

# DONA NELSON: TRUTH IN PICTURES

## MICHAEL KLEIN

*"Did you hear?" said the painter to a guest at the opening night party, "conceptual art is dead!"*

In the late '70s, I was as hungry to look at new paintings as I am today. In



Dona Nelson  
*Solicitation*  
1983  
oil on linen

particular, I was in search of painters for a gallery I was thinking of opening. Two friends, the sculptor Mary Miss and the writer Richard Whelan, insisted that I go and take a look at "the singular work" of Dona Nelson. Miss had just been interviewed for an issue of *ARTnews* in which she was asked to identify an up-and-coming artist. Her choice was Dona Nelson.

When I first met her, Nelson was not new to New York. She had won a Theodoran Award at the Guggenheim in 1971 and had shown in and around a bit, but without a dealer. She really had no public face.

A strange mix of images greeted me in her fifth floor walk-up studio on Greenwich Street. The most recent, two or three depictions of landscapes on fire, were the paintings that had so struck Whelan. Along with her current pictures, Nelson set about to show me some earlier works: a set of small portraits, a series of abstract compositions on wood (a format she still continues to employ), and some powerful seascapes *en grisaille*, including a small, jet black, alluring image of the ocean at night entitled *Evening* (1981).

Those images of the sea at night have stayed with me for the past fifteen years. The larger paintings like *Flung Sea* (1981)

were shown in 1982 and reviewed in the *Village Voice* and *Art in America* that same year. Eventually, Jack Boulton purchased *Flung Sea* for the Chase Manhattan Bank Collection. Dona told me she later destroyed *Rolling Ocean* (1981). *Three Shells* (1982) remains in the artist's collection. Each scene is moody, rugged like a tomboy yet always elegantly portrayed and richly descriptive. There are smaller paintings on this theme as well, not studies as one might presume from their size, just smaller works, more compact in scope and facility. Like their larger mates, each demonstrates what paint can articulate.

Such are the characteristics that ring true in Nelson's work from whatever period one examines. Whether she is at work on landscapes, broad abstract spaces, or delicate watercolors, Nelson's rule is to make each endeavor a memorable experience for the viewer. "Taking them someplace," is how she once expressed her process to me in her distinctive voice.

Another uncanny picture which caught my eye that first day was *Rolling Clock*

(1980), a small vertical painting done in gray, black, and white. It is a completely abstract image, yet simultaneously an idiosyncratic composition of odd shapes, whose narrative is as important as its design, which contains the rolling clock, the hill, the cloud above, and the clock's reflection. All the images have been derived from nature, all are in tones of gray, Horace Pippin gray, re-worked and re-mixed. The great invention is this dashing clock, fearless in steps and action. Dona was quick to respond when I asked her about this painting: "Remember Cézanne's early still life *The Black Clock!*" Her works of the late '70s and early '80s exhibit similarly distinguishing features, and Nelson noted in a recent letter to me "the targets and circles of the 1970s are the building blocks of the paintings I am now doing."

By the end of my first studio visit, I was won over, so much so that I included her works in several group shows soon thereafter. While I did not have a public space for several years, Nelson went on to have four solo shows in New York. I continued my visits in what became an almost annual event. In 1991, after looking at the newest pictures, as well as some old favorites, like *In the Crosswalk* (1983) and *Rain Dream* (1986), I offered her a show at my gallery on Broadway.

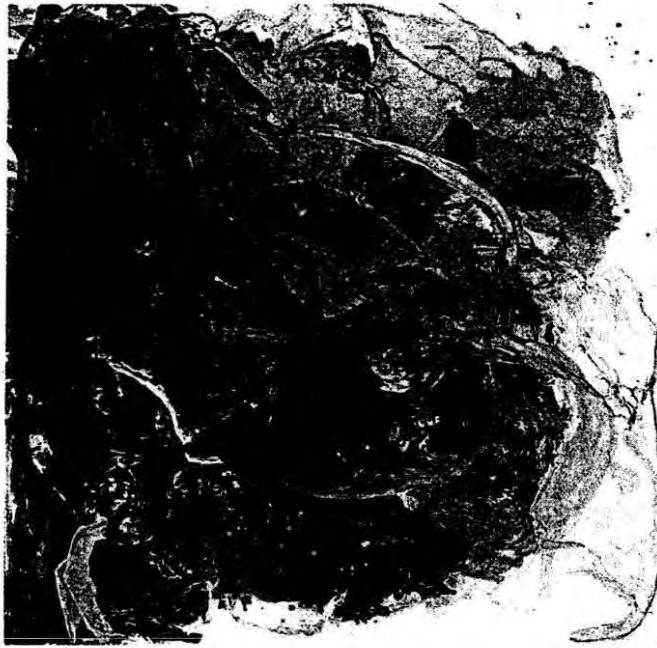
Those paintings were the seeds of ideas that would come to blossom some years later. In the meantime, Nelson felt the need and moved in a direction of more directly personal, figurative paintings. She left behind her black-and-white palette and turned to strong color: a Chinese stone garden lantern; her father's portrait in *Surveyor's Lunch* (1982), set against the late fall light of the Nebraska countryside; a view of her Tribeca studio at dusk in *Daily News* (1983); early Spring in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens in *Days* (1983); a cold dusk after a winter storm in lower Manhattan called *Piles of Snow* (1983); and *Familiar Trees* (1986), based on a trip to Ohio, where her family resides. Not only were these pages from the life of the artist, but they come together like an Aaron Copeland suite, full of images and moods and tonal chords reverberating with the character and features of the American landscape.

The fundamental quality of a place, its atmosphere, its geometry, and its color were key ingredients in the making of these pictures. Such an association still remains true for her work today. Her life has been her subject matter, as it was for Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, or, slightly later, for Alice Neel. Ironically, those artists also anticipated what was coming to these shores from Europe, a wave of Neo-Expressionist painters who invaded America's galleries and museums in the late '80s. Suddenly, such subject matter in the hands of a male artist was heroic, expressive, and powerful; the most talked about thing in new art since the invention of acrylic paint!

Nelson's paintings were a way of explaining herself, describing this shy girl from the Midwest to a large, oftentimes hysterical, and mostly cynical New York audience. For many, her works were just too personal, too contrary, and too figurative for the conventions of the time, much like the reception given to Richard Diebenkorn's and David Park's figurative work in New York in the '50s. Like them, she created a small but loyal coterie of followers. Since I recently saw a selection of these paintings at the Morris Gallery of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in a show called *Parks & Portraits: Dona Nelson 1983-1998*, all these thoughts and ideas about her early paintings have been coming back to me.

Invention for women is a critical no-no. Great invention, fearless steps, and apparent ambition is practically amoral (is it not unladylike also?). For someone like a Sigmar Polke, or an Anselm Kiefer, yes, but for an American female artist, definitely not. How can she be both an inventor and a painter? There is no mainstream support so that the door can be left wide open to innovation, to risk-taking, even to allowing for contradiction within one's own body of work. This

artist discovering and then explaining new ways of painting, me rethinking my idea of who she might be as a painter. There is a link from image to image, from



Dona Nelson  
*Octopus as Astronaut*  
1992  
acrylic, cheesecloth on canvas.

year to year, from visit to visit. But there is no linear development, as seems to be the only way for some painters. Nelson is as brash and resourceful and conceptually-minded as much of her generation, but she is not committed to a singular style, a signature style, or the slow boil of discreet and subtle shifts from one season to the next. Instead, Nelson explores the possibilities that exist within the depth and range of painting itself.

What further constitutes a "Nelson" is an inventory of ideas that find expression through the mediation of paint and extraneous materials. It is her desire to use paint as an expressive form, without glut or guilt or chaos. It suggests the unusual combination of the poetry of early Arthur Dove with the simple forms of Milton Avery, though links between such earlier artists

to contemporary painting have yet to be critically or historically explored. It is this "pictorial tradition," for lack of a better term, a fusion of abstraction and representation that is at the root of much painting today, linking the need to tell a story to the process of visually creating the story.

What would become the "Octopus Series" began in 1990. In it Nelson again ventured to abstract the visible by incorporating the image of the octopus in four stunningly inventive paintings, only one of which has ever been publicly shown. Though her subject remains constant— an iconic-like representation of the octopus— each painting is different in color, structure, and orchestration. Nelson's octopus is a creature derived from early black figure Grecian urns, not taken from naturalist photographs in the *National Geographic* or the Science Section of the *New York Times*. Nevertheless, in her realm, they are almost lifesize. The symbolic content of the octopus, sometimes referred to as the devilfish, is far less important than its physical appearance or personality (at dinner recently, I was told that the octopus is the smartest of the cephalopods and can problem solve too! )

As it moves, as it traverses the ocean floor in search of food, the octopus' form changes. Its floating, rippling, and extending— a kind of visible mutability in a seemingly weightless liquid environment— seems comparable to the process of gluing paint-soaked muslin onto her canvases. Stretching, pulling, and twisting her materials, Nelson experiments with her fabrications in order to push the expressive quality of a painted surface to an emphatic extreme. Similarly, the form of Nelson's painted and collaged octopus alters from canvas to canvas. In each, the surface bears witness to an exploration of techniques and rough-cut method that underscore the emotional dynamics at work and the unique spirit of each composition.

*Octopus Blue* is the talisman of the series, while *Octopus as Astronaut* is modeled in cheesecloth. The octopus' form evolves from translucent to almost transparent. Like its cobalt blue sister, it is sculpted painting, although much of the picture's background takes its cues from early Helen Frankenthaler works, stained, dripped, and covered so that the central image of the octopus floats and glides across the surface and is never overwhelmed by color or technique. There is no singular signature style: the octopus changes, and change is its nature.

It is perhaps through this series that Nelson discovered the means of abstraction that she needed to promote the representational and subjective nature of paintings. In a recent article, Nelson stated that her mature work began in 1989. She has endeavored to keep a balance between technical skills and the desired image. All her efforts at drawing, painting, and modeling act in concert. Where do these ideas come from? Nelson's eclectic nature could lead her back to her past, to her education from a library full of books on artistic theory and biography. Her inspiration for such experimentation could come from an historic source, such as a watercolor by Paul Klee, a painting by Albert Pinkham Ryder, or from more contemporary references like Grace Hartigan or Richard Pousette-Dart.

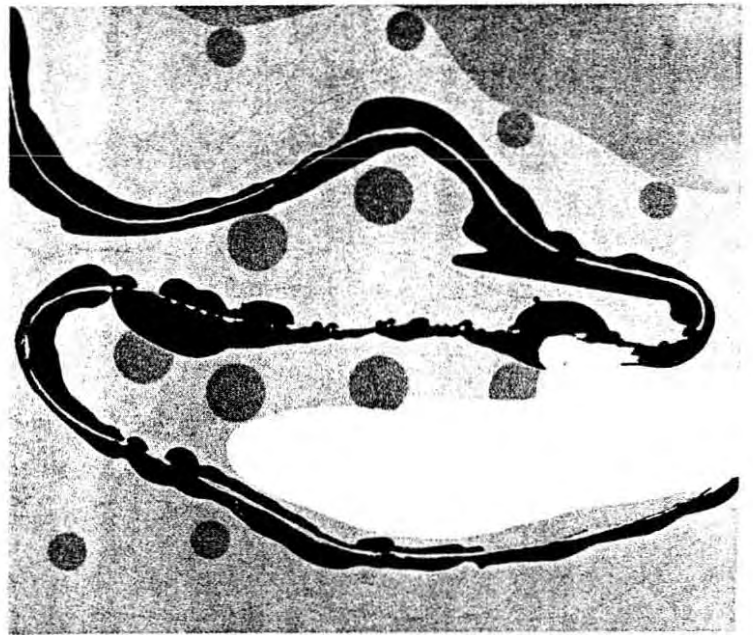
Never forgetting her Midwestern roots, Nelson always retains a directness in her imagery, an affirmation of the who, what, when, and where of life. "This is the truth," she seems to say, "this is how winter feels, how the light of a candle shimmers, and how the explosion of spring blossoms becomes a *poco tango*." If the line and color of Matisse offer a strong inspiration, so too does the work of Pollock, particularly his works such as *Autumn Rhythm* or *Full Fathom Five* (1947), where the action and application of paint spell out the feel and texture of a time and a place. Pollock's characteristic brashness and bravura are recognized in his tracery of paints, but he has also added a short list of extraneous materials that pepper the surface of the picture, denoting the "real life" nature of his studio.

The seasons and the locale of the early '90s saw an explosion of Nelson works manifesting different sizes, different themes, and different ambitions, and they were executed with a Pollock-like inclusiveness. The double entendre title *Blue C Green C* (1992), refers to a musical score, while its structure looks like a map assembled with biomorphic shapes. It is illustrated with and diagrammed by the use of string, muslin, and china marker.

Similarly, *Une Petite Étude* explores biomorphic content and relates to the deflated, yet buoyant, abstract shapes of her dear octopi. Nelson's corollary to the built-up surface of these early '90s paintings, *Octopus Blue* for example, has been to devise a more lyrical, graceful, and fantastic group of poured paintings. These pooled streams of paint create a metaphoric landscape, one which echoes the nature of paintings. Layering enamel over acrylic, the pour functions as the descriptive line and also as the shape of forms. These are overtly flat compositions with the force of gravity in control. Luxurious in appearance, paintings like *Candlelight*, *Polkus*, *Greedy Winter*, *Poco Tango*, and *Plume* seduce the viewer with their glisten. Light and color are represented by spheres of acrylic paint, and the wet enamel slides over and around these shapes, causing the interior light to be splintered.

Without great effort, Nelson seems to command the paint to remain weightless, to move and drift over her surfaces like an octopus propelling its way underwater. The most decisive development of these latest paintings is their elegant simplicity—two key words in the future of this innovative artist. Again the factor of the American grain is in her vision. These pooled streams of paint create a metaphoric landscape, one which echoes the nature of paintings by Ryder, Hartley, Dove, and the life of forms in works by William Baziotis and Mark Rothko of the '30s and '40s.

Her works are also rich and luminous, like Morris Louis' classic stained pours of the '60s; nevertheless, Nelson conceives her pours not just as a formal structure but as keys to recollections of places, events, and even moods. The emotional tenor of a picture hangs in the balance between the grace and self-



Dona Nelson  
*Ducks and Geese*  
1994

acrylic, enamel, muslin on canvas

haunting *Candlelight* (1993) or the funny *Ugly Helen* (1998).

This past winter Nelson just finished a new series, an elegy to New York, her home for the last thirty years, though she spends much of her week in Philadelphia teaching. She also maintains a small painting studio on Washington Street, in New York. Her new series, "Stations of the Subway," will premier soon in its entirety, though a few individual paintings have already been shown by

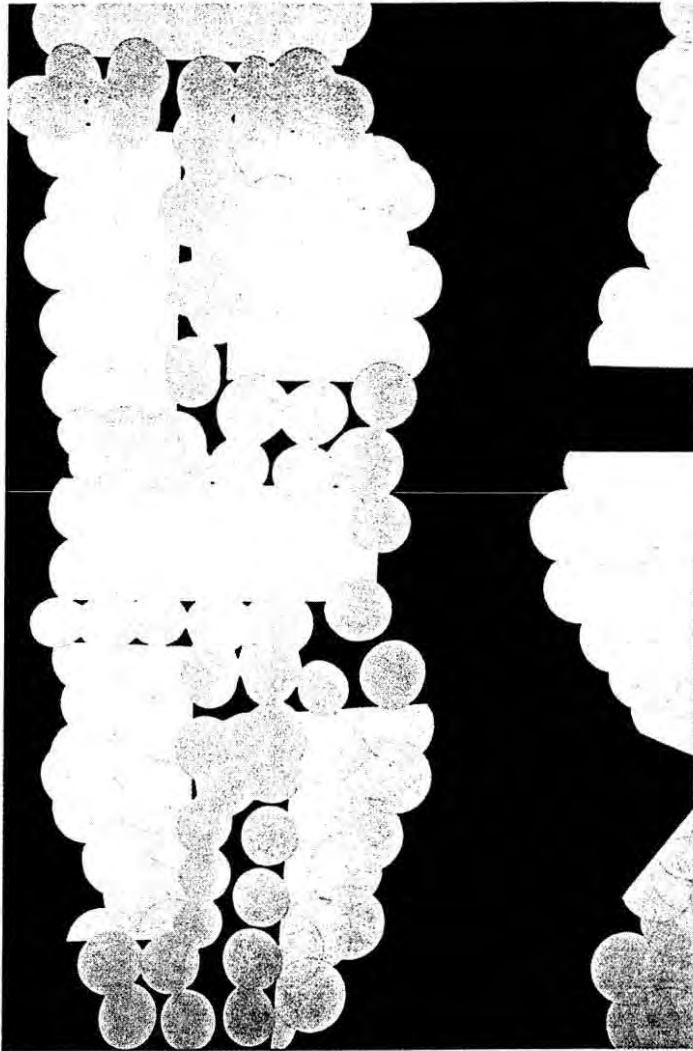
different dealers. Echoing Barnett Newman's title for his legendary "Stations of the Cross" series, Nelson is bringing that symbolic long walk home, situating it in our own time and place.

It is typical of Nelson to subvert the religious reference of "stations" with something more secular and down-to-earth. Each painting is a meditation on the street. The new paintings are composed of rows of spheres and grids inspired by the iron lattice and glass mosaics that are found on the sidewalk and that cover the underground spaces of New York's transit system. The tactile nature of paint reflects Nelson's urban physical surroundings, such as weathered and broken concrete pavement, intriguing patterns on the street, and the yellowed tiled walls of subway stations. Each of the eleven paintings in this series is vertical in format. Some are boldly graphic, done in black and white, while others in the series are wildly colorful.

These paintings are fresh, visually glossy, and brash, just what one would expect to find in New York. In some instances, the canvas has been textured, built up in layers and gracefully juxtaposed with ovoid pools and puddles of enamel paint, the way one might find a perfect puddle in the street undisturbed by vehicles,

the wind or pedestrians. The pour works in concert with the grid of circles and spheres behind it but also opposes them, like trains travelling in opposite directions, as in *Express-Local* (1997).

Nelson remains very realistic about herself and her work. She knows that painting takes time to learn, both as craft and creative endeavor. She is in no hurry. The road to getting there continues to keep her busy. She is aware of the degree of discomfort felt by those who cannot pin a label on her. Nonetheless, her audience grows, along with her ambition and her desire. New converts are steadily won over, just as I was years ago. One perceptive young critic recently wrote, "she is honest and direct. Such admirable qualities are rare enough to find in anyone, let alone an artist. Treasure them."



Dona Nelson  
*Express-Local*  
1997

acrylic, enamel on canvas