

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Dona Nelson Stands Alone

The dizzying effect of Nelson's two-sided paintings brings to mind the sensory overload of living in a city.

By John Yau  
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Installation view, *Dona Nelson: Stretchers Strung Out On Space* at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Since Jackson Pollock first poured enamel onto an unsized canvas laid out on the floor, artists have restated painting's identity in a multitude of ways, starting with Helen Frankenthaler pouring paint onto raw canvas. Lucio Fontana cut incisions into monochromatic surfaces; Sam Gilliam mounted unstretched, painted canvases on the wall; William Tillyer cut open paintings so that the wall beneath became part of the viewer's experience; and Analia Saban made a large sphere from the fabric of unraveled paintings.

Dona Nelson, however, has turned the fact that a painting is a two-sided canvas surface attached to a wood stretcher into something that challenges the aesthetic and experiential boundaries we associate with looking at them —

even for those familiar with these other defiances. In an interview with Leeza Meksin (*Brooklyn Rail*, July-August 2018), Nelson states that she makes “three kinds of double-sided paintings.” After defining each kind, she goes on to say: “Most of the paintings start as two-sided paintings, and sometimes, early in the process, one side looks particularly good to me. I decide that the painting is a wall work and usually cover the back with muslin.” As these words make clear, she is improvisational and open in her approach, rather than programmatic.

All three kinds of double-sided paintings, and some one-sided works, are included in the exhibition *Dona Nelson: Stretchers Strung Out On Space*, at Thomas Erben Gallery (February 20–April 3, 2021). For those of us who were unable to attend her exhibition, *Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings*, at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College (May 12–Aug 12, 2018), curated by Ian Berry, this selection affords viewers the opportunity to see the full range of the artist’s investigations and the wildness of her work.



Installation view, *Dona Nelson: Stretchers Strung Out On Space* at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Foreground, “Studio Portrait Over Time” (2016), cheesecloth, muslin, painted string and acrylic mediums on linen, 81 x 36 x 5 inches; base 38 x 32 inches

While the gallery space is packed with artworks, and can feel overwhelming at times, this challenge seems integral to Nelson’s assault on the two-dimensional, wall-mounted

format of traditional painting, as well as painting's promise of aesthetic sanctuary. The dizzying effect of Nelson's two-sided paintings brought to mind the feeling of living in a city — its sensory overload and the nagging sense that it is far beyond comprehension, except in fragmented glimpses. At the same time, while her works evoke the invigorating chaos of New York streets, they do not attempt to mimic it. A sense of order and humor run through them, which is especially apparent in her figurative pieces.

"Studio Portrait Over Time" (2016), which is made of cheesecloth, muslin, painted string, and acrylic mediums, consists of two two-sided paintings mounted on a base at a slight angle to each other. Both paintings stand over six feet high and around three feet wide, which corresponds to the personal space taken up by a standing adult. It is not quite the space we associate with social distancing, but it gives the individual breathing room, so to speak. By separating the two paintings just enough that we can look at the space between them and see what is on the obverse side, Nelson invites us to connect four different views.



One of the four features two figures made of cheesecloth soaked in an acrylic medium. A seated figure is seen in profile, the chair's legs cropped by the painting's bottom edge. Standing next to the seated figure, further back, is someone in a gridded shirt, wearing what could be a bishop's miter. When I looked at the back of this panel, painted string and the faint, linear silhouette of the two figures (the result of the acrylic used to stiffen cheesecloth soaking through and staining the canvas) quickly made me aware of the artwork on the other side.

Two figures are also on the neighboring panel, on the side stretched over the support — one standing and one seated. The standing one — a featureless figure made of white cheesecloth soaked in a clear acrylic medium — is on the painting's left side, cropped by the left edge. One of its distinguishing features is a large ear. Meanwhile, the uneven surface of this form, a result of the cheesecloth, becomes a topographical terrain.

In this same painting, just to the right of the standing figure is a vertical line



Dona Nelson, "Studio Portrait Over Time" (2016), cheesecloth, muslin, painted string and acrylic mediums on linen, 81 x 36 x 5 inches; base 38 x 32 inches



made of painted string; it defines the left edge of an incomplete rectangle, whose top and bottom are composed partially of string. Overlapping, painted strings — which seem to parody crosshatching — penetrate the painting's surface along the left side of the seated figure.

The portrait of standing and seated figures in an artist's studio is familiar, but Nelson has rescued it from cliché's vicious jaws. How many times have we seen this image and not seen the sitters' faces? By disregarding the cult of celebrity, she reminded this viewer, at least, how much this persona dominates the media.

But much more is going on in "Studio Portrait Over Time" than what I have just described. Is the rectangle, whose dimensions echo that of the painting, a "painting" or a window? The question gets turned on its head when we realize that the painting has two sides; Nelson further complicates it by her use of cheesecloth on the other side, which soaks through. Additionally, there are two two-sided paintings, which seem both related (two figures, one seated) and distinct.



Dona Nelson "Riley and Olive" (2020), painted string on linen panel mounted on plywood base, 71 x 43 x 4 inches

Another shift that takes place in this panel is in the relationship of the standing and seated figure. On the inward-facing painting, the standing figure is closer to us and dominates the composition. For the outward-facing side Nelson has reversed the power dynamic: the seated figure is closer to us. Each side seems to present an artist and a companion in a studio. There is no overt narrative.



In “Riley and Olive” (2020), done primarily in painted string, Nelson uses the wood frame to upend what we think of as the front and back of a painting. On what is typically the reverse side, because of its relationship to the shallow, box-like frame, we see two young women. Seated side by side, they are larger than the painting, and extend beyond its edges.

For works with painted string on both sides, Nelson collaborates with her assistant, who helps shape the composition by choosing where to thread the string to the artist, on the other side. The assistant’s leeway “opens up the field of drawing,” as Nelson told Meksin.

Drawing is not usually considered an activity given to collaboration or dual authorship. And yet, by acknowledging the role played by her assistants, and her inability to see what exactly is being “drawn,” Nelson once again subverts assumptions about drawing and authorship. By using painted string, she connects drawing to weaving and embroidery, extending the parameters of these forms.

Nelson accomplishes so many smart, interesting, engaging, and challenging things in her work, while never losing sight of how she uses her materials, her sense of playfulness, her willingness to push her technique further, and her recognition that painting is an intensely physical activity.



Dona Nelson “Riley and Olive” (2020), painted string on linen panel mounted on plywood base, 71 x 43 x 4 inches

Along with incorporating string, her application of canvas collage, acrylic mediums, and cheesecloth to the raw canvas expand the definition of painting. In addition to the two figurative paintings, abstract works such as “WOOD” and “Spring” (both 2020) are a celebration of materials and processes.

At one point, while standing in the square space of the gallery, my turning this way and that, I realized that the walls and architecture were no longer the setting in which I saw the paintings. It was like being inside a maze; I was not always sure what direction I wanted to take. At another point, looking at the visible part of a crate leaning against a wall (behind one of Nelson’s freestanding paintings), I wondered if it was part of the exhibition. I think Nelson’s ability to blur and undermine categories is just one of her many strengths. When she makes a painting whose surface has been cut open, she is suppressing the distinction between art (a finished product) and damage and decay (waste).

Nelson has merged the intellectual headiness of her work with a deep and sensual feel for her materials, and an obvious pleasure in the making. This is just part of why she is such an important artist.

