



Dona Nelson

Tactile Image

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exhibition continues to February 8, 2003

CHEIM & READ

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Dona Nelson: "Tactile Image"

by Brooks Adams

Intuition is making a comeback in art. Automatism, transcendentalism, and non-rational systems ranging from dream interpretation, both Freudian and Jungian, to alchemy and the Kabala have been suffusing visual culture—more so, perhaps, than at any other moment since the early 1960s, when Beat ideas entered the American mainstream and Joseph Beuys's fat, felt and mythic metaphors took hold of a generation of art students in Düsseldorf. In the last season alone we have experienced a welter of exhibitions on Surrealism and its various tributaries, along with a revival of interest in the formal experiments of Max Ernst and Man Ray; the rediscovery of pictorial work by eccentric and quasi-shamanistic figures such as the late Harry Smith; as well as the reassessment of a number of

contemporary painters representing several generations, from Lawrence Poons to Carroll Dunham, whose multifarious techniques or multilateral prospecting for imagery seemed elusive, or a little beside the point, only a few years ago. These conditions suggest an ideal climate in which to behold new work by Dona Nelson, who over the last three decades has surely proven to be one of the most relentlessly searching, rigorously idiosyncratic, and technically inventive painters alive. The monumental canvases on view here—involving graphite and charcoal frottages in the formal sense, and haptic voyages in the other, para-normal one—at once reflect this zeitgeist, and represent her own continuing quest for the meaningful mark, the aleatory impression, the revelatory mistake.

This artist has from the very beginning of her career been almost militantly nonchalant about travelling back and forth between abstraction and figuration. In fact Nelson's earliest works, made in her lower-Broadway loft during the mid-1970s heyday of Conceptualism, were site-specific wall drawings. By the end of that decade, Nelson was painting austere, abstract landscapes. Then in the early '80s, she exhibited a group of small, grisaille, lushly painted realist works, including two—a male, vaguely Christ-like nude looking at his reflection in a mirror, and a psychologically mysterious picnic scene involving a kneeling

father with infant—that I acquired at the time. (A few years later I bought *Clock in the Rain*, from 1986—a large, thoroughly poetic, semi-abstract painting with an urban park theme.) The artist's early '90s shift to an even more abstracted, though still figuration-based style of painting, involving low-relief motifs built-up with cheese cloth and gel medium (namely the “Octopusses” series), seemed abrupt and rather quixotic at first, but in retrospect clearly established the multi-material lode of textural and expressive ore that she is still mining.

Nelson's restless beat, however, goes on. Her great “Stations of the Subway” series of 1997–98 heralded the emergence of a more hard-edged, syncopated stylistic strain that suggests a synthesis of jazz-influenced urban realism and epic abstraction. And since 2000, living first in Jersey City and then in Philadelphia (while maintaining a studio in Manhattan), she has been testing her gears nonstop, shifting between a maverick but fundamentally classic form of American Scene painting, and a loonier, more purely intuitive style that can perhaps best be described as psychic automatism. The monumental drawings on canvas that comprise the present exhibition suggest roots right at that point where late Surrealism morphs into early Ab Ex. Yet Nelson's penciled totems and nimbuses never feel academic or even art historically referential, nor do they smack of

spiritualism in any traditional sense: Ouija boards these ain't. *Au contraire*. They are plainly, stubbornly grounded in the raw, irrational, inchoate now. This pioneering painter's painter has always been among the most down-to-earth of souls. Her straightforward and uncompromising temperament tethers each new formal departure, each new psychic voyage to an obdurate and dirt-simple actuality. Nelson insists on the humble source. Sometimes she unabashedly copies, for instance building unselfconsciously awkward, clunky passages in relief, made of cheesecloth and gel, that are attenuated transpositions of imagery or even entire paintings that are themselves second and third generation interpretations from a miscellany of original sources. The act of copying, of course, can have liberating implications. Since 2000, she has taken to faithfully reproducing her mother's modest landscape paintings, works the mother had made in Ohio during the late '50s and early '60s while taking art classes with her young daughter Dona. This elaborate process—in literary terms somewhere between Proust and Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*—was “one way,” according to Nelson, “of getting to know my mother better.” It was also, she says, “a way of slipping an image into abstraction.” *My Home I* (2000), the signal painting in this series, is one such “slippage.” The rough-hewn depiction of the

mother's image of a small-town church and Christmas tree in the snow is just about the corniest thing you could possibly imagine. Through its Nelsonian slip, however, the painting somehow seems grave and grandly atavistic—indeed not entirely unlike Giotto's painted rock formations from the *Trecento*, in Padua's Arena Chapel. Nelson made another, pencil-on-canvas, version of the mother's original, *My Home II* (2000), in which the artist feels she "returned the image to its early-American roots," by leaving empty a large raw canvas border. Then in *My Home III* (2000)—a version in color and with relief of the same composition that is more abstract and ineffably Gothic—the mother's tidy image of a church has been extruded and submerged in a web of blue and yellow skeins. Finally, with *Apartment* (2001), the original version of the mother's painting returns to us as a contextualized rendering: an object depicted over the mantelpiece within an interior: the artist's Philadelphia home. For *Pennsylvania Nativity* (2001), another painting with passages in relief, Nelson used a similarly humble if more emotionally remote source: a faded color postcard reproduction of an anonymous folk-art rendition of that holiday-season perennial. Here the pale, almost marmoreal appearance of the cheese-cloth constructions, inflected by graphite shading and acrylic medium in-fill, greatly amplify the postcard's wan, sec-

ond-hand images of what appear to be a Greek Revival temple and the figures of the Three Wise Men, somehow seeming to bring us closer to some original devotion. As if to worry the bone further, Nelson subsequently produced the more ghostly and allusive *Walnut Way* (2002), a large-scale charcoal rubbing taken off of her own cheesecloth build-up. For all their homely sources there is—has long been—an epic dimension to many of Nelson's landscapes. In *Mountain Road I* (2000), for example, the first in a series of at least five methodologically and visually eclectic variations on the same theme, Nelson takes on another of her mother's Sunday paintings, in this case a little fall foliage scene, and turns it into a rather wild painterly abstraction, evocative of Cy Twombly's recent floral outbursts, within an oval vignette. The words "Dona We All Enjoyed Your Comments," redolent of some long-ago Midwestern classroom, are nevertheless emblazoned in low relief along the bottom, as if to bring herself back to her own beginnings or, if you will, cutting herself, in true Calvinistic fashion, down to size.

And for all its homespun, Midwestern virtues, Nelson's work converses fluently with big-city American, as well as European precedents, distant and recent. In an interview with Ron Platt, printed in the catalogue of her 2000 exhibition at the Weather-spoon Art Gallery in Greensboro, North Carolina, Nelson

states: "I've had to think through the painting I grew up with—the Abstract Expressionists, process people like Morris Louis, the material approaches of mid-century European artists like Lucio Fontana and the Viennese Actionists, and the relationship between all that work and folk art." *Opening Night* (2002), an essentially abstract painting with an elaborately built-up surface, would certainly appear to bear out Nelson's statement. While it may suggest to the artist herself a depiction "of a stage on which I'm an actor, allowed to do anything I want," many viewers will likely think they hear echos from out of Antoni Tàpies, Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana. (The white-gold and baked-parchment tones of the vessel-like forms in the lower part of the painting in particular recall figurative motifs in many of Fontana's ceramics.) The constructed surface of *Opening Night* furthermore generated a number of pencil rubbings (with acrylic medium on canvas), including works such as *Anne's Lace* (2002), whose cave-drawing and fossils-in-sediment aspect evoke Tàpies, and whose ethereally subtle morphoses recall Arshile Gorky; as well as *Naked* (2002), my personal favorite, whose variously mineral and biomorphic forms inflected by doses of adamant black and bright green make me think of Clyfford Still, and seem also to be engaged in high-level dialogues with a couple of Nelson's near-exact contempo-

varies, especially with early '80s works by Carroll Dunham, and with more recent work by Terry Winters.

In fact, Nelson's work in general, at once exalted and humble, appears to be at home within an even more up-to-the-minute, international context: a currently cresting wave of anti-epic activity that would encompass Peter Doig's vast, weirdly normative landscapes; Paul Noble's Borgesian, large-scale drawings of urban prototypes, plans and blueprints, from office buildings to graveyards; Toba Khedoori's colossal, precisionist renderings of small architectural details and lowly rocks; Matthew Ritchie's delicately expansive, maplike allegories; Michael Raedecker's tonal, fuguelike, threaded landscapes; and Russell Crotty's enormous yet minute, obsessively penciled, oceanic and astronomic surfer's notations. And so the question, as ever with Nelson, remains: is she like a balloonist—something of a tinkerer and thoroughly independent, even eccentric in an old-fashioned way—who occasionally steers straight into the eye of a storm? Or is she, as I believe her to be, more nearly elemental, more central, more of a weather system unto herself, one that others ought closely to observe.