

ARTSEEN

## Dona Nelson: *Selected Paintings, 2019 – 2023*

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LOCKSGALLERY



Installation view, Dona Nelson: *Selected Paintings, 2019 – 2023* at Locks Gallery, April 5 – May 17, 2024. Photo by Joseph Hu

Dona Nelson stands inches from *El Toreador* (2023), a massive painting mounted in a steel stand several feet from the nearest wall. They're looking closely at the surface. "This canvas is from China," they tell me. "It's whiter, it's very soft." They beckon me to the verso of painting, pointing. "And it takes the stain in a different way than canvas from India." Nelson is especially sensitive to these qualities, and their attentiveness to such detail sets the tone for our conversation as we walk through their show at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia.

About half of the paintings in the Nelson's current exhibition are installed like *El Toreador*: standing in the gallery space, on a steel mount or wooden base, with both back and front sides visible. These works, the smallest of which is over six feet tall, have a commanding, architectural presence. Their installation is generous and spacious,

and complements the paintings hung on the wall. “There’s something about having paintings out in space,” Nelson muses. “They’re not finished the way they’d be when they’re rectangles on the wall. The paintings perpetually produce themselves.”

Nelson works on both sides of the canvas, for weeks, months, sometimes years—a deliberative process belied by the energy and immediacy of their work. At first glance, the two sides of *El Toreador* appear like disparate paintings: one, bright and bold with blue and white gestures looping and dripping through zones of acidic orange; the other, darker and denser, with an all-over linear web atop the surface. Gradually, correspondences emerge. An area of richly saturated purple on the right edge of the verso appears as a faint trace on the opposite side of the recto. Forms on the front are bounded by lines on the back. The two images are interpenetrated, inseparable. Despite appearances, they share a single surface.



Installation view, Dona Nelson: *Selected Paintings*, 2019 – 2023. Left to right: *First Painting* (2021), *El Toreador* (2023), *Iris is the Day* (2019), *Ring* (2019)

The temporal element of Nelson’s process is palpable as a visual phenomenon. As we look at a more traditionally installed painting, *Providence* (2023), which is hung on the wall, they note that there is nothing on the surface: the painting was worked entirely on the verso side. What is visible upon the canvas is difficult to comprehend. The scrawls and gestures, dynamic and energetic as they are, appear almost as a negative or a transfer. As Nelson pools paint on the back of the canvas, the various layers don’t blend but rather seep into one another, so that the earliest applied colors visible on the front of the canvas are bounded by thin haloes of contrasting color applied in subsequent campaigns. The visual impression is one of removal or corrosion.

Positives and negatives, and additions and subtractions are central to Nelson’s art, and help to explain why, despite their being a gestural painter, there is no characteristic mark making common to their work. At a distance from *First Painting* (2021), it appears that a dense thicket of lines branches upward from the bottom left corner, gradually giving



Installation view, Dona Nelson: *Selected Paintings, 2019 – 2023*. Left to right: *January Sun* (2022), *Aquetong* (2019), *Providence* (2023)

way to broader areas of washed out blue and pale green. Moving closer, it becomes apparent that those lines are unpainted, or barely painted. This “negative drawing” results from Nelson applying ropes of cheesecloth hardened with acrylic gel on the back of the canvas, which impede the soaking of paint through the surface. *January Sun* (2022) features a kind of reversal of this process, its buoyantly colored surface covered in glossy acrylic gel, with a turbulent, veined pattern cut from that surface. Much of what is unusual and visually illusive in Nelson’s art emerges from their innovative and process-oriented approach to drawing.



Nelson stresses their connection to the tradition of stain painting, a technique long considered moribund. In the hands of its earliest practitioners—Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis—staining was a means of making coterminous the separate aspects of color, drawing, shape, and surface. Kenneth Noland’s term “one shot painting” describes the holistic material approach and unified visual field created by the process of staining. While the color field painters of the 1960s worked with large, emblematic images—what their champion Clement Greenberg once described as a “large, balanced, Apollonian art”—Nelson’s contribution could be described as Dionysian. They work with abandon, eschewing both composition (“I’m not interested in it,” they tell me) and conceptualization: “If you were to have a lot of ideas about what makes a good painting, these paintings do not happen,” they say of their work.

Nelson’s art is conservative and radical, two qualities only nominally contradictory. They’ve taken up a particular tradition of American abstract painting, preserving what they’ve found useful for their artistic practice while introducing new techniques and materials to realize their vision. Their paintings perpetually elude comprehension, offering an immediate visual impact while rewarding the viewer’s slow looking with a world of inexhaustible detail.