

Art In Conversation

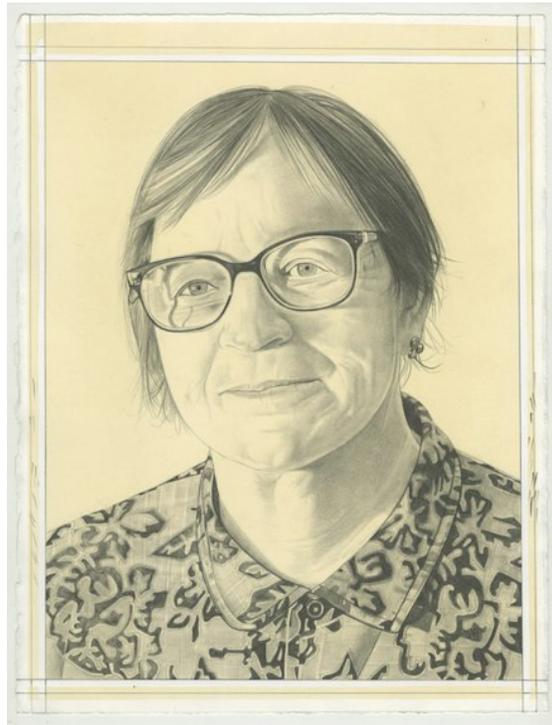
Dona Nelson with Leeza Meskin

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LOCKSGALLERY



Dona Nelson is the smartest person you've ever met, but she gets one thing wrong. She says: "I don't have a signature style." And if you look at how widely and wildly she has expressed the intensity of her vision, you might nod and agree. Over a fifty-year career she has painted yellow figures and blue octopuses, charcoal on canvas and enamel on linen, hung paintings on walls, ceilings, and made them stand in the middle of a room on paint-splattered milk crates. But this isn't an infinite variety without order. Nelson's signature style is, precisely *this*: she is always showing you what IS there with contagious and joyous verve. I met Dona over ten years ago at Tyler School of Art—my first real teaching gig after grad school. She came up to me—tall, striking, instantly iconic—and said, without any preamble: "I want to be friends." I was already a fan of the work, and her straightforward and unabashed approach made me an instant fan of the person. The paintings grab you like Dona does, asking for your attention and refusing anything less than your keenest witness. She makes what she sees come to life, transforming a regular apartment into a living, breathing site for creation that makes you realize it was alive all along. I kept trying to convince her during our interview that her physical practice takes her to a spiritual plane. But she refused it. "The real is the spiritual," she said repeatedly, pressing on the table, gesturing to the wall, invoking the subway. Trust me when I tell you no limit can contain this brilliant and fearless painter with whom I had the pleasure of talking about her art in my Morningside apartment on a sunny May afternoon.



Portrait of Dona Nelson, pencil on paper by Phong Bui



Leeza Maksin (Rail): Let's talk about your survey show, *Stand Alone Paintings*. The title evokes both a kind of defiance—like the paintings stand alone, and say what they need to say on their own—but also a sense of solitude. How did you think of the title?

Dona Nelson: I came up with that title because I don't do signature style paintings. Once in a while, I make a really great painting. It stands alone, by itself, a painting that you can actually remember. I didn't really try to be that kind of artist, but that is the kind of artist I am. So I have individual paintings, and it would be fine if each was the only painting I ever made.

Rail: The installation is very striking. How much of the plan happened on site?

Nelson: The curator, Ian Berry, picked the paintings. He came to my studio a couple of times and looked through all my images. He came up with this arrangement of paintings. It was he who suggested that we hang paintings one above the other, because if we had not done that we wouldn't have been able to put as many paintings in.



Installation View, *Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings*, 2018, Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. Photo: Andreas Vesterlund

Rail: There are close to thirty paintings in the show. And since you work so large, it is amazing to get that many large paintings in one big room. The way that they are installed evokes screens and partitions, a network of chambers where you can find yourself suddenly alone even when others are nearby. How do you think about architecture and its effect on your paintings?

Nelson: I am interested when architecture does not dominate the experience of the paintings. Maybe one of the strategies of Pollock and Still making such big paintings was anti architectural. But art galleries evolved as a white cube, basically Bauhaus, and often times the gallery space dominates the art experience. I want you to walk in and have your first experience be my paintings rather than the walls around my paintings.

One of my first and most intense experiences of painting was seeing Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950 – 51). Sometimes I go to MoMA and I just walk through the whole museum very fast, but that's the one painting I really can't walk by. It makes such a statement, and it is so convincing. There was a circular exhibition of Newman's paintings, *Stations of the Cross* (1958 – 1966), at the National Gallery in Washington D.C. which was one of the greatest painting installations ever, and I can't believe that they dismantled it. There was a bench in the middle. All the paintings were black and white, but they were made with different paints. There was magna; there was acrylic; there was oil; and there was just this incredible liveliness. It was very enjoyable to look at the paintings because there was no added aestheticizing. It's just Newman's spatial divisions and the materials. The essential experience of painting was that installation.



Installation View, *Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings*, 2018, Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. Photo: Andreas Vesterlund

Rail: One of the things that struck me at the Tang was that corner where there are four large paintings based on your mother's small pastel of a landscape and a village. We don't see the pastel in the show, but we learn about it through these versions that you made of her work. Those four paintings started to function as a key to understanding all the other works in the room, and also how to understand the relationship between the performance of painting—its physicality—and also the kind of metaphysical quality that activates memory and desire and loss. I'd love to hear you speak more about the experience of watching your mother paint.

Nelson: I sometimes accompanied my mother to her adult education art class in Kokomo, Indiana, when I was in second grade. I remember walking home with her on a summer night. I was always into drawing, since I was three or four years old, like many artists. My mother and I took an art class together in our church basement in Columbus, Ohio, when I was about eleven. It was great fun; I just loved it. I always loved my mother's paintings and pastels, even though they were just tiny little paintings. You might think that they're basically calendar scenes, but I always found them very moving and really authentic, and they have this kind of amazing scale to them.





Rail: Did you make those paintings while she was still alive?

Nelson: No, but I was thinking about her.

Rail: She was a teacher right?

Nelson: She was a grade school teacher, a really good grade school teacher. She was also a Brownie leader, and that was the only group I was ever a part of, when my mother was the leader. [Laughs]

Rail: In the four paintings that are in the show at the Tang, each takes a different approach, treating the image differently each time, including the one that is actually contextualizing the little pastel in your apartment. And that's the one that has the most texture. It's sort of mimicking the mantel on which the work lived in your apartment.

Nelson: That was the last one made. It's named *The Apartment*. I was living in a very interesting apartment in Jersey City that had a really nice black marble fireplace.

Rail: Did you consciously approach your mother's pastel as an impetus for a series of work?

Nelson: Well, it was after I had done *The Stations of the Subway*, where I tried to make the experience of looking at abstract paintings and being in New York City kind of equal. It was my contention that a lot of the abstract painting of my generation is very much a response to the architecture of New York City . . . so much geometric abstraction. *The Stations of the Subway* was kind of tongue-in-cheek. Reality, to me, is the highest spiritual thing. Just the subway. I love the subways. So I made that series, and that was like twelve, thirteen paintings, and when that was over I was thinking about other experiences of looking at art within the context of a place. My parents were from Iowa. I grew up in Nebraska, Indiana, and Ohio, so I looked at my mother's little artworks in the context of the Midwest, and also in the context of the stories I've heard about immigration and homesteading.

Rail: Have you ever collaborated on a painting with an artist?

Nelson: When I use string on my two-sided paintings, I am collaborating with my assistant on the other side. I have made major string paintings with Ryota Kuwabara and Kristen Mills, who are



Dona Nelson, *My Home IV (Apartment)*, 2001, cheesecloth and acrylic mediums on canvas, 90 x 60 inches. Courtesy the collection of Richard Marcus



Dona Nelson, *Phigor* (left: front; right: back), 2014, acrylic paint, soft gel medium, and tar gel medium on double-sided canvas with raw steel stand, 117 x 70 inches. Collection of Timothy Phillips. Photo: Jeremy Lawson

interesting artists themselves.

Rail: With your two-sided paintings, are the front and the back interchangeable?

Nelson: There's usually a definite front and a definite back, but sometimes I reverse the canvas and work back into it.



I make three kinds of double-sided paintings. First, the kind I work on with an assistant in which I punch holes in the canvas and pass back and forth painted string. My string paintings are different than my other two-sided works, because my assistant has the choice of which hole to return the string, which opens up the field of drawing. I have noticed that the person I'm working with is very important. Every painting with a different assistant has a different quality. I love the process. It takes decision-making off my shoulders. It's more like play.

Another kind of two-sided painting, which is maybe the more radical kind, is when I don't look at the back. I work flat, while the painting is on milk crates. I glue down cheesecloth ropes which act as dams, and then I stain the canvas with watery acrylic. When that dries, I lay down puddles of pigmented tar gel. The back ends up being a surprise—an index of the processes done on the front of the canvas.

The third kind takes the longest because I take the canvas off and re-stretch it again with the back becoming the front, sometimes several times! One side becomes a color source for the other side. Unpredictable patterns happen because I'm not watching how colors are soaking through. For these pieces, I often do prep work. For instance, I'll glue down a grid of cheesecloth rope and pour puddles of fluid acrylic into the



little squares. Sometimes I'll punch holes through the middle of each square so the canvas plane is porous, then I'll work with that porosity so that there's communication between the painting's front and back.

Rail: Do the two sides have a yin/yang relationship? Do they complete each other?

Nelson: I don't think "complete" is the right word. They form each other, even if one side looks completely different than the other side, they are totally interrelated.

Rail: When in your process do you decide that a painting needs to be two-sided?

Nelson: 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.

Rail: What determines the installation of the two-sided paintings?

Nelson: It depends on the space that I have to work with. When the paintings are connected with hardware to the wood structures that I had made for the Tang show, the two sides are equalized. The wood structure that connects the two paintings that sit on milk crates become a loopy architectural construct. The crates are stained with paint, and I like using them in the art piece, because the paintings rest flat on the crates while being worked on.

Rail: So these new wood structures create a theatrical space in which the viewer is brought into the very innards of the painting?

Nelson: Yes, and you don't see a front without a back, like a physical cubism. I will also probably continue to use the steel stands. There's a certain way in which they have their own aesthetic. They have a stubborn medieval quality, with screws on either side. They are just functional, but they declare themselves as separate from the paintings.

Rail: How do you feel about the contemporary fad of double-sided paintings?

Nelson: That's just a fact of life. Many painters use it as a device to activate space rather than to make a particular kind of painting. When paintings are truly double-sided, they are viewed from different angles, and they are often viewed close up. There is not a prescribed way to view a two-sided painting.

Rail: Do you think memory plays a role in how a double-sided painting is viewed?

Nelson: The idea of remembering one side while looking at the other side activates something that is usually not a part of viewing paintings—to simply remember what you just saw. It makes the mental, physical. It asserts vision through the body. You need more effort as a viewer. You cannot be passive.

Rail: I really liked what you wrote in your essay "Second Sight," where you talk about how during the process of painting you feel like you're in the dark. So painting is not actually about seeing, or at least not solely about seeing . . .



Nelson: Paintings are surprising to me, particularly working the way I do, because I don't have plans ahead of time, I don't do drawings ahead of time. I don't have compositions ahead of time. I go to the studio and just start, and usually I'm feeling lazy and like, "Oh I'd really rather not paint today, I'd just rather lay around and read." But I start, I go out there, and there are piles of materials and I'm like, "All right, let's get going! Come on, come on, come on!" And then I just start doing something. A lot of times I'll start with some cheesecloth and wet it with gel medium, throw it on the canvas, and I'll try and get four or five paintings going at once. I just do anything. Then slowly over a couple of weeks the thing starts to evolve.

I think people don't focus sufficiently on the specifics of the way paintings are made and how that makes different categories of paintings that have a different relationship to energy. For example, it's very important if you gesso or not. We can divide painting into those who use gesso and those who don't. Those who don't are connected to Gutai and to Arte Povera. I saw a great show in London: Giorgio Griffa, an Arte Povera Italian painter. He wrote, "I don't make lines or circles with the paint, I put the paint in the canvas." That's the phrase he used, "I put the paint in the canvas." I wish people would think about painting in concrete ways.

In 1989, when I was out in California, I decided that I hated gesso. A metaphor came into my head at the time—or maybe it was a dream—that I went out into a cotton field, with a lot of cotton plants, with a gallon of gesso. I poured it on the cotton plant, and it killed the plant! I woke up and said, "I'm not going to use gesso anymore!" My paintings changed then because every piece of canvas, no matter the weight, has a kind of reality to it. If you cover that with gesso, you cover that reality. Then you try to replace the reality of the canvas with some idea you have, as if your idea, your composition, is more important than the reality of the canvas. To me, it's not! I went to see the black and white Pollock show in Dallas a couple of years ago. He used enamel on raw canvas. You can't erase that. Once you put that on there, that's the painting. There's a lot of pressure when you do that. You have to be completely in the moment, not distracted.



Dona Nelson, *Anne's Lace*, 2002, graphite and acrylic medium on canvas, 88 x 106 inches. Photo: Jeremy Lawson



Rail: When you're sculpting pieces of muslin that have been saturated with paint or medium, you're looking with your hands and creating these landscapes that flip the vertical plane of the canvas and make it into a horizontal typology. How do you think about sculpture and ceramics, where the touch of the hand is visible as an imprint on the material?

Nelson: In the early 1990s, I lived near a fabric store on Broadway near Canal Street. Outside the store I spotted a bin with a big roll of cheesecloth that had little strips of denser weave running through it. I had been painting with a brush and oil paint in the 1980s, a slow way to paint. One day I decided, this cheesecloth is so cheap, I'm going to buy the whole roll! It was six feet wide, and I started a big painting with it, just gluing it on. I didn't know what I was doing; I had no idea actually, but I had started going out by subway to the Coney Island Aquarium, and visiting a couple little whales they had out there in a tank.

So anyway, I bought a whole bunch of this cheesecloth and started these really big paintings with this material, and the whales floated into the paintings. The way cheesecloth took acrylic was fantastic. I started squeezing the gel medium through the cheesecloth and it was like clay. I could still go on being a painter, making reliefs and whatever. In 1989 I went to the British Museum. In the basement they have all those Assyrian reliefs. I loved them. I've always loved sculpture, ancient sculpture. I get a lot of energy from looking at sculptural reliefs. I can feel it in my hands and my arms.

Rail: Reliefs are typically an architectural art form that references history. Like your paintings, reliefs activate the haptic sense, with images emerging out of serious stone facades, and creating a human connection. What gave you the idea of actually making rubbings or frottage from your reliefs? How did you arrive at that?

Nelson: I've lived in many different places, many different studios. Space itself is very alive for me and has been since I was a kid. I've always loved to go into empty apartments or just any place I haven't been. When I did those rubbings, I had moved to Philadelphia. I lived and worked in a carriage house in Germantown. I made a big construction with muslin and cheesecloth and medium, and it was so heavy, I could barely move it. And I thought, "Oh let me put a piece of canvas over this big construction, and do a rubbing!" I thought, "Oh my god, what a thing I discovered!" What is really interesting is that I could do several rubbings from the same construction and would get different images, depending on the drawing materials I used.



Dona Nelson, *Skylight Rubbing, Walnut Lane Summer*, 2002, graphite and acrylic medium on canvas, 126 x 72 inches. Photo: Jeremy Lawson



Rail: Your images often feel to me like they've been there all along, hidden in plain sight, as if you've just pulled the curtain and uncovered what was there. It reiterates this idea that the image or design of the painting is less important than the experience of making it, or the experience of seeing it.

Nelson: Absolutely! And what you are seeing is not separate from the space you are in while looking at it, and the image is not separate from the space that I'm in when I'm making it. I think I'm very sensitive to place. My family always jokes, "Dona is off someplace, roaming around town." That was my favorite thing, just to roam around and experience different places and spaces.

Rail: There's a mnemonic device for re-entering certain moments in your life by visualizing things in different rooms and that kind of spatial awareness within a particular memory will help you keep things structured in your mind. So the more I looked at that series of work that deals with your mother's paintings, the more I felt like they were different rooms of memories. The work feels very spiritual, but you access the spiritual through these very basic things, whether it's the texture of the canvas, or the way a certain color looks on another color. Do you think that literal objects in our life, or let's say, during the process of making a painting, serve as portals into the spiritual plane?

Nelson: No. Reality is the spiritual plane. I don't like the idea that I have to go someplace. I like the idea that I'm here.

Rail: How do you put so much emotion into the paintings?

Nelson: I don't put emotion into it. The emotion is in you. I just make the painting. One of the many things I'm against is putting meaning into painting. What does it mean? I'm like, "You missed the whole point!" You're not going to have the experience if you are waiting for this meaning to come along. Even the word meaning kind of meanders along. You have to wait for it. I feel like the artist is not responsible for putting meaning into their work because everybody is so full of meaning, they will put their own meaning into whatever they are looking at.

Rail: So when you're making a painting, there's not part of you that intends something to come across?

Nelson: It's a painting. I don't think it means something else! It's kind of surprising. I never really have a handle on what I've made, and that's not just a metaphor, but a handle, an actual... I don't have a handle on the pot. You know? It just is. It was my day, or my two days, or my week in the studio, and I really was in to it! And then I went on to something else. I'm not an expressionist. I'm a materialist. *[Laughs]*

Rail: Would you say that about your figurative painting also?

Nelson: Well that's different. In the eighties my work was different . . . yes, there's one painting in the Tang show of a tabletop. It's just a very messy tabletop which is kind of like my tabletops usually are, with a million things going on. It was a period of turmoil, and so the painting did reflect a kind of scattered attention. I actually made the painting to hold myself together, because right in the middle of that painting there's a

Nelson: On many levels it's a radical thing to be an ambitious painter and a woman. Making paintings is exciting, it's erotic. I love making paintings. And that's one reason I paint the way I paint, with buckets of liquid and that kind of thing. When I started painting that way in 1989, pouring buckets of paint onto a construction, it felt like I was using radically different parts of myself.

Because when you paint in oils with a little brush, it's very arduous and takes a long time, and you do have a different relationship to the painting than when you have a bucket of color and you throw it on there and it stains. And I'll tell you this, this sounds awful but I had a very sexist teacher at Ohio State, and he was so sexist that he was ridiculous, you know? One day he said "Yeah, you should look at Helen Frankenthaler because she does staining" and he thought it was related to menstruation, female fluids, which is so outrageously sexist nowadays, but at the time? I kind of took it as a positive thing! I'm like, "That's cool. I like that idea."



Installation View, *Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings*, 2018, Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. Photo: Andreas Vesterlund

Rail: The luminosity of your color feels so piercing and immediate, like weather. It feels sublime and terrifying, like stained glass in a big cathedral. In movements like Gutai and Arte Povera, material, textured experience of the world is foregrounded. Whereas your work somehow combines that haptic experience with an intensive experience of color.

Nelson: It's about developing the possibilities of stain painting. The paint and the canvas are one. Stain painting is pretty profound. It was only invented seventy years ago. It's an aspect of painting that can be developed. I don't like putting judgments on material reality. It's like they say some trees are trash trees, you know? Tree of Heaven, which springs up between the sidewalks in cities and has so much vitality, or dandelions. One of my earliest memories when I was running around the neighborhood as little kid is visiting an old woman who had a big collie, and she would make it my job to brush the dog. I would brush the dog until I got a gallon bucket of hair. One day I picked her a huge bouquet of dandelions on my way to brush the dog. I could hardly hold it in my hands. [Laughs] I knocked on her door, and said, "Agnes, these are for you." She said, "Pee-yew, dandelions!" She grabbed them from my hand





and threw them in the garbage! *[Laughs]* It hurt my feelings that she didn't care for them, but I loved them because dandelions are so yellow. Of all the yellow flowers, they are the most yellow. That's the experience of color—that's why I like stain painting.

Rail: I was trying to liken the experience of being bathed by color—the scale of your paintings and the way they confront you in real space—to a kind of dumbfounded, speechless, even religious experience.

Nelson: Well, I very much like Yves Klein. I think that he is very important. His paintings are purely experiential because you can't experience Yves Klein unless you go and stand in front of an Yves Klein. It has to do with the powdery surface, and the matte-ness of the pigment that gives a very particular experience of color. I do actually really like the color of dirt I can find down in Georgia, the red earth. I do really like dirt, dirt color, I always have ever since I was a little kid.

When I was a little kid, my main thing was to dig holes. I was always out in the yard digging holes. I remember once there was a large silver bug in the bottom of one my holes. I was really excited! *[Laughs]* I also collected rocks; I always loved rocks. I remember my mother asking, "Who put this rock in the middle of my dining room table?" I would select rocks that I thought were really beautiful to put around for decoration. I'm actually very close to the person I was when I was a tiny child. And painting is very much connecting to those things, truthfully.

Rail: Which actually makes it so much more feminine than it has been thought of traditionally, because it's connected to this engendering of one's self as a subject in this primal moment when one is not yet gendered.

Nelson: Yes, exactly. But you don't have the descriptions, and this is something I've always resented. I resent the descriptions of being a woman, and I am so pleased that young women have the language now that I didn't have when I was young. Like "cis-women," and that's a traditional idea of women. Because I actually would not call myself a cis-woman, I never have been. Because I don't like thinking of myself in that objectified way. Why do I have to do that? And this is one thing I really object to, and a lot of teaching about gender, I've always objected to it since I was very young. I feel like I should be allowed to have myself be whole without your describing me as a woman in your cultural place where women have their place. That has nothing to do with me.

Rail: Have there been people in your life, men or women, who understood and respected that?

Nelson: Yes. I think most of the people I've been close to understand that. And even in my family—I had two sisters—there wasn't a necessity to define myself. I almost feel like I resent the impulse toward definition, whether it's in painting, or whether it's in people. Usually those impulses towards definition are assigning you the role of some other, some lesser. Mainly it's authoritarianism that needs to define better art from lesser art, and I have objected to that my whole life. Painting is my job, it's like being a farmer, it's like tending the cows, it's a job. Unless I see it as a job, and I say I'm pretty lazy.

Rail: I find that very hard to believe.

Nelson: Painting is not easy. It's not easy. For my really good paintings, I have to work them past success. I'll have a painting, and if I have another person around, an assistant or a friend,

they'll come in, they're like, "Oh, that's a terrific painting," and I'm like, "Yeah..." And then I'll sit there and I'll look at it and I'm like, "It's so good, I've got to work on it!"

Rail: *[Laughs]* It's too good, too good for it to be done. Maybe that has something to do with caution around success, that when something is successful it's too complete and that finishedness ends up being a deadening thing.

Nelson: It hasn't been taken to a place where it's really surprising, that's why it can be in the safe category of "good," good is another word that I really don't like, I don't like the two "o"s. *[Laughs]* Good *[prolonging the "o" sound.]* He is a good painter. Well, I always think, that poor person! *[Laughs]*

