



Dona Nelson: Paradox Lake, 1994, latex enamel on canvas, 70 by 78 inches. All photos courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York.

# Abstracting the Familiar

*Ever since beginning her career in the early 1970s, painter Dona Nelson has shifted freely between abstraction and figuration. Her latest works, the author contends, combine aspects of both styles in a highly inventive treatment of the everyday.*

**BY FAYE HIRSCH**

**L**arge in scale, allover in composition and executed in bright, jarring colors, Dona Nelson's paintings induce in the viewer the sensation of being transported, carried across the surface by whatever means. The meandering green paint pourings of *Paradox Lake* (1994)—liquid currents in the 70-by-78-inch expanse—seem the product of an inscrutable natural force. "Some of my earliest memories," wrote Nelson recently in one of her typically oblique artist's statements, "have to do with swimming in a lake. Lake Okoboji was deep and murky underneath and ultramarine blue, flat, and sparkling on top. I breaststroked with my eyes just above the waterline. . . . The water was warmed by the sun for a foot or so below the surface. Below that, I cut across icy currents as I swam."<sup>1</sup>

Citing her own body as a metaphor is not unusual for Nelson, who in her abstract works of acrylic and enamel chooses the scale and compositional strategies of the Abstract Expressionists to engulf a viewer and to undermine analytical distance. For her, the rectangular perimeter of the canvas seems something to defy physically. "I under-



Gathered Allusion, 1994, acrylic, enamel and muslin on canvas, 70 by 75 inches.

stand why the ab-ex painters always had trouble with the edges," she has written, "and why they ended up doing such big paintings—literally to have more space to work with. In a 75x78-inch canvas you have a disk of about 40 inches across in the middle of the canvas—that's the only free part—everything else is impinged upon by an edge."<sup>2</sup> To keep vision circulating through that "free part," out to the edges, then back in again to freedom, seems to be the principle of her restless abstraction.

Nelson taps a formal vocabulary that should by now be worn out: lines and shapes, sometimes with traces of figuration, which she makes by dripping, pouring, staining, collaging. In resurrecting mid-20th-century American abstraction, she freshens the vocabulary. She accomplishes this with little irony and no trickery—no coy references to our postmodern position nor to the impossibility of painting—by keeping the viewer's eye moving, by deluging her canvases with color, by pushing her materials to a sometimes embarrassing excess. The generous scale of her works, however, belies her true

evocation: not the shudder of the sublime but rather the surprises—and pleasures—of familiar things.

*Gathered Allusion* (1994), for example, with its riverine swirls of hot yellow paint and collaged muslin (attached and manipulated while it's wet—a technique she has used since 1988), is modernist abstraction made over in cheap fabric, like an haute-couture knock-off. She painted it "in the August heat, practically naked, with paint and gel medium up to my eyebrows. Actually, my own body is the stand-in for the female models that Yves Klein 'painted' with."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, Nelson's engagement with Abstract Expressionism is colored by much that has happened since, from Nouveau Réalisme to Post-Minimalism to body art.

Last spring, at Nelson's solo exhibition at the Michael Klein Gallery in SoHo [Mar. 2-Apr. 3, 1996], titled "Paradox Lake" after the painting, I ran into an artist friend who said, "Dona picks up in painting where Process art left off." In *Zilence* (1996), Nelson began with round white acrylic spots

about the size of dessert plates, on a ground of deep charcoal gray. The positioning of the spots was determined by a throw of coins onto the surface, a technique she often uses, saying the gamble gives her a place to begin. Nelson next poured white enamel paint over the wet surface. Her canvases are flat on the floor when she pours, as Pollock's were. Her procedure is also reminiscent of Scatter art, and the work might be seen as a painterly meditation on late-'60s and early-'70s sculpture, which itself took much from Pollock. Like the Process sculptors—one thinks of Serra tossing molten lead—Nelson lifted from Pollock the conviction that inherent in a finished work is the performance of its making and, by implication, the passing of time.

Additional, smaller pourings of pink, lavender, blue and green eddy and pool in the wetness of *Zilence*'s first white current. The pourings become the circulatory system of the painting. The field she establishes, both black-and-white and color, is a messy, extravagantly impure palette that bestows on the work a festive atmosphere (albeit a winter festivity; Nelson wished the temperature of



Zilence, 1996, latex enamel on canvas, 70 by 78 inches.

the painting to be as cool as that of *Gathered Allusion* was hot<sup>4</sup>). It appears to be streaming with confetti. The white spots, lightly scribbled with colored crayons, peek from behind the big spill and counterpoint the smaller splotches in both shape and color. Perhaps colors are the “z” in this work’s “zilence,” the buzz that prevents the black and white from becoming too serious or too still.

Abstractions, absorbed into the metalanguage of 20th-century painting the instant the pigment hits the canvas, always defer to an earlier abstraction: a drip bespeaks Pollock, a stain Frankenthaler. Abstraction is always, therefore, a representation of something that has come before, something that is as surely a part of the existing world as a tree or a house. Deeply aware of this “always-already” condition of painting, Nelson has taken the liberty throughout her career of shifting back and forth between abstraction and figuration. Her abstraction, rife with playful relationships between forms of distinct character, always resembles figuration,

and her figuration, with its subsuming of representational logic to the dictates of form and material, always impinges on abstraction.

“I consider it quite a coup,” she wrote to me recently regarding the List Arts Center’s spring 1996 exhibition “Face-to-Face: Recent Abstract Painting,” “that I got a painting with a figure in this abstract painting show. Ha. Ha.” Indeed, arcing through *New Year’s Day* (1995) is a drawn figure whose contours could conceivably be mistaken for an abstract trajectory. Though there is whimsy in this willful indeterminacy, it also speaks eloquently for the freedom to be had in painting in the ’90s: no authoritative paradigm hampers its formulation. And Nelson is willing to try anything to exploit this regenerative potential.

**R**ecognition came to the artist in the early ’80s, not for monumental abstraction but for large figurative works like *Daily News* (1982, Metropolitan Museum of Art), a still life with cat and newspaper, its space tilted up vertically, giving it the flavor of a Synthetic Cubist picture. Before that, however, had

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come many abstractions, despite the fact that Nelson studied with Malcolm Morley, never known for abstraction, at Ohio State University, where she received her MFA in 1968. She moved to New York that year to enter the fledgling Whitney Independent Study Program. Throughout the ’70s Nelson painted geometric abstractions, works inspired by Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly. In addition to these gridded and architectural pieces, she began with *House at Night* in 1973 to make spontaneous compositions as well, by pouring enamel onto canvas.

She turned to figuration in the early ’80s after becoming frustrated with what she saw as the limited capacity of abstraction to convey personal, internalized content. She began to paint whatever was readily available, including friends and family sometimes cast in imaginary or remembered landscapes: her father in *Surveyor’s Lunch* (1982), resting in the Nebraska landscape (although by then he



Days, 1983, oil on canvas, 78 by 72 inches.

lived in Ohio), or herself and painter Harriet Korman in *Perennial Conversations* (1982-83), chatting on a blanket in a park. She considers *Days* (1983) to be an important work from that time. In this painting, a yellow bicycle leans against the wall of the overlook at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. Beyond it is the rose garden in early spring, not yet in bloom, nor are the tall background trees budding. A lone forsythia bush gives the work a temporal grounding as well as carrying the yellow of the bike back into the view both visually and emotionally. The bike seems a surrogate for the artist, who perhaps rode it to the gardens on a day that first breathed an easing from winter.

"You see something through someone's eyes," says Nelson of this work. "It is an internalized vision of the landscape."<sup>5</sup> This manner of characterizing *Days* sounds more like a description of an abstract than a representational landscape. There is a quality of distractedness in her paintings—of half-seen, secondhand imagery picked out of a vast sweep of space—that establishes their emotional tenor. Balanced between distance and immediacy, between large, generalized compositional blocks and compelling, ordinary details (a bare blue-and-white pergola, the bike's yellow enamel bars), this painting entails finding what is at hand, a process Nelson now brings to all the paintings she makes, whether representational or abstract.

It appears to have been her quest from the start to find something that already exists, be it a modus operandi or an image, and make it look entirely original, to "re-present" it as though it were not a find but an invention. In the works in her recent show she forced her materials to register their manipulation, but gave them a look of immediacy that made the viewer forget the labor of their making. *Knight* (1996) is evocative of the end of a snowy winter day with patches of clouds dispersing in a cool, fast wind. Drawn across its center is a strip of muslin coated with gray paint. It makes a line that not only executes a curve vital to the sweep of the composition, but also a modeled surface implying physical manipulation by the artist. Nelson seems to "find" that line in the material world, in the muslin itself.

Perhaps Nelson's switch between figuration and abstraction is yet another way of making her project become a series of "finds." To trump any expectation (even her own) about the course her career should follow has been her lifelong endeavor. In *Dreams Travel* (1993) a pour of white takes the viewer on an adventure, as bits of muslin change from base material to image along the way: moth, ring, ant eater, jellyfish. Other



*Dreams Travel*, 1993, muslin and acrylic on canvas, 75 by 70 inches.

shapes are more nebulous, less readily identifiable as objects in the world, though no less surely images for all that. *Dreams Travel* asserts creativity (as well as seeing) as a process of finding imagery, whether it is something recognizable or apparently new.

In this process, Nelson enacts the sleight of hand practiced by poets as well as artists. Elizabeth Bishop opens her poem "The Moose" with the Maine landscape unfurling in the sunset. Sunsets have been done to death in poetry, yet in this poem, the sun is setting in an entirely fresh and novel way, "sometimes" ("sometimes the sun sets/facing a red sea,/and others, veins the flats'/lavender, rich mud/in burning rivulets") becoming *this time, now*. When the moose comes into view at the end of the poem, it is only after the poet has spent time

traveling in a bus, in the penumbra of half-heard conversations, the murmurings of lives; the animal is an apparition so big and homely that it defies interpretation. It merely vanishes, leaving a vague scent behind. To come across such unexpected creatures is the task of the artist, and only by traversing the familiar can she find something truly unexplained by anything that preceded its sighting. □

1. Artist's statement in *Face-to-Face: Recent Abstract Painting*, Cambridge, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1996, p. 18.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Letter to the author, May 26, 1996.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Conversation with the author, April 1996.

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