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Dona Nelson

A Conversation with Iva Gueorguieva

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Dona Nelson in her Pennsylvania studio (detail), 2019. Photo by Gary Donnelly

LOCKS GALLERY

Since the late 1960s, Dona Nelson has pursued an independently minded practice, countering painting's as a "capitalist project of repetitious products." Although they painted abstractly in the 1970s, Nelson started painting representationally in 1981. As Nelson wrote in 1977:

Present-day abstract painting is almost totally ruled by painting conventions: grids, stripes, panels, fields of all-over activity, images suspended in the middle canvas, etc. Why paint abstractly at all if our paintings are bound by more rigid organizing conventions than the portrait, landscape and still life ever were?

An example of their work from the early 1980s can be found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Daily News*,1983, is a table still life in a New York City loft interior that features a flattened newspaper with the sports page on one side and headlines warning of nuclear proliferation on the other side. In 1990, they returned to a version of abstract painting along with continuing

to make various kinds of representational work. Since the late 1990s, they have tried to include, as an aspect of individual paintings, references to the architectural context of the painting display, deconstructing both their paintings and conventional gallery installations of paintings. For example, their exhibition, *Stations of the Subway*, at Cheim and Read Gallery in New York City in 1999, merged suggestions of the architecture of the City of New York with abstract paintings. They have been making two-sided paintings since 2003, and in 2014, their large two-sided paintings, hanging from the ceiling in the Whitney Biennial, were written about in *The New York Times* as some of the strongest work in the exhibition.

The exhibition, *Moby Dick*, at Michael Benevento Gallery in Los Angeles, February 4th to March 25th, 2023, was a continuation of a fifty-year painting practice that has rejected distinctions between abstract and representational painting and insisted on acknowledging the construct of the art exhibition itself. As in Nelson's exhibitions in other cities, *Moby Dick* featured figurative "box" paintings (double sided paintings in thick wooden frames) alongside freestanding abstract paintings and paintings hanging on the wall. Endlessly inventive with materials, Dona constructs their paintings by many different means using acrylic paint, gel medium, strips of cheesecloth, or folded and collaged pieces of muslin, charcoal, and painted string.

The large double-sided paintings bisect Benevento's gallery space, obstructing the open line of sight and the physical passage of the viewer, while the "boxes" stand near the walls and resemble doorways full of onlookers and loiterers.

Dona Nelson, *Moby Dick*, 2022, acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 106 x 88 inches

With its low ceilings and beautiful black wood beams, Benevento's gallery is particularly conducive to the feeling of being in a ship. Architecturally unique, the space features two wings projecting to the left and right, creating a continuously segmented space of multiple chambers. The chamber on the right features the large painting *Moby Dick*,

2022 mounted on the wall. The opposite chamber, on the left, has a projection of the back side of *Moby Dick*. In front stands a box painting called *Mate*, 2022, illuminated by a powerful single bulb that produces an x-ray effect, allowing the folds of the collaged fabric to appear as tissue and bone.

The abstract double-sided paintings sometimes have sides that are similar, such as *Moby Dick*, 2022, but often they are very distinct. The fluid paint puddles or stains the canvas saturating the surface bearing collaged strips of cheesecloth, as well as scar-like traces of its application and subsequent removal.

The figures and groups of figures that populate the "boxes" are constructed from collage and colorful string or drawn with charcoal. The different mediums used to render these figurative forms create the sensation of witnessing the simultaneity/ contemporaneity of their internal lives and their external appearances. It's happening all at once so the sensation of being seen, watched, intuited, followed, intensifies the more the viewer traverses the space. The effects accumulate and stick to you, obfuscating any sense of a singular or ideal vantage point.

I have been talking with Dona Nelson and looking and thinking about their work for 26 years. Our marathon-length phone conversations leave my sketchbooks filled with maps of dashes, phrases, doodles and names of writers and artists that look like debris after a tornado. I am thrilled to have this opportunity to converse publicly with one of the most significant American painters working today.

Iva Gueorguieva
Los Angeles, California, 2023

Dona Nelson, *All Summer Long*, 2022, acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 82 x 82 inches

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Iva Gueorguieva: After seeing your exhibition *Moby Dick*, I had a dream in which the large painting *All Summer Long*, 2022 stood in a field of tall late summer yellow grass holding up the sky.

The more I thought about the physicality of the Benevento's space with its two-winged chambers, the more I connected it to diagrams of the brain with its left and right hemispheres and infinite neuro connectors. I realized that despite the hyper-materiality of the work, the concrete, the oozing paint, the rough collage, the conceptual architecture of your project is based in the most ephemeral and fleeting aspects of our sensory existence and constructions of meaning. When Lucio Fontana stabbed his luscious monochromes in 1949, he penetrated the surface, opening the space to the void—to a negative. Your double-sided paintings act as membranes, as liminal conditions of possibility. Does it make sense to talk about the paintings as beings and as fields of sensory possibilities?

Dona Nelson: You, Iva, have described my exhibition, *Moby Dick*, so thoroughly, eloquently, and generously, that I hardly know what I can add! I do try to work every painting until it becomes an image. I would not call them "beings," but when I see they are finished, there is a kind of recognition on my part of a work of art that did not exist before. I always feel that I am not original, but my paintings are. Because I work flat with watery paint, gravity plays a big part in how they turn out. I just keep working with the materials (water, paint, cheesecloth, muslin, canvas) without judgment or expectations and then, boom, an image appears! The painting appears! I really like what you say about hyper-materiality and ephemerality. Sometimes people have said

that my work is messy, but when a painting becomes an image, it is quite precise, delicate, and active. Image ephemerality is especially strong and active in the painting *Moby Dick*, which is why I used that name for the show. Sometimes, the same thing happens when I am working from a model. I worked from two models when I made *Mate*. One had to leave, and I finished the work with another person, but that figure is a moody presence rather than a portrait. I wanted *Mate* standing at the entrance of the show like the plastic or printed figures of waiters sometimes at the entrance of restaurants.

The abstract paintings are very different when I include figurative boxes. Why do you think that is?

IG: The double-sidedness heightens the ephemerality of the image since, as the viewer moves back and forth, they are unable to construct a whole. The image hovers in the space activated by the attention of the painter/viewer. The "boxes," full of presences/witnesses, mark the viewer looking and affect the quality of the attention. I think the triangulation of looking, being looked at, and sensing being witnessed, renders the whole subject/object question moot and bends the material, psychological and emotional conditions of both making and looking into a continuum. I recall a moment in the book when Captain Ahab meticulously sands down a small indentation in the boat meant to hold in place his prosthetic leg. The stability of his physical body is the pivot for his "sighting" of the behemoth, the a priori condition of "capture." I think the "boxes" stabilize the viewer's body the way the indentation stabilizes Ahab. They function as a kind of fulcrum.

The fact that *Mate* is penetrated by the intensity of the light bulb mounted exactly at his center dematerializes it and makes it seem spectral. We take exhibition lighting for granted but here you choose to highlight it and make it even theatrical. Why did you choose to use mechanical means to feature and amplify the dematerialization of the image in this exhibition? And how does this choice exemplify your approach to constructing an exhibition? Your agency in making the paintings is that of a "worker." Who are you when you install an exhibition?

DN: By "mechanical means" do you mean the spotlight in the porcelain socket attached to the wall illuminating *Mate*, 2022? I love those old-fashioned white porcelain sockets. For one thing, I thought it was a nice little sculpture to go with the sculpture/painting that *Mate*, 2022 is, but more importantly, I needed a bright light shining at the front of *Mate*, 2022, so that when you go around to the back of the painting, the construction of the figure would show up like an x-ray. There is a small muslin construction on the back as well—a nose and glasses. Other than that, without the spotlight, the back of *Mate* is plain linen. Do you know the photographs of the great Czech photographer Josef Sudek? His photographs sometimes feature a corny surreal moment like a broken mask on a wall covered with vines. Low tech corniness . . . a light gesture, literally! On the other hand, I'm not a fan of very dramatic installations, black walls etc. Paintings are best seen in simple settings, hopefully with some natural light.

I like seeing my paintings in light situations other than under halogen lights. They reveal themselves differently, especially the relief figurative boxes. I always insist that Thomas Erben take down the wall in front of the windows when I have a show in NYC, and when I stop by the gallery, I'll often turn off most of the gallery lights. Of course,

as soon as I leave, the gallery turns them back on again! Mostly, in contemporary galleries, paintings are overlit, which kills 'um!

Yeah, I'm a worker when I make my paintings, but I'm an artist when I do my installations! I don't make paintings for shows and all my paintings are different from one another, so the way they are put together when I do show them is crucial! If I can't be there to install, things generally don't work out. My strongest attribute as an artist is my feeling for space. Since I was a child, I've always loved going into rooms where I have never been. Rooms with four walls are mysterious and alive for me, more than nature I'm embarrassed to admit! That is another thing I love about Josef Sudek. He mostly stayed at home, photographing his windowsill, his yard, a few still life objects... poetry so rare and everywhere!

Dona Nelson, *Mates*, 2022, muslin, charcoal, acrylic medium on linen, 75 1/ x 43 1/4 inches (front and back)

IG: I just looked up Josef Sudek and the photographs of his window in the rain, the water obliterating the view outside—are stunning. Your admission that you love interiors gives me a good opportunity to direct my next question to your recent show *Re-Figuring: One Painting at a Time: 1977-2022* at Thomas Erben gallery, NYC, which is structured around *Surveyor's Lunch*, 1981-82, a large portrait from memory of your father. His back side feels like a portal, an opening that can contain the body of the viewer. If the viewer consents to be thus taken in, the payoff is viewing through the surveyor's eyes, from this perspective one can see both the landscape and the exhibition. The small gray paintings from the 70s installed diagonally from the

Surveyor's Lunch, 1981-82, feel like compass readings or visual clues akin to quotes from Rumi, meant to direct, guide, and shift one's perspective. What are some of these clues?

This exhibition surprised me because I usually sense interiors or narrow urban spaces when I think of your paintings. The "land" erupted in this exhibition, and I found myself considering its meaning as a place of birth, of return, of belonging. What is your relationship to "land" or to a place and how does that affect the ways in which you enact these connections within and through the act and space of painting?

DN: "Portal?" . . . There is something about that word that I find humorous. "Beam me up, Scotty!" His back is kind of the shape of a door, but the thing about painting someone from the back is that you are naturally looking at the same view that they are; you don't have to go through the back of the figure! It did occur to me in the 1970s that I was plotting out the surface areas of my paintings in a surveyor-like way—objectively. I think I even wrote that at one point. I was trying hard to be objective with those little grey paintings, thinking about Abstract Painting. I don't really think in complicated ways, you know, "clues" and such, when I put together shows. One thing that connects the various bodies of work is the attempt to reconcile a view of the horizon when you are positioned above a painting that is resting on milk crates. The lavender painting, *Twilight*, 2022, that was on cinder blocks, is map-like, and *Fisherwoman*, 2022 has a horizon on the figurative side and is basically a horizontal stripe painting on the other side. If you put a horizontal stripe painting in the proximity of a painting with

Dona Nelson, *ReFiguring, one painting at a time (1977 to 2022)*, installation view with *Twilight*, 2022, acrylic and acrylic mediums on canvas, 80 x 80 inches

a horizon line, it's going to be read as a landscape reference, especially if the stripes are brownish! Ken Noland did horizontal stripe paintings in pink that didn't have a landscape reading.

I am from Nebraska, and I do prefer "big sky country" where you can see a horizon line, but I am not a nostalgic type of person. Instead of looking at the horizon, I look down at the ground under my feet, and a new painting is resting there on milk crates. It's a new day and a new painting! I painted that painting of my father forty years ago! I don't want to "return" anywhere. My studio is my home.

IG: I accept the inevitable alignment of the viewer's line of sight with that of a figure painted from the back. My description aimed to amplify the fact that your work demands an embodied response from the viewer. Similarly, when I asked about the "clue" that the gray paintings suggest I was thinking about your description of *Untitled*, 1978 in which you refer to the bending intersection of two black lines twisting as "the effect of turning one's head."

You don't simply put together a group of paintings when installing a show. You consider a specific place and time; these paintings won't be alive in quite the same way ever again, just the way we as humans are alive singularly at every given instant. It's this space/time singularity of the viewed painting that fascinates me.

The painting *November 1*, 2022 resting on the crates feels very different from *All Summer Long*, 2022 touching the ceiling. One painting rests, the other one holds up. When I asked about the "land," I wasn't thinking of it symbolically or metaphorically. I was thinking of it as the place where we all stand, the earth. It's connected to your description of how you always stand on your feet as well as to the sense of your activities in the studio as "labor."

I love Warren Rohrer's work and we have talked about him several times. He grew up in a Mennonite community and lived and painted in Christiana, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the state where you also currently choose to live. He thinks of the land tended by farmers as akin to his canvases and expressive of the same conceptual and formal essence. I see *Fisherwoman* as a direct statement about the verticality of the living human body locked into a dynamic inevitability with the horizontality of the land. When the painting lays on crates it is the land, and the expanse is both terrifying and exhilarating. I am thinking of Pip (the character in the book Moby Dick) when he falls from the boat a second time and is left at sea alone. The sea holds up his body but "drowns the infinity of his soul" and when retrieved, he is all but mad.

When Rohrer thinks of the painting's edges, he thinks of the fencerow, a boundary the farmer reckons with that brackets her activities. In the 70s Rohrer chose to adopt the grid. What is your relationship to the grid? The stretcher bars are sculptural grids that are front and center in the double-sided paintings. I am also curious about the role of judgment. When you describe your process there is extreme precision and specificity but instead of judgment, you call it a presence. So how do you decide that the process has delivered a painting?

DN: Where I live is a nondescript suburban town with strip malls, north of Philadelphia, very different from the pastoral place that Lancaster is! I actually like

junky strip malls with little businesses with abandoned manikins in the window better than pastoral places! I'm the anti/Wyeth! I studied with Malcolm Morley, a transplanted Brit, a conceptual POP artist, and a very interesting artist. He used to say, "Cut Andrew Wyeth and he bleeds sentimentality." For some reason, he had a bee in his bonnet about Andrew Wyeth! Of course, Warren Rohrer is completely different than Andrew Wyeth. Warren Rohrer is a wonderful lyrical abstract painter, a master of subtle, woven color and delicate touch. I know you are really interested in him because, after graduating from Tyler, you did research for the Warren Rohrer show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, but I'm about as different a painter from Warren Rohrer as you could possibly find. As a matter of fact, I probably have more in common with Andrew Wyeth than Warren Rohrer because Wyeth is such a cornball and there are aspects of my work that are kind of corny. The relationship of my paintings to land has to do with looking down at the ground. It's the detail on the ground I like . . . leaves . . . I love fallen leaves in the fall and dandelions and daffodils in the spring! I don't have fields to look at, but I have a big yard with lots of trees. I know each tree like a friend. I love the bark of different trees and the way they change in the seasons. I'm in the suburbs, so a lot of my neighbors just have expanses of green lawn. The air is so delicious back among my trees in the summer! My trees actually help me breathe and make paintings, because I open big studio garage doors and work outside. I have a fabulous studio. That is the one and only reason that I live in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, but now I've lived here a long time, and my yard and the seasons actually play a big role in helping me to paint. I would never want to go back to NYC, although I loved, loved, loved NYC when I lived there from 1969 on—not the art world, but the city itself! I permanently moved to the Philadelphia area in 2001. I've lived in my current location for about 16 years and it has allowed me to keep developing my work.

A painting like *All Summer Long*, 2022 is a slab, a literal slab, as if the front of it, the stain painting, was a fresco and the stretcher was studs of a wall, so it makes sense that you would think of *All Summer Long*, 2022 as holding up the ceiling! I don't like the idea of paintings as inevitably rectangles on walls, although it is interesting to have some wall paintings hung with the two-sided works. Then, one can think about what an image is, relative to the materials that make the image, and paintings become dialectical objects, the show a dialectical field. Of course, the Support/Surface artists did that in the 1960s, and Miró did that in the 1920s when he was trying to "destroy" painting! The Support/Surface Artists did not have the inventive or expressive range that Miró did. Their work looks wonderfully concise and elegant today, but the politics surrounding the making of their work in the 1960s have evaporated.

The stretcher of *All Summer Long*, 2022 is about fifty years old, with many previous staple marks. I love the color of the stretcher and the color of the aluminum bars - the color of literal material - not just paint color. The facticity of the physical stretcher changes what a painting is in a profound way. The illusion that is natural to painting becomes material, and distinctions between body and thought are destabilized.

IG: Through the lens of extractive, militarized late-stage capitalism one sees nothing but the corpse in corporeality, while you find in it the vitality of embodied thought. Your reflection about the stretcher and the aluminum bars reminds me of a conversation we had years ago about the color of concrete. You opened my eyes to the complexity of literal material and inspired my experiments with concrete. Your connection to the trees in your yard is palpable and thinking about all that growth, wind, and renewal

I am compelled to see the figures in your painting made of folded muslin as molted skins.

I would like to spend some time with the work in the room past the projection of the backside of *Moby Dick*, 2022. *November 1*, 2022 is propped on two black crates and faces a tall, thin vertical painting called *Swing*, 2023. *House and Travel*, 2021 hangs on the wall and a figurative box painting of two female figures, *Olive and Riley*, 2021, made with color string stands witness halfway down the left wall. I love the way the two huddle and seemingly share limbs. They look out, but their whispers seem intentionally contained. *November 1*, 2022 is milky-white with beautiful blue and green forms floating in rivulets. During the opening I noticed that there was enough space behind the painting to accommodate a group or 2-3 people. That added to the suggestiveness of the crates as places to sit and gather. Can you walk us through the relationships between the works in this space?

In 2018 we did a two-person show in London called *Portal* and I remember you talking about how you stab the canvas with an ice pick to push the colored string through. This memory brings me back around to asking you about Lucio Fontana. I saw the Fontana show at the Met Breuer in NYC a few years ago and I was struck by the visceral intensity but surprised to find that he used black gauze to subsequently bandage the cuts from the back. My curiosity about Fontana's cut is directly connected to Pollock's drip. Do you see them as connected and can you share some specific insights in relation to your own practice?

Dona Nelson working in front of her Pennsylvania studio, Summer 2022

DN: I have been thinking a lot about my very early art teachers, especially my first foundations teacher at Ohio State University where I started in the fall of 1964. It was a big night class, taught by a graduate student from Japan. We must have done

other things, but all I remember is rubbing big blocks of charcoal into huge sheets of newsprint. At the end of the night, I would be covered with charcoal dust! I hated the class! When we had to turn in drawings to be graded, I thought so little of the charcoal saturated newsprint that instead I turned in drawings I had done in high school and the guy gave me a well-deserved "D." That young guy taught me everything, and in the 60s with the beginning of POP, which was all about the image, it wasn't an easy lesson to convey. He taught me that material is intelligent, more intelligent than meanings I or others might ascribe to my paintings. This was a profound political lesson that has helped me resist all of my many encounters with authoritarians on the right and on the left. Money is completely arbitrary relative to material. Most of my paintings now, like *November 1*, 2022, are material on one side and soak through on the other side. I don't decide if the paintings are finished. The best ones just stop when they are dry, then hopefully they are animated by being seen.

IG: In 2018 you sent me a photograph of you in the garden wearing a big sun hat, almost vanishing behind the tall grass and summer flowers. I knew the camera had caught a glimpse of you tending, witnessing, and watching the paintings come into being as you painted outdoors in the summer light. Yes! Material is intelligent, more intelligent than meanings . . . this is a truth that you gifted to me, and I internalized it deeply.