

Dona Nelson by Richard Whelan

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Interview

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During Dona Nelson's recent one-person show at the Michael Klein Gallery (her fifth New York solo exhibition), I talked with the artist at her large Tribeca loft. Not a place likely to appeal to the editors of *Architectural Digest*, it is primarily a studio in which—amid dozens of paintings, new and old, large and small, on the walls and spread out over much of the paint-spattered floor—Nelson more or less camps out in rather Spartan comfort. There we resumed a conversation that we've been having for more than 20 years.

Richard Whelan What struck me most when I first saw this body of paintings is how they pull together so many disparate strands, or seemingly disparate strands of your work over a period of 20 years.
Dona Nelson In a sense, I've been working back and forth between signs and direct expression since I was in college. I started doing throws of ink onto small drawings. Then I would grid up the drawing and reproduce it large, on a canvas—this was about 1967. I didn't really understand the full implications of this as a student, but I liked the idea of something spontaneous being rendered slowly and meticulously. So I started from pop art and worked my way back to abstract expressionism. A lot of my work is, in a funny way, inside out and backwards from the normal way that people think of historical progression. It has to do with coming of age in the '70s, after Warhol. My generation—I'm in my mid-forties—started out with pop art as our basis. In terms of my representations, I have worked back into history, back from experiencing first the sign for a portrait to making portraits. For instance, when I was in school, we didn't do portraits. So when I was 35, I decided I wanted the experience of painting a portrait of someone sitting in front of me. So my work does involve a great deal of dancing with history, and coming into awareness of who I am relative to the time I started painting and thinking about painting. My work is not just about looking at a painting and deciding if it's good or if I like it, but about the dialogue between paintings.

RW One of the most striking things about your work is, I would say, its lack of irony; that unlike pop, your work comes so intensely out of yourself. Although you have a wide knowledge of the history of art, the strength of your paintings is that they're intensely personal.

DN What I got from pop was the distance, not the irony. There's a couple of reasons for this. One of them has to do with being a woman. In 1978, I wrote a little article for *Heresies* called "Growing up a Painter." I wanted very much, when I was young, to think of myself as a painter, with a capital P. And in recent years, I've looked at that article and thought the title was hilarious, because it doesn't say anything about growing up as a woman. And for a long time, I didn't think about what it meant to be a woman in relation to the tradition of painting. But my particular take on painting is distanced, both from coming up in the age of pop and being excluded from the tradition. I didn't have many women painting models. It is really that distance, the distance of a woman in relation to the tradition rather than ironic distance. Also, irony implies a criticality of the tradition. There's been a lot of feminist commentary, for instance, on modernism, and yet I love a lot of modernist painting!

RW I would say you really extend the medium with material that is not paint. You use cloth as if it were paint.

DN In the early '80s, I was doing oil paintings of things I saw and things I dreamed up and imagined—direct observation and imaginative wanderings. I became uncomfortable with the continuousness of the representation. So I started cutting up the paintings and collaging different canvases together. Ultimately, I started to discard the flat pieces of canvas and to build up images with little wads of muslin and gel medium. They're like islands that interrupt the picture plane, that interrupt the flow of the enamel. It's very unpredictable to me what kind of imagery will come out of the crinkles of the muslin. It leads me into imagery that I don't have to think about beforehand.

RW What makes that medium so well suited to you is that your paintings seem so much the texture of dreams. There is something so uncontrollable, spontaneous and free associative. It's as though you seem to have unusually direct access to subconscious material.

DN I've always felt very physically clumsy with painting and drawing. I feel so much more mobile when I'm able to use the muslin, because the drawing makes itself. I don't have to think up an image and then do it; all I have to do is play around with this little wad of muslin and stop and an image is there. And if I choose, I can ball it up and another image will appear in five or 10 minutes. It's been very, very liberating for me.

RW In your two dream paintings, are you consciously aware of the relationship among the parts? Does a story develop or is there a logic? Or is it completely spontaneous and mystifying?

DN I feel there's a logic because if there wasn't, I'd be satisfied with everything equally. The paintings take me quite a long time to do. Maybe I'll do three, four images in an afternoon. It takes a long time for the muslin to dry. Lots of times, I'll look at it and I won't be satisfied. I can't quite locate what dissatisfies me, but often it's not so much the image as the way the shapes relate. The meaning of the images isn't separate from the spaces between the images. That's why I hit on the idea to pour enamel between the images. So a lot of times, I'll change images, not based on the kind of meaning that I might read into them, but on the basis of the way they look together. It is not necessary to know the meaning of things to feel that a meaning is there, and that's my premise for working.

Sometimes I do get inspired in an indirect way by dreams and memories. And both dream and memories tend for me, to be extremely visual. So almost the whole impact of the experience is concentrated in one or two images. For instance, I had a dream the other night, which I know, I have a very strong feeling, has a lot to do with my paintings. It was a kind of Nancy Drew mystery story. I was with other people in a big house, and someone had disappeared. We were searching for clues for as to what had happened to this person. And we were looking through all of these drawers and cupboards in this old house. At the bottom of one of these drawers was an old postcard on which was handwritten, "Dear Dona, talk to so-and-so, go to such-and-such a place." It was filled with great clues. I called out, "Hey, look at this postcard!" I was extremely shocked that the postcard was to me because it was old. But then the other people looked over my shoulder at the postcard, they didn't read the same thing. And when I went to copy the postcard it didn't read the same anymore. It was just an old postcard. In the course of this dream, I found several old postcards, but I had to remember what they said on the first reading, because immediately after that, they would disappear. And I think that that is what my painting is. I work with my materials, and what appears under my hand doesn't come back. If I'm not sensitive enough to catch it, and see an image or see a shape that has some meaning to me—and by that I don't mean literal meaning, but one that makes sense—I will lose it forever, and I can't repeat it. And that dream was the lesson of my painting. You better catch things the first time around, because they won't come back.

RW Often, not in reference to the dream paintings but in a more general way, when I have seen a painting for the first time and have responded very directly to its look and have then asked you what you were thinking about, you would point out things that illuminated the painting. I think about this a lot: your paintings are oddly very accessible, very beautiful, very physical, but they're also very cryptic. They come out of such deep encrustations of personal experience and interpretation. What relationship is there between painting and the spoken word? This is a constant question, must the painting entirely be self-sufficient? Why is it so interesting to hear what you were thinking about, what a particular image means to you? Let me put it this way, in taking the two dream paintings as one example, can you tell us how those configuration of images come about? Do you begin with a dream image? Is it pure play?

DN Yeah. That's mostly what it's like, pure play. I'll see an image on the cover of *Time* magazine and I'm off on some kind of journey. The next image I paint, let's say it doesn't speak to the first image so I'll take it off, leaving a little stain behind. And I'll paint that spot into an image. And it goes from there. It's like walking down the street and having your eye caught by a blue car, and then seeing the person in the car...It's in a way arbitrary, but once you get started down a particular path, it becomes inevitable that

you'll have certain kind of adventures. And more than stories, my paintings are adventures, like walking down a street you've never walked down before.

RW I remember once you found an enormous man's shoe, abandoned on the street, no laces. How did you develop that into a painting?

DN In a way, nothing could top the shoe itself. But it was a wonderful still life object and I felt like I wanted to paint it. And once I painted the shoe, I wanted to paint the man in the shoe, and then of course, he was talking to another man, and there you have a painting. I think that real things in the world...everybody sees things very differently, and real things in the world have the possibility of an imaginative life and I think that that's what makes people very different from one another, that they each see a different imaginative life for the object world.

RW Gary Winogrand once said he photographed things to see what they would look like photographed. Do you? I get the sense that when you go into the studio, there must be a sense of curiosity—that you paint to see your paintings, or to see how things that you've seen will look like painted. Does that make sense?

DN That's a really nice idea, but it's not like that at all. (*pause*) I don't really know what I'm doing. I feel that I'm in a thick fog and my hands are making things, they're making images, they're pouring colors, but my hands are leading me as if I'm blind. I feel that the room is dark while I'm painting, and I am touching my painting as I would touch a wall or furniture as I move around a room in the dark. And I really and truly—now and most of my past—have no idea what the painting will look like before I am totally completed with it. Once in a while I'll like a painting so much I'll do a copy of it, or another version of it. Sometimes, very rarely, I'll get a little series going. Four or five paintings. That's very different, because they're almost a commentary on the first painting. But generally I'm just working blind.

RW Do you think that that's why some people have trouble looking at your work over a period of time? They are unable to discern the continuity, and they are disturbed by that? We're so accustomed to people working in series, an idea, working it to death, making very recognizable, product images. I think the way you work is infinitely more interesting. But I know over the years you've gotten a tremendous amount of trouble from people who will walk into a room with all of your paintings and will say, "This is like a group show."

DN Well, that's just the way it is. It interests me to work blind. That's how I cover new territory. My paintings are my travels. I don't travel that much. I like to travel. But I feel like I travel far in my studio, and if I was just turning out Dona Nelsons and I knew what they were going to be, all the fun would just go out of it and I'd quit painting.

RW There's something a little subversive about the freedom you've allowed yourself in a time when there's so much pressure to make a recognizable product. Do you feel that is subversive?

DN It's kind of subversive. The main intention isn't to be subversive of commodification, but in fact it is. And I think it makes people uncomfortable. A defined product means that you have your little corner of originality but really, it's a more natural thing for human beings to criss-cross culture and to appropriate un-self-consciously, to have their moments of originality.

RW There's something more exciting about an exhibition where the range of paintings is fully visible and where the paintings can play off each other. Is that important?

DN Yeah. Installation art of the last few years is often talked about as being different from painting. But every time you hang a group of paintings, what you have is an installation and how those paintings relate is a big part of the viewing experience. In my case, I would hope that the installation would let the viewer know something about the process, the way in which I slip from one kind of painting to another, often to a painting that looks to be aesthetically and expressively in opposition to what just came before it.

Sometimes people do tell me that my shows are disturbing. Myself, I like the verb “disturb.” You know, it’s like wind on a still lake. Maybe disturbance will make a little space, so that the paintings will keep engendering themselves, will have a kind of momentum beyond the exhibition, the way they do while they’re still in my studio.

RW You do in fact write stories as you did for your previous show in 1990. Is there a direct relationship between painting and writing, are they parallel activities?

DN I just sat down one April afternoon and pulled three stories out of my memory from the same time period as when the paintings had been made. The paintings were already done; the paintings were in no way an illustration of those stories even though once I got the paintings up on the wall, people wanted to read them as narrative. They weren’t. The stories took place in three different cities. They were about how you both maintain yourself and change as you travel. The paintings were about traveling, the mutation of one painting into the next. I wanted the writing to parallel the exhibition rather than explain it.

RW There is, in a lot of your paintings, a very obvious and very strong feeling of jazz, of improvisation.

DN I love jazz, I love all kinds of music and I listen to music constantly as I work: Steve Lacey, Ornette Coleman, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Indian music. It has been my goal as an artist to work with as much freedom and as much responsiveness as I see when I go to a club and listen to a good group play—the way they respond to each other and how much sense their freedom makes. Joseph Beuys said, “Freedom has to come out of your creativity, not your environment,” and I do believe that.

RW What about the influence of poetry and fiction and other reading on your work?

DN I like poetry because meaning is not so nailed down. I love to read poetry when I’m very tired, so I’m not really thinking. Sometimes I just read it out loud and I just like the way the words sound. I like Pablo Neruda; I read a lot of Borges’ poetry, a book called, *In Praise of Darkness*. I like García Lorca, Anne Sexton. Oh! A writer who’s been very important to me is Christa Wolf and also Ingeborg Bachman. Both German women writers. Christa Wolf is a famous fiction writer and literary critic from East Germany—former East Germany, sorry. Her first novel, called *The Quest for Christa T.* is a very odd piece of literature because all the writing is around the edges of the story; it’s like she never gets around to telling the story. So the first half of the book is enormously frustrating because you keep wanting a narrative. She talks in that book about creating a form that keeps engendering itself, that isn’t finished. And I responded very strongly to that idea. It’s like Wim Wenders’ movie, *Wings of Desire*. I had a kind of epiphany when I was seeing that movie. About halfway through the movie, I was feeling very bored and restless, annoyed with him because he wouldn’t seem to get down to telling the story properly. All of a sudden, I realized I was thinking more than I usually do in a movie. *Wings of Desire* allows you to intervene in the movie and to think. It’s no mistake that the contemporary painter whose work I feel very drawn to is Sigmar Polke. He’s one of the few painters working in the present who tries to really exercise the possibilities there are for making a painting. He works with much less need to create a defined body of work that serves some theoretical or political purpose.

RW Would you talk a little bit more about your very strong feelings of what it is to be a woman painter?

DN Well, it’s hard to be a woman painter—it’s really hard. I’m in my mid-forties and most women my age who have tried to participate in showing their work in the art world have experienced a lot of sexism. Very direct sexism from curators and art dealers. It accounts for a lot of anger that I have and I don’t like it. It gets in the way of creativity; I spend my day steaming about something somebody said to me instead of doing my work. But recently, I’ve been thinking about how extremely lucky I have been, considering that I have been able to work seriously in painting since my teens. I’ve always had a place to work, and I’ve never sold a lot of work but I’ve always sold enough and had enough shows to be able to get teaching jobs to keep my painting going. In a sense, my checkered career has allowed me a freedom from the pressures which people who show more regularly experience. I have never had the pressure to turn out recognizable

Dona Nelsons, and that has really allowed me to develop the form I wanted to. So being a woman has been, in a funny way, a great blessing to me, in terms of the way my art has developed.

In the last couple of years, there has been a great demand for speaking directly about being a woman in one's art. My art is speaking about being myself. I feel sometimes that the feminist statement in art is all about men. It rails about being socially defined, or how you have been socially defined by history, which leaves little room for the notion of individual experience and the idea that I come along as an individual and look at the history of painting and I can intervene in that history. It may not get seen because I may have a hard time showing it, but I can intervene in that history and practice my art as a painter without having to speak about the way I am socially defined by other people. I'm sure the work does speak about that in oblique ways. But I feel it's a backward step to expect women to do work about being a woman; it's intrinsically sexist. I feel the same about expecting artists of color to speak about being people of color as intrinsically racist.

What I do think is very positive about the last several years of politically concerned art is that it means that more artists get to put their work up on the walls, that curators feel uncomfortable about doing shows that are all white males, and that's good. One of the things I've thought for a long time is that people who are termed folk artists seem to allow themselves a much greater range of invention than do professional artists working in the mainstream New York art world. The divisions between so-called folk artists, so-called outsider artists, so-called educated artists—a lot of those divisions are based on race and class divisions, and they need to be done away with. The mainstream, white, New York art world is an anachronism, its too small. To assume that sophistication can only come through a knowledge of 20th century art history is ridiculous. A lot of artists have access to traditions of African art that don't come through Picasso but come directly from Africa. People who aren't necessarily educated along Western art historical lines have other bodies of knowledge.

RW Who are some artists working now who you particularly admire?

DN I like lots of artists; however, I think that my approach to painting is somewhat different from most painters one sees in New York.

RW Who are some of the artists before the present whose work you feel you have a real affinity with?

DN When I was younger, the first artist, painter who really excited me was Edward Hopper. Every once in a while we'd stop at the Chicago Art Institute when we were on our way to my grandmother's house in Iowa and I'd have a half an hour to run pell-mell through the museum.

RW What about people like Klee or DuBuffet?

DN I haven't really looked that much at either one of them. I like Picasso, particularly late Picasso, when he gets very messy. There's always this feeling with Picasso of this total confidence; he'll do one painting, go on to the next and he doesn't look back. You reach certain kinds of imagery, certain ways of painting if you're totally confident and that's so rare in the history of painting. You could say Polke has that kind of confidence. I find that very exhilarating and inspiring.

RW You do a lot of teaching. How do you think that affects your own work?

DN It's not very good for my own work because it limits the time I have in the studio. However, I feel that I have gotten some appreciation of the way people begin to think about art when they're very young. It's very important to actually consider what a painting is. I don't think it's done enough. I mean, people slip into all kinds of theoretical discussion without stopping to ask what a painting is. It's both an illusion and a very physical thing that we respond to with our whole body. People talk endlessly about the computer age and technological invention and the future, but the body still is the center of our experience. And painting is always for me about that physical, sensory experience which isn't separate from ideas.

