

The Sincere Passion of Dona Nelson



Installation view of Dona Nelson, "The Individualism of Dona Nelson", CANADA, New York, NY, 2026

By EDWARD WAISNIS January 25, 2026

"You can never really see my two-sided paintings. You can view photographs (of) both sides of a particular painting, and then say you saw a painting...But, in the actual space of the exhibition you can never completely see it. You leave the exhibition with an impression of the paintings. An impression is different from seeing. It's hard to pin down, and not in the same category relative to sight, as an image that can be remembered. Impression is a word that is more related to mood and the space around your body. My two-sided paintings cannot be photographed as you would experience them in an exhibition, walking around them."
—Dona Nelson *

Nearly a quarter century in at producing two-sided paintings (previously featured in an exhibition at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia that I happened to review for this forum) Dona Nelson presents a new body of work, in this format, in this exhibition informed with a title that riffs with an album by jazz great Gil Evans. Rather than a curious choice, the moniker proclaims Nelson's process in approaching composition as well as her singularity. And, like a musician, Nelson modulates the timbre and delves into the tablature of her viscous pigments—thin to thick, complex to parred-down, ver incident and evocations—the very ooze of paint.

By allowing paint to seep through unprimed surfaces, Nelson rejects the traditional frontal gaze, forcing a reconciliation between two visually distinct but materially interdependent planes.

(Allowing that Nelson has intentionally created works meant to have both side viewable, it is almost as though she has commandeered the niche experience, in the rarified world of high art, afforded the rarified horde of art dealers, collectors, museum curators and conservationists, and art handlers who get to view the recto of a painting during it's trafficking from storage, travel, installation, or conservation.)

Nelson's process involves ropy wads of cheesecloth, impregnated with acrylic medium, utilized as a tool to delineate intuitive drawing onto which pools of color are poured; a technique with echoes of Helen Frankenthaler. Once dry the cheesecloth is extracted leaving rivulets, gouges and stains that constitute the work's unearthed imagery.



Dona Nelson, "Monday", 2025, acrylic and mediums on canvas, 88 x 106 inches.

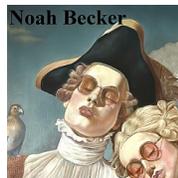
Studying under the influential painter Malcolm Morley, who has since settled into underrated stature, was instrumental to Nelson's development. The work of sculptors (David Smith, a touchstone) further informed Nelson, leading to the embrace of painting "in the round". Frank Stella's messaging of painting as object has long-term impacted Nelson's course.

Nelson has also found inspiration in her own back yard. From the collections of the museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, to a throwaway application of Cambodian antiquities in a Philadelphia neighborhood memorial park, to the temple of eccentricity that is the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, PA. What she takes, in studying these collections of time-ravaged antiquities—and various sundry homespun objects in the case of the Mercer—is the ill-defined nature of these time ravaged forms as she

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elucidated in a talk: "Forms when they are worn away...no difference between representation and abstraction". †

Apropos Nelson's hometown loyalties, as well as further evidence of stimulus for her free-standing works, add Marcel Duchamp's seminal *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (aka *The Large Glass*), 1915–23, housed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that eliminates designated 'sides' by dint of being orchestrated on a sheet of glass.



Dona Nelson, "Saturday", 2025, acrylic on canvas, 106 x 88 inches.

Bright Night and *Saturday*, both 2024, work up Johnson interplays of the primaries caught in late-Stellaesque webs.



Dona Nelson, "Juniper", 2024, acrylic and mediums on canvas, 60 x 61 inches.

Juniper, 2025, holds the jewel-like qualities of stained-glass through a panoply of marine blues and teal with foliage like outcroppings of kelp green. Given that this work, together with *Bright Night*, have the earliest dates I suspect that they represent an origin point for this cycle of Nelson's practice.



Dona Nelson, "River", 2025, acrylic and mediums on canvas, painted stringer, power-coated steel, 106 x 88 inches.

River, 2025, presents a unique conundrum. Namely, what does the front look like. Affixed to the wall, in a normal installation fashion, but with what would be read as the facing side of the canvas against the wall. And what a back, with it's predominate stretcher bars, spottily stained, brought front and center as compositional element laid over a kaleidoscopic bed serving as field. I have to wonder if this was one of those 'happy accidents' that painters stumble into, from time-to-time? I can imagine the circumstances that led Nelson to turn the painting to the wall and consequently coming to the decision that it was actually finished in that state.



Dona Nelson, "Monday", 2025, acrylic and mediums on canvas, 88 x 106 inches.

A personal favorite, *Monday*, 2025, contrasts a seemingly leather inlay-inspired tangle, on the one side, juxtaposed with a masterful simplicity, evocative of Robert Motherwell's work, on the other. The predominant cerulean-to-teal coloration of the wash that encapsulates a minimal frame square on the wall facing side. Fixed to a floor stand and tethered to the wall with a system of industrial pipes and flanges that situate it several feet from the wall predicated orientation dysphoria that is something of a Nelson trope.



Dona Nelson, "Grass", 2025, acrylic on canvas, powder-coated steel, 108 x 88 inches.

Another show-stopper, *Grass*, 2025, is a dominant presence showcasing a mossy (aerial) schematic and cross-section of a morass of strata, on it's respective sides.

Nelson proves that painting is not a fiction to be questioned, but a field of endless, visceral possibility. For those interested in the evolution of gestural abstraction, her work is essential.



* Dona Nelson, Vermont Studio Center talk from 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORJxHTrVkzA>

† *ibid.*

Dona Nelson: *The Individualism of Dona Nelson*
CANADA (in collaboration with Thomas Erben Gallery)
60 Lispenard Street, New York, NY 10013
January 8–February 14, 2026



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