

Dona Nelson, "Stations of the Subway"

Cheim & Read, through Feb 17 (see Chelsea).

Back in the days of Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross," abstraction was a high style with metaphysical pretensions, and to take direct aesthetic inspiration from worldly patterns and splatters was considered an interest of the philistine or rube. Dona Nelson wryly smiles back at this glorious past of the New York School while also speaking to our time—when an artist can get all the material she needs from the tiles, tracks, wheels and tunnels of the New York subway system. Even if it implies that there's no longer a shuttle to immortality, Nelson's "Stations of the Subway" includes plucky and sometimes joyful canvases.

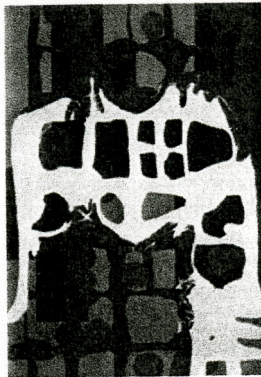
Admittedly, the historical baggage is occasionally too heavy: One painting, *The Deep*, bears the title of a noted Pollock work, and you have to wonder why Nelson would seek out this comparison, only to finish second. *Street of Walls*,

with its play of yellow, blue and red, is also too obviously an homage to Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* to stand on its own.

But the other paintings are totally fresh. *High Lounge* best evokes urban energy, as creamy purple, zebra-striped swirls seem to create a see-through curtain for an impressionistic view of city skyscrapers. In *Holiday*, a grid of subway tile is disturbed by a flow of acrylic paint that bites into the grid with such intensity as to seem from another plane of reality. (One imagines it as the artist's frustrated fantasy of a volcanic meltdown of the system, or one soul's arson against the confinement of bricks and

mortar.) Elsewhere, Nelson covers her canvas with circles to denote those heavy metal wheels that run the rails. But it's a tribute to the work's strength that the forms invite any number of lyrical interpretations: For me, they stack up like CDs on an assembly line, evoking the headphones that commuters use to block out (but not transcend) the rat-race blues of our very physical urban world.

—Robert Mahoney



Dona Nelson, *Fleshy Reflection*, 1997.