangelo assemblage about the John F. Kennedy assassination, a piece by Betye Saar that lays bare the perversity of racist tchotchkes and a painting by May Stevens in which her racist father is stripped of both clothing and paternal authority. Barkley L. Hendricks's *Icon for My Man Superman* (*Superman never saved any black people—Bobby Seale*), 1969, depicts Black Panther cofounder Bobby Seale against a metallic silver background, referencing Eastern Orthodox icon painting. The work calls to mind the paintings of contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley (one of which is displayed in the museum's lobby), although the latter seem derivative and complacent by comparison.

Regrettably, the exhibition does not adequately explore the theme of economic inequality—a focus not only of the Panthers but also of King and many of his contemporaries. The same would appear to hold true for the Brooklyn Museum's ongoing "Activism Season" as a whole, which has highlighted liberal causes while skirting the source of the nation's most significant protests today.

—David Markus

## DONA NELSON Thomas Erben

Dona Nelson pushes her paintings hard. They're doused in thinned acrylics, splattered with gooey tar gel medium, festooned with wads and strips of cheesecloth (that are sometimes then ripped off) and, occasionally, stabbed with ice picks. She's even invented a solution for a problem we didn't know existed for the medium: how to make paintings so that they can be seen from all sides without losing the flatness of the image.

Nelson cites Pollock's late paintings and Miró's anti-paintings as inspiration, and like the efforts of Pollock and Miró, her wrestling with the medium brings up its dark side. Acknowledging a violent impulse in the making, she flirts with painting's destruction yet expands its definition ever further. Paintings have been installed freestanding before (e.g., the Nicolas Poussin at Philip Johnson's Glass House, or all those double-sided Renaissance panels), but the double-sided freestanding format has become Nelson's trademark as surely as the squeegee is Gerhard Richter's or the curved stretcher Elizabeth Murray's.

Of the eight paintings in the show, five are two-sided. These all begin with a thin stain tracing the crossbar and stretcher grids on the back. The largest, *Phigor* (2014), at 117 by 70 inches, was suspended a few inches above the floor on a metal stand and pushed out a couple of feet from the wall by two black tubes that attached to the stretcher near its top. The white crossbars, two vertical and four horizontal, partially obscure the exuberant dark splashes on the back of the canvas. Controlled pours on the front cover most of the red-stained crossbar grid, and resolve into a central, ghostly, blue-and-ocher shape that is pushed into place by a white veil wrapping around the edges of the painting. The front surface is crusted with dried residue of bubbles and smears of medium.

In *March Hare* (2014), the most allover composition in the show, a blue tic-tac-toe grid is faintly visible on both sides. As with two other freestanding paintings, Nelson has removed the crossbars so that both sides can be seen unobscured. The trail of viscous tar gel on the front records where cheesecloth was applied and, once dry, scraped off. The resulting zig-zag web keeps the composition from settling into a clear shape. In *Top* (2014), pigment-rich opaque pours float like contiguous countries (separated by walls of thick medium) on top of the stained forest-colored surface—a nod, perhaps, to Miró's shapes as much as to aerial views of land. The clashing materials—earth-hued stains, translucent tar gel borders and plasticky, artificial-colored spills—shock with their utter incompatibility, as surprising as the small holes that punctuate *Orangey* (2011).

Nelson has long been known as a painter's painter, and the risks she takes with her work have had enormous



View of Dona Nelson's exhibition "Phigor," showing (left to right) *Orangey*, 2011, *Red and Green Noses*, 2013, and *March Hare*, 2014; at Thomas Erben.



influence among the many young painters whose renewed interest in unorthodox processes has been so prominent in the last five to 10 years. There is no overarching explanation for why each painting here compels the viewer's attention. Often the works' very brazenness is hard to look away from. Nelson's commitment to trying anything, and her openness to wildly unexpected definitions of how a painting might "succeed," makes her work a model of a form of art-making that demands much of its audience. At a moment when we are faced with unprecedented challenges, both ecological and social, Nelson's work provides a resonant example of how radical experimentation can be combined with rigorous process to redefine our sense of what's possible.

—Julian Kreimer

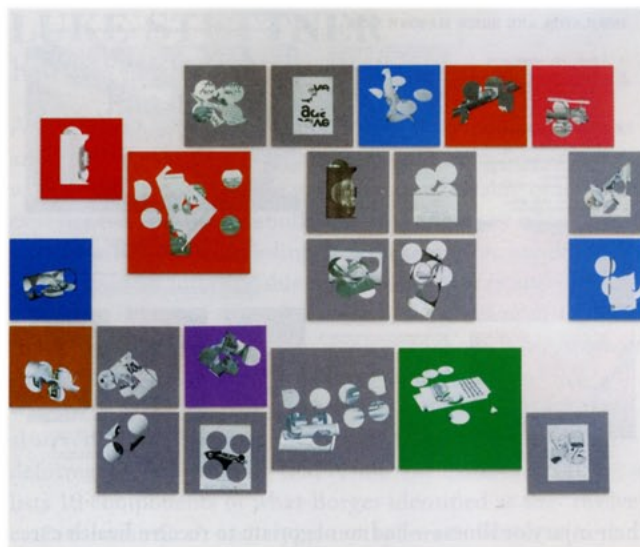
## KELLEY WALKER

Paula Cooper

Kelley Walker is no stranger to the perversities of advertising. One of his earlier subjects was the notorious 1995 Benetton ad that hawked its goods via a reproduction of an airline crash, another a 1974 Pioneer stereo ad featuring the master ad man, Andy Warhol. In two recent series using Volkswagen Beetle ads from 1950 to 1970, Walker exploits the brilliant graphics of a redemptive campaign, deepening his decade-long reflection on the implications of printed matter. More than sharp design and good engineering, it was brilliant advertising that allowed the Beetle to shed its Nazi-tainted past and become the friendly "people's car" beloved of the entire earth.

At Paula Cooper, Walker installed on three walls a single untitled piece (2013) consisting of 196 MDF panels silkscreened with full- and double-page VW ads, flipped, rotated and folded. Occasional snippets of backward texts and curled-back pages clue us in to reversals. Of two sizes (16 or 24 inches square), and printed in both Pantone and CMYK printers' colors, the panels are perforated with holes that toy with flatness and materiality while choreographing a playful visual dance across the entire installation. The "Bug" appears in a range of settings, in close-up or on snowy country roads and city streets, only to have its curved profile cut off by actual holes. The panels were installed irregularly, with larger and smaller gaps between; together, the gaps and holes echo the blank spaces that Walker has elsewhere built into his work as a (modernist) trope of resistance and negation. Pushing the ad further, he deployed the digital imaging program Rhino in a series of aluminum sculptures displayed on a tabletop ("Bug," 2014). This time the ads are screened onto both sides—indistinguishable due to the torquing—of hole-perforated aluminum sheets, which twist and curl as paper might in a fire. Yet they remain silvery and cool, their conceptual tricks and paradoxes beguiling.

Still handsome but edging into pretentiousness was "Pioneer PL-518 Series (TVRY)," 2014. Interleaving images of vinyl records and their covers, Walker printed them onto 24-inch-square MVP panels that were then laid flat and



Detail of Kelley Walker's untitled suite of 196 panels, 2013, Pantone and four-color process silkscreen with acrylic ink on MDF, 167 panels: 16 inches square, 29 panels: 24 inches square; at Paula Cooper.

raised slightly above 2-foot-tall pedestals. The records are reproduced to scale, and indeed the floating panels feel a little like turntables. From Kraftwerk to Little Richard and Edgard Varèse, the album choices are just too, too hip. You feel like you've landed at a party with a show-off dee-jay hogging the mix; Walker is nothing if not conscious of image.

At the other end of the scale—from rigorous control to engineered accident—a large group of rectangular, wall-hung works consisted of actual, superimposed screens of Walker's many leftover projects stretched on aluminum or wood frames. Aptly, the series is titled "Screen to Screen 30x40," since the ground itself is always a screen, its layered imagery an abstract muddle in which vignettes of Walker's works float into visibility like the prognostications of a Magic 8 Ball—here a Beetle wheel, there a record. In this series one feels vividly the presence of Rauschenberg and Warhol—the former in the look of the work, and the latter quite literally, since among the image scraps is the Pioneer stereo ad. Is the series a catharsis of sorts? If so, Walker updates the timeworn practice of plate cancellation, spinning it into his ongoing meditation on image recycling and dissemination. Here, though, the recycling exhausts itself, and dissemination is stopped dead in its tracks.

—Faye Hirsch

## FRED LONIDIER

Essex Street

The motto "an injury to one is an injury to all" has been used by the Industrial Workers of the World since the early 1900s. It also seems to underpin San Diego-based artist and union activist Fred Lonidier's seminal work *The Health and Safety Game* (1976/78). Composed of 26 wall panels and a 20-minute black-and-white video, the installation elaborates upon the job-related medical conditions of workers in various fields. Specifically, it outlines the bureaucratic barbed wire that these laborers—who are portrayed anonymously, identified solely by



allover and violently gestural paintings cover the blue screens of death that once told you your cable was out or that your OS met an unhandleable exception.

Floating over all of these differently mediated temporalities is that of your own vision, split between the perception of a stilled vertical painting with active video *collé* and that of a horizontal playback interrupted by oil static, or resting uneasily somewhere between the two. When conditions are right and a moment of darkness on the flat-screen's reflective surface aligns with the gaps between brushstrokes, a painting can return your own furtive gaze, inserting the time of your looking between painted surface and looped background.

The painting bends to its video substrate; the screened images themselves are not so accommodating. A visitor born under the sign of the iPhone's internal accelerometer might find herself fighting off a manic urge to pull the screens off the wall and shake them until the snippet of a Food Network cooking show or an ad for a decade-old Honda or a few seconds of *60 Minutes* automatically rights itself. Despite the paintings' portrait-oriented similarity to comically outsize smartphones, the archive they screen stays landscape. They refuse to respond in the ways we now expect from our media technologies, not only to our desires but even to our sheer physical orientation in the world. In their literal *détournement* of the screens that facilitate our conspicuous consumption of "the present," Okiishi's paintings create a tension played out in the viewer as the wagged dog of an immediately graspable conceptual gesture—a tension that is genuinely moving and feels perversely like relief.

—Jeff Nagy

## 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 riddle 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

## Arnold Mesches

LIFE ON MARS GALLERY

Arnold Mesches had his first solo show in 1947, and according to the Life on Mars Gallery website, he has by now had 124 of them, which perhaps gives a new meaning to this one's title, "Eternal Return." The exhibition included selections from three series of paintings, "Coming Attractions," 2003–2007; "SHOCK AND AWE," 2011; and "Eternal Return," 2013–14. As a title, "Coming Attractions" recalls the fact that Mesches, who spent most of his career in Los Angeles before moving to New York in 1984, worked in the film industry in the 1940s and '50s. The first work in the series (not in this show) took a grandiose, old-fashioned movie theater as its setting; projected on the screen is a scene of three waiters in an otherwise empty restaurant set out with white tablecloths, as if its clientele were about to turn up any minute—



# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Go Figure: Dona Nelson's "Phigor"

by Rick Briggs on May 3, 2014

Dona Nelson's paintings are by turns joyous, confounding, risky, mysterious, straightforward, difficult, tied up in knots and freewheeling. One thing they are not is uniform. Nelson has long resisted a signature style, committing herself instead to an adventurousness in her means of expression. With her inclusion in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, a slew of recent awards, and now her current exhibition, *Phigor*, at Thomas Erben Gallery, Nelson's on a roll.

The Erben show features five freestanding, double-sided paintings and three paintings hung high on the walls, including the sparely painted "Bright!" (2014) and "Violet Bridge" (2014), as a buoyant counterpoint to the double-sided paintings, which tend to be larger, more complex, and held in place by floor-bound metal stands.

The idea of a two-sided painting has precedents in Sigmar Polke's "Transparents," shown in New York at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1989 and, more famously,

Marcel Duchamp's "Large Glass" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Nelson shares Polke's love of process and a resistance to categorization, having moved freely between figuration and abstraction.



Dona Nelson, "March Hare," (front), (2014), acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 83 x 73 in (all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

(Full disclosure: When I met Dona Nelson 30 years ago, she was a figurative painter who had previously been abstract and later returned to abstraction. Before I had even heard of Sigmar Polke or Gerhard Richter, I saw Nelson as a painter willing to take the risk of big stylistic changes at the service of her expressive needs.)

With Nelson's work, there has long been a preoccupation with the basic material elements of painting: canvas, stretcher, and paint, which comes out of a Minimalist idea of specificity. To this, she combines emotional and performative aspects derived from Abstract Expressionism in general and Jackson Pollock in particular.

The Pollock influence can be seen most readily in a painting like "March Hare" (2014), with its intertwining of poured paint, poured clear acrylic medium and removed muslin (more on that in a moment), making for a rough-surfaced, spatially ambiguous web. Her process is both intuitive and intensive. As the gallery press release describes it: "Working from both sides of



Dona Nelson, "March Hare," (2014) (back)

the canvas, and often stretching and restretching it several times before deciding which is front or back, she stains, soaks and pours paint, sometimes forcing it through incisions or hosing down the canvas with water.”

Part of the fun of a Dona Nelson exhibition is tracing out the physical permutations she exerts upon the canvas – unwrapping the how. But don’t expect to unravel these mysteries in one go. They’re complex enough to make your head spin. Take the standout “Orangey” (2013), a large, vertical, double-sided painting. As positioned in the gallery, we approach the back of the painting with its two large vertical shapes – one orange and one blue – life-size figures, if you will. Since you are looking at the back, you also notice the stretcher frame and, oddly, thick red paint emerging from the underside of the stretcher bar to the left – although the stretcher itself is clean.



Dona Nelson, “Orangey,” (detail), (2013),  
acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 83 x 78 in

Walk around to the front and one of the first things you notice is the bright orange imprint of the stretcher’s supporting crossbars. Turn again to the back and sure enough, the crossbars are missing. She’s either switched out the entire stretcher frame or removed the crossbars. While there, you also notice that the blue shape has been painted on the back and the orange shape was painted on the front. Dizzy yet? Because the mysteries continue, compounded by Nelson’s practice of flipping the front of the canvas back and forth during the painting process. The painting is littered with little incisions, or canvas punctures, a form of mark making à la Lucio Fontana, through which paint has been pushed to the front, emerging in the form of droplets. (Although how the incisions were made in the vicinity of the stretcher bars remains a mystery. My guess: the punctures were made when the canvas was unstretched while being flipped from back to front.)

Applied to the front are multi-colored strips of rope-like cheesecloth that form a loopy, webbed line. The cloth acts as a dam to contain the flowing acrylic paint. In some areas, the fabric has been peeled off to reveal the white of the canvas and then reattached elsewhere, sometimes mirroring the vacated line. This peeling seems to have inspired a similar move in a few other paintings — “Top” (2014), “March Hare,” and “Red and Green Noses” (2013) — where Nelson cleverly creates a positive line from the deleted material. “Top,” another standout, is wall-bound and consequently provides a simpler viewing experience, but one that isn’t any less rewarding. With

its thickly pooled areas of glossy Wet’N’Wild colors — bright violet, baby blue and cadmium lemon yellow — on a stained, camouflage-like ground, the painting evokes the immediacy and primacy of a fully formed Chauvet cave painting.



Dona Nelson, “Top,” (2014), acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 70 x 79 in

One of the relative constants amidst the variety of these paintings is the previously mentioned imprint of the grid of the stretcher and crossbars on the canvas. Nelson’s grids function as compositional scaffolds for the painting’s riot of material complexity and brightly colored images; they also act as direct indexical markers regarding the physical structure of the painting. Nelson’s constantly points to painting as both image and object. Similarly, in “Red and Green Noses,” she sews lengths of colored string through the canvas, front to back and back and forth, before knotting them off — the line, both literally and figuratively, ties the two sides together. In a recent artist’s statement regarding this interdependence of the two sides, Nelson spoke of her fascination with “the way in which two very different visual and physical manifestations can be inseparable from and, indeed, create each other.”

She has also called what inadvertently happens to the back side of the canvas as a result of the staining, soaking, and hosing-down of the paint as “received images,” or, as in the case of “March Hare,” “a completely received image,” (meaning she applied no paint at all to the back). That Nelson has chosen to honor these happenstance developments is a reflection of how much she values the element of chance, which was most influentially applied to art in the notion of automatic drawing, which the



Dona Nelson, “Top”, (detail) (2014)

Surrealists saw as a way of triggering the unconscious. As with a dream, images simply arrive as a byproduct of experience, not of volition.

While most of our attention is rightly focused on her visual and material splendor, these qualities are merely conduits. What Dona Nelson is really working with is imagination, mystery, chance, time, and possibility itself, and we’re all the richer for it. [Dona Nelson: Phigor](#) continues at the Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, 4th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 17.



# THE NEW YORKER

MAY 12, 2014

## ART

### **Dona Nelson**

A studio warrior for New York painting since the sixties, Nelson has plowed through several abstract and figurative manners on the way to a present state that might be termed Post-Exasperation. Seen here (and to striking effect in the current Whitney Biennial) are big canvases not so much painted as assaulted with acidly colorful acrylic washes, clots, and peels and with puddles of gelatinous acrylic medium. Here and there, collaged clumps of cheesecloth and thickets of colored and stitched string join the fray. Five of the works are freestanding, painted on both sides. Nelson gives notice that she will do anything, short of burning down her house, to bully painting into freshly spluttering eloquence. Through May 17. (Erben, 526 W. 26th St. 212-645-8701.)