

# Dona Nelson's Time Pieces

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Dona Nelson paints landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, figures, interiors, fireworks, seasons, and rain. In her most articulated paintings many of these genres coexist, forming poetic strata. Nelson's work is full of allusions to memory, to an ongoing present, and to dreamlike states alike. Her pictorial syntax—simultaneously choppy and fluent, stoic and plaintive, alternately rarefied and rude of tone—suggests the plain-and-fancy flavor we taste in the writing of Wallace Stevens. Nelson draws from life on the outside as well as from what one senses, unmistakably, to be the elaborate inner life of the soulful loner. Her paintings depend as much on straightforward subjects out of what is commonly called the common vernacular as they do on the oblique, the ineffable, the ephemeral.

Through the '70s and early '80s Nelson produced a good number of small and middle-sized landscapes and seascapes, often in black and white, that are all but abstract. The implicitly mystical preoccupation with light sources and the bold, bald compositional style in these paintings, which include *Flying Near the Earth*, 1980, *Shells*, 1981, and *Rolling Ocean*, 1981, recall the nocturnal seascapes of Winslow Homer and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the early work of Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove, as well as late-'70s and early-'80s work by a number of Nelson's contemporaries who were considered "New Image" painters at the time. While Nelson's work may continue to elicit comparisons like these, however, it remains highly idiosyncratic. In the early '80s she veered away from abstracted and minimalist rendering and began to paint figurative subjects, often urban,

sometimes autobiographical, that suggested a personal, indeed rather old-fashioned search for expressive meaning. Nelson is an artist without a ready agenda. Where others painted figures as cultural emblems or elements of style, she went for characterization and emotional pitch. Even during this period, a heyday for a populist artist such as John Ahearn—the plaster-cast *caravaggiste* who shares Nelson's clear empathy for inner-city subjects—and for figuration in general, her paintings seemed to exist somewhere off on their own.

A group of very small black-and-white paintings on Masonite from 1981–82—ambiguous figure studies, family psychodramas, odd mystery scenes—marks this shift in Nelson's work. There is, for example, a latter-day Narcissus facing a dressing-room mirror in a stance of homoerotic self-awareness that recalls recent performances by John Kelly. (Intimations of sexual duality subtly filter through Nelson's body of work. A painting from 1984 called *Summer Man*, for instance, is alternately titled *Portrait of Myself as a Man*, and this ambiguity is echoed in several works from 1988 involving studio models. Where Nelson's male models are psychologically distinct—clearly subjects with whom the artist has identified—her women tend to seem generalized or idealized.) Family scenes include a young, vaguely Eisenhower-era father spanking a small child at a picnic ground. There is also *Late Picnic*, 1982, a strange, evocative little item whose two figures seem to be involved in a moonlit séance-by-a-tree. The emotionally taut climate of these brushy, spontaneous-looking pieces—each as if a memory

Below: **Dona Nelson, Days, 1983**, oil on canvas, 84 x 72".  
Opposite: **Dona Nelson, California Landscape or The Man Who Needs Everything, 1988**, oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 84 x 75".



caught in a snare—make me think of psychodramas by William Inge, raising the possibility that Nelson is a Method painter. The expressive immediacy of her more intimate work from the beginning of this decade, paintings such as *Surveyor's Lunch*, 1982, *Reader*, 1982, and *The Yellow Cabinet*, 1983, suggest a potent and peculiar brew of Edward Hopper and Van Gogh.

Nelson's outlook is, I suppose, very 1950s. There is a plangent tone in a lot of her work that relates, quite directly, to street photography, Beat poetry, and jazz. Moreover, though she was a postwar baby, it is almost as if she had absorbed the shocks and ideals of the Depression era. In fact her New York City paintings, urban scenes such as *Cold City Night*, or *Cold, Busy Street*, or *Corner*, or *Summer Man*, or *Second Cook*, all from 1984, seem to some extent to reflect the experiences of artists—the Mexican muralists, the American “magic realist” O. Louis Guglielmi—who cut their teeth on the socialist politics and public programs of the 1930s. Nelson's city paintings are heatedly painted in a slightly lurid palette, and are chock full of garbage cans and bits of skyscraper, work clothes and newspapers, figures warming their hands in the streets, doorway bums, tenement stoops, and high-top sneakers—signs of our times that add up to a neo-WPA atmosphere.

It is to paintings by the late David Park, however, that Nelson's work most closely relates. The whirring blue bicycle wheels and simple-as-pie style of *Coming Storm*, 1983, recall Park's *Kids on Bikes* of 1950. The toughish glamour-girl caught in traffic in *Stripes at the Crosswalk*, 1983,





**Dona Nelson, *Double Time*, 1986**, oil, charcoal, and collage on canvas, 84 x 60".

might be the daughter or date of one of Park's numerous café and jazz-club patrons, while *Pink Raincoat*, 1983—one of the more satisfying city-in-the-rain paintings this side of Gustave Caillebotte—has the disarming directness of Park's paintings of children and friends. Park, too, abandoned abstraction to pursue what he felt to be a more socially vital form. Like Nelson—who was born in Grand Island, Nebraska, and grew up in central Ohio, has lived on both coasts, and leads the sometimes peripatetic existence of those who must teach—he lived in California's Bay Area as well as in the Northeast. Both of their work is intensely American, while also being indebted to France. Perhaps most important, both are temperamental loners whose regard, however sympathetic, is nonetheless at a remove, busy recording, like some erratic subjective camera. This is especially unusual in Nelson's case, today, when so many artists have adopted the roles of critic or diagnostician, composer or designer.

The poetic articulation of Nelson's work varies from mood to mood and piece to piece rather than according to subject. With *Festival of Fire in the Dark City*, *May Night*, and the smaller *Falling to the Sea*, all inspired by the waterfront celebration of the Brooklyn Bridge's 1984 centennial, we find her in an epic-rhapsodic vein. These near panoramas are probably her most public, least quirky paintings, but they include a number of extremely fluent passages of white used variously to outline silhouetted figures against the night, to define the aerial trajectory of a falling "chrysanthemum" of light, or to create the day-for-night



**Dona Nelson, *Dancing Glance and Contemplation*, 1987**, oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 84 x 75".

effects of cinematography. *The Baby Park*, 1985, and *Cold Park*, 1986, are of identical size (84 by 84 inches), have the same subject (children in park settings), and are seen from the same flattening, overhead perspective. They are nonetheless as drastically contrasted in all other ways as a birthday party and a breadline. The first painting is a boomer's cornucopia (toddlers everywhere!) made up of smooth, assured strokes and well-defined zones of buoyant color, a little like some circa-1960 work by Alex Katz on the theme of benign family recreation. The second, more a drawing than a painting really, is scratched out against a pale yellow-green ground and is both physically and figuratively threadbare.

Nelson's eclecticism is in part willful. She mistrusts technical facility, being of a school of thought that tends to equate it with moral glibness. Yet many of her works show her to be a sensualist as well, with a bit of the magpie's fondness for flash and splendor. *Dancing Glance and Contemplation*, 1987, is a big and wonderful painting, as intensely patterned as a painting by Edouard Vuillard. Its dazzle does not entirely eclipse a lurking melancholia. In it we find small, scattered, huddled *pentimenti*-like figures receding wistfully from a kaleidoscope of blue, gray, and yellow orientalist pattern. It is as if they were figures out of Raphael Soyer turning away from the heat generated elsewhere on the canvas by Pierre Bonnard. A nearly life-size, urban Sun King of a figure radiates with a motley, macho, sartorial splendor at the center of the picture.

Whatever her subject, however, Nelson's essen-



Dona Nelson, *Pink Raincoat*, 1983, oil on canvas, 30 x 20".  
Private collection.

tial theme is time. Virtually all of her paintings produce the subliminal sensation of a clock ticking—a clock whose arms move according to a subjective, wholly unmechanical logic. In *Clock in the Rain*, 1985, one of her most dreamily poetic distillations, these arms take the form of two coat sleeves sticking out from under an umbrella, as if searching for the moment to mark. In *Double Time* and *Wavelength*, also from 1986, the artist's familiar repertory of faces, arms, umbrella, wood-grained tabletops, newspapers, letters, sleeping cats, and legs in high-heeled shoes accumulate, giving us pictures of distraction, of many lives lived at once, which is how most of us live. Reading the newspaper, watching the cat, and thinking of you—each of these actions is a universe collapsed in an instant. Time, for Nelson, reflects no theory and is strictly a first-person-singular affair. It is almost as if her work were itself a metaphor for the solitude enjoyed or suffered by all who must invent what they do as they invent themselves. In a poem from 1978 titled "Timebourine," Nelson wrote, "In a dream, we were talking earnestly about time./ I have never understood these concepts./ I said 'Time is flat./' You said, 'No, it's folded.'" Flat time and folded time are the elements, both formal and internal, in Nelson's work. Rain, sleet, snow, and the winds of March are moods of the face on the clock—something the postman must get through to bring you a letter, while living in whatever weather is on his mind. □

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