



Installation view, *West and north walls*  
Image: Courtesy of March Waters Inc.

## Dona Nelson's 'ReFiguring, one painting at a time' renews interest towards paintings

*ReFiguring, one painting at a time* at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York underscores how the painter incessantly follows the labour of effort to sustain her artistic oeuvre.

by Dilpreet Bhullar | Published on : Dec 17, 2022

In the age of quick methods and instant results, the **exhibition** *ReFiguring, one painting at a time* by Dona Nelson at **Thomas Erben Gallery** in **New York, United States**, offers a rare peek into the world driven by a long process. The creative engagement in which the **American painter** involves herself is a labour of love and efforts towards **paintings**. Each layer of paint in the work leaves a trace to open a window to the multiplicity of effort invested in the making of the work. This **art exhibition** is a follow-up of Nelson's much-acclaimed contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Moreover, this show runs in conjunction with another critically acclaimed show, *Phigor*. It successfully led to the acquisition of her work by the **art museums** and foundations such as the Museum of Fine Arts, **Boston**, Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Museum of New South Wales, **Sydney** and the Kadist Foundation.

With the dawn of **digital technology** in the 1960s, the inventive principle of the large-scale abstract painting was considered to have come to an end by artists and critics alike. This was compounded by the rising trends of paintings to be approached with an art market. "Reducing the painter's role to that of a high-end commodity producer and greatly enhancing the art dealer's creative role. Young people who want to paint in 2022 need to know that large-scale painting is rich with possibilities for material invention and the material invention is the first step to rethinking painting conceptually," informs Nelson in an interview with STIR.

To make the current audience savour the beauty of large-scale abstract paintings, Nelson necessitated a rethinking of typical late 20<sup>th</sup> century **gallery** conventions surrounding the display of paintings. "I wanted to activate the position of the art viewer. For many **abstract art** expressionists, making big paintings with their whole bodies challenged the conventions of easel painting. I wanted the physical aspect of viewers walking around, looking at my two-sided paintings, to activate my paintings. I do not think that big painting can satisfactorily be experienced in photographs," confesses Nelson.



Installation view, *West wall*  
Image: Courtesy of March Waters Inc.

The **landscapes** that Nelson has inhabited find a new place in her canvases. *Surveyor's Lunch* is a **portraiture** of her father, a surveyor and then a civil engineer in Nebraska where the artist was born and lived until she was close to seven years old, at which time her family moved to Indiana. Nelson says, "The landscape in that painting is completely invented, and, looking at it now, it seems a strange landscape, with a top half that is different from the bottom half of the painting where my father sits on a fallen tree. It's like the top half is Nebraska and the bottom half is Indiana. The top of the painting with the little houses probably references all the stories I heard growing up about my Danish grandmother Phema's family who homesteaded in Nebraska in the late nineteenth century. Initially, they lived in sod huts."

The straight line of the horizon and the tall Nebraska sky with high clouds had a deep impact on Nelson as a child. Interestingly, when Nelson sees a horizon line, she feels grounded. "Since I turned 20, I have lived on the East Coast, and only at the seashore am I able to see the horizon as I could in Nebraska. The horizon line and having a job to do is the crucial connection between *The Fisherwoman* (2022), and *Surveyor's Lunch* (1981). I come from a family of farmers, and to me, what is interesting about landscape is its connection to labour. My two-sided paintings require a lot of labour, flipping the canvas and so on, and I like the labour of making a big painting," explains Nelson.

Her latest work *Fisherwoman* started by covering the front of the canvas with stripes, two inches apart, made with rolled-up strips of cheesecloth that were soaked with acrylic gel medium. She walks us through the making of the painting, "These strips dried into hard ridges, then I poured fluid acrylic paint in the little channels between the stripes. Horizontal stripes naturally result in an abstract landscape-type image. Happily, the paint soaked through to the back in such a way that, when I righted the painting, I found a seascape on the back of the canvas! The great thing about making two-sided paintings is that I am pouring the paint on the face of the painting while the work is parallel to the ground, resting on milk crates, so I do not see the back until the paint is dry. As soon as I saw the back of *Fisherwoman*, I imagined a figure connected to the stretcher bars, so that the blue and white stains on the canvas would be read as the sky. I very much wanted to activate that spatial illusion with the head of the fisherwoman in front of the sky, so I found a model to pose for me, holding on to the stretcher bars."

For Nelson, "The thing that makes painting eternally relevant is that it is an illusion that is physical. Paintings are analogous to what it is to be alive. In our bodies, we think." Nelson is confident that after watching her works the viewers would not see it as an **immersive art** practice that is bound to traditional ideas about the distinction between abstract and **figurative art**.