ART SPIEL

IN DIALOGUE

The Bone and Muscle: A Conversation with Dona Nelson

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Dona Nelson in her studio.

For decades, Dona Nelson has dissolved the formal boundaries of painting: refusing to apply pigment to just one side of he canvas, mounting the stretchers of her double-sided paintings on freestanding metal stands, and letting them occupy gallery floors like sculptural interlopers. In her current two-person show with Andrew Ross at Thomas Erben Gallery, however, the painter has ceded the floor space entirely, anchoring her three new works squarely to the wall.

Ross's wooden sculptures thrive in this absence, their wild energy echoing Nelson's ethos while remaining distinctly his own. Yet Nelson's withdrawal from the floor reads as one of the artist's most radical gestures in years, allowing her relentless experimentation to distill into three decisive disruptions of painting's wall-bound conventions. These works cement her as both torchbearer and tireless innovator in the great American pastime of large-scale abstraction. As she quipped before breaking into a loud laugh during a freewheeling public talk with Ross after our interview: *"I don't see so well anymore. That's why my paintings are so good!"*

This is your first time doing a two-person show with a sculptor. You've pushed painting into sculptural territory for years, but do you feel that in this show with Andrew Ross sculpture is pushing back into your painting – keeping them mounted on the wall?

Nelson: Yeah, I think there's an amazing connection. The reason I put sculptural pieces with my paintings in my own shows is that I like to activate the space of the room – so it's not just dead space and then: wall.

I love showing with Andrew, and of course, he's a much better sculptor than I am; because I am actually not a sculptor. I'm a painter that puts paintings out in the middle of the room. (laughs)

People say, "Oh, you're kind of a sculptor," and I'm like, "No, I'm not!" No I'm not. I don't think like a sculptor. It's always that plane you walk around, and everybody's annoyed: "Why do I have to walk around it? Usually, I can just stand in one place."

Installation view, *Dona Nelson + Andrew Ross: New Works*

You didn't collaborate directly with Andrew, but did you kind of pass the ball back and forth on the way to making this show?

Nelson: No, no, we didn't. I just visited his studio once, and when I saw his work it was in its very early stages.

The thing about Andrew and me is that we have two obvious things in common. Neither of us went to graduate school, which I think is kind of important for our work. He was saying he never had a thesis show, so there's this open-ended quality to his work. He's experimented with figurative work, and we share that – the figurative. And also the idea that things aren't finished. Things aren't even finished for me now, and I'm old! (laughs)

With Andrew's sculpture, it keeps manifesting itself as you look at it – it seems to have infinite

Dona Nelson, *Tuesday Can Be Anything*. 2025, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 88 inches

possibilities. But he uses scanning from the internet, these very elaborate technical processes. And I just throw cheesecloth out of the cab, and that's all I do. You can see how technical I am!

What I understand about Andrew's work in the show is that he's translating the kinetic energy from videos of men wrestling. That made me think about how you work on both sides of the canvas – that wrestling that goes on with color and material pushing through from one side to the other.

Nelson: Oh, I love that. Because actually, the main thing with my painting is that, even though I have assistants, in the end, I have to make the painting; and I'm usually there by myself.

They're very heavy because I work on stretched canvases. So I have to arrange them on milk crates. I have another four milk crates set up beside, and then I puuuush the painting up – whack! (laughs) That's how I move them, because they're too heavy.

Like the white painting in the show (*Tuesday Can Be Anything*, 2025), that painting is actually a breakthrough painting. I did it over Christmas and New Year's – I like to work on the holidays. It probably took me a month, or five weeks, because it's on #10 canvas, and it's very, very hard to get the paint to go through something that thick.

So you were trying to push it through because what you like is for the paint to move from back to front?

Nelson: Yeah, the painting you see on the wall has no direct work on it – it's all from the back. I was determined, and luckily, my assistants were on vacation, so I was just putting buckets and buckets of watery color on the back to get it to go through. Sometimes I'd put three buckets – so there's like a little lake between the stretchers.

I'm lying there on the floor, in this pleading voice: "Does anything come through? Nothing! Nothing! Nothing comes through." Or maybe one little drip. That painting was very difficult, but it's a breakthrough painting.

The paintings in this show feel like you had complete control over the chaotic process – like they really were the paintings you intended them to be.

Nelson: No, I have no intention. (laughs)

Okay, I see. (laughs)

Nelson: Zero. The way they happen is: I have cheesecloth ropes, wetted with gel medium – they're the drawing. On the white painting, I had some idea of how I wanted my assistants to put the cheesecloth on, which is to say, I wanted them to not put on that much. That was the problem – big expanses of emptiness.

And different colors go through the canvas very differently. Reds, oranges are lighter pigments, and they go through much more easily. The hardest one to get through is white. It must be a very large molecule or something.

What's really different about that painting is that I put the light blue on first, and then for some reason, I put the white wash on. The light blue had gone through, and then that allowed the white to go through.

Like it opened up tunnels for the white to pass through.

Nelson: It opened up! Because usually, I can't get white to go through. So it's complete serendipity as to the image. But it's interesting when people say, "Well, Nelson, how come your paintings always look like yours?" And I'm like, "I don't know." Yeah, that's a mystery. They do look like my paintings!

I can see you're a painter who wants to be surprised; but there's something about these paintings that feel like you channeled something very directly about your own work. They feel very good examples of Dona Nelson paintings.

Nelson: Well, you know, it's kind of mysterious because I've been working for so many years, and I do have things that have been really important to me. Like when I was working with landscapes in the '80s – imaginative landscapes based on places I'd lived – I saw this Duchamp drawing called *Portrait of Chess Players* (1911) at the Guggenheim. It's been very important for how I think about space.

That white painting is abstract, but I feel the space is related to this park painting I did in the '80s called *Lake Michigan*. I'm interested in this kind of flattened and opened space – it's not planar, nothing's in front of anything else. It's the idea of how you experience space when you're walking. It's physical.

Dona Nelson, *Lake Michigan,* 1986, oil on canvas, 74 x 80 inches

Are you thinking about navigating terrain?

Nelson: Yeah, yeah – navigating terrain. Even though I hadn't thought about it for a long time, when I finished that painting, I said, "Oh, that's related to *Lake Michigan*."

And that connection appeared through the process?

Nelson: Yeah, when you work so long, you have things that interest you. You don't have to think, "Oh, this is an influence." No, you have things that interest you.

As someone who works from both sides, do you also consider the edges of the painting?

Nelson: Well, I work flat, like Pollock. The other painting in this show, *Cardinal Plane*, looks great in any direction. Originally, it was vertical. The white one, I guess I was thinking about *Lake Michigan*, so that was fixed in up-and-down. But the best paintings, recently, can turn any direction on the wall.

Then could *Cardinal Plane* be shown vertically in another context?

Nelson: In fact, I was thinking of putting it vertical on my website.

That says a lot about the composition. It has enough integrity to hold up in any orientation.

Nelson: That's right. I feel like the painting has a lot of bone and muscle. Literally, that's what I want. I don't think in terms of composition, because my compositions are decided so offhandedly. So much is determined on how paint soaks through. But, I do like a feeling of bone and muscle.

Dona Nelson, *Cardinal Plane,* 2025, acrylic on canvas, 88 x 108 inches

If you look at Chinese painting, the idea is that you can wander through the mountainscapes, which are like *spines*. The landscape itself has got spines. There's not this big distinction between human beings and the environment that they're in. Our bodies have something in common with the earth, and everything.

I like considering a painting as something with its own body, which needs skeletal integrity to be able to stand by itself and live in the world. The fact that *Cardinal Plane* can be reoriented and still function – it's like a really healthy person. A person who just keeps smoking cigarettes and survives anyway.

Nelson: My paintings definitely smoke and drink. (laughs)

I've had an interest in how Antoni Tàpies thought about material as energy. I get that sense in your work – that paint is an energetic form.

Nelson: It's always buckets. It's never separate from water. I used to be an oil painter, and I loved it, but the idea of covering a canvas with a little brush these days. It would take so long. (laughs)

These new paintings go back to my very early work – when I was 20, making abstract paintings. I came of age with Abstract Expressionists and Pop Artists on the scene at the same time.

That's something people don't understand about young artists: time collapses, and it's all the same to them. They don't have this hierarchical thinking about the development of abstraction.

I actually think my generation was affected, more than we realized, by the fin de siècle, the end of the century. Looming into the end of the century. The whole "painting is dead" thing, coming from just looking at the 20th century – basically Western – progression of abstraction. I think that was an illusion.

An illusion that something would actually end with the year 2000?

Nelson: It's just an arbitrary number. It's like 10 a.m.! And that really affected abstract painting. It still does. But we can just throw that idea out the window. It's 25 years into the 21st century. The world is full of art. Interesting art, too. Good art.

Do you feel like there's a lot of interesting abstraction being made today?

Nelson: Maybe not in galleries. I think the idea of the art world is kind of over, in a certain sense. I don't know what artists are doing in Detroit, but I heard there's a lot of good artists. And I mean, all over the country, all over the world.

I loved the Henry Taylor at the Whitney. To me, that is the best figuration in the history of America. Because in America, you know, figuration is usually not as good as the abstraction is.

I've felt this lingering idea in painting over the past ten years that abstraction is mostly decorative or safe, or an implication that you need a representational framework to say something profound. But do you think that the material itself, the paint, communicates directly?

Nelson: Oh, definitely, but it's not the painting. The feeling is in the viewer. Everyone is full of feeling. The artist does not need to put either meaning or feeling, because everybody that looks at the painting is full of meaning and feeling. So if it's a really good painting, where you've activated all the possibilities of what an abstract painting can activate, you're going to activate the viewer.

Just make the painting. Make the most interesting painting you can make, and don't worry about the viewer.

But some paintings access those feelings more than others.

Nelson: Well, some paintings are better. Some are a lot better. I just saw the Franz Kline show

I loved it. He wasn't like the other Abstract Expressionists. Motherwell said Kline felt like painting had saved him, and he wanted to communicate that.

And they're rough; he used house paint. They're not in great condition, but that almost adds to their quality. The cracks, the dirt – I really like that.

Same with de Kooning. There was a de Kooning/Soutine show at the Barnes, and they had these 70s de Kooning's you don't see very much: very painterly abstract paintings – not figurative. And, do you know that he works through the canvas and he puts Band-aids over the holes? I counted eight Band-aids in one of the paintings! They were so funky.

I read that de Kooning used Plaster of Paris to extend his paint when he was broke.

Dona Nelson, *Skater,* 2024, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 78 inches

Nelson: He wasn't worried about it, and that's important. Artists now wouldn't think that way.

There's market pressure now for paintings to last 5,000 years.

Nelson: Well, it's good to note that a lot of the Abstract Expressionists did not think that way *at all*. So, therefore, they have a different relationship to their art.

Once you notice that you can at least reflect on your own position. You can't change it. You can't somehow say, "Well, I'm not going to worry about the market." I think that's kind of baloney, because it is a fact of life. We are in a different time now, you know. We really are.

The paintings in this show, 50 years from now, do you think that they can hold whatever changes may come to them? Like the Kline or de Kooning paintings looking kind of yellowed or whatever, but still good because of the way they were made.

Nelson: The bones and the muscle. Yeah, I think so.

Well, the thing is, I don't actually like a lot of stain painting, because it doesn't hold up very well. I have noticed. My paintings are made kind of like stained paintings, but I don't want them to look like stained paintings.

I'm not even crazy about Helen Frankenthaler, actually. I don't like her paintings that well. I really don't. And, that's the reason. Then there's lesser stain painters. I'm like, "Oh, these are

Installation view, *Dona Nelson + Andrew Ross: New Works*

terrible." They don't actually hold up in time, at all. They look pretty bad.

My paintings are varnished. My paintings are varnished with Golden Soft Gel Medium, as the first thing you put on. Then with regular acrylic crystal varnish. That changes the space in a very, very profound way.

What does it do?

Nelson: It makes the space less physical. And I like that. It introduces an element of illusion that I think is very interesting.

Final question. If you were to do another two person show, could you see showing with someone working in a different medium again?

Nelson: Well, Andrew is a very good artist. He's a very good artist. He's very serious, you know, no fooling around. Very focused on the work.

He doesn't have a lot of this historical referencing, I don't think. He's really interested in the complex things he does transcribing photographs into physical spaces and objects

There's not too many artists that I would want to show with, that I would think are good enough – truthfully. You have to show with a really smart, good artist. I could tell from just meeting Andrew, with hardly any evidence of work at all, that he was a good artist.

Just from his personality?

Nelson: Yeah, just the way he was focused. He was very focused on these little models he was making. And describing these very small, abstract qualities that anyone who wasn't an artist would think was completely uninteresting.