

Tang features 'Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings'

Painter known for her bold, two-sided works

By William Jaeger | Wednesday, June 27, 2018



Installation view, *Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings*, Tang Teaching Museum, 2018, photo by Andreas Vesterlund

Long live painting! In the Tang's main gallery, "Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings," a retrospective of large acrylic works that cavort and compete for your attention, every single work sizzles and questions. Diversions are everywhere. It's good stuff, a good show of good art — 35 years of work about painting, verb and noun.

If exploring paint, and the process of painting, seems like a motivation more suited to the mid-20th century, you might have one reason why Nelson has until recently slipped under the radar. But this is also a reason to visit, for the works require nothing from the viewer but an ability to be wowed and swept away.

One novelty: Nelson attacks many of her canvases from both sides. For about a third of the paintings here, the final object stands as a kind of flat monolith, a free-standing surface that has two faces. It takes up space like a sculpture and yet insists on being a painting.

If you go

"Dona Nelson: Stand Alone Paintings"

Where: The Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, 815 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs

When: through August 12

Hours: Tuesday - Sunday noon-5 p.m., Thursday noon-9 p.m.

Admission: free

Info: tang.skidmore.edu

This is made obvious as you enter, since you encounter the very first painting, the 2015 "Ribbed Red," from what would normally be considered the back, the canvas wrapping toward you around the wooden stretcher. It is held up on wooden legs like a small, square billboard, and you can then wander to the other side to see the "front." The title implies repeating red lines and you get them there, but this is only the beginning, as masses of color butt and overlap.

The best paintings succeed without one side depending on the other. In another recent work, "The Old Apple Tree," a map-like feeling of greens and blues is broken into irregular sections with some larger protruding white lines. A few red ovals with blue rims cluster like eggs near one corner, and for some of

these the canvas is peeled forward so you can see right through. On these little flaps we are already glimpsing the back, and when you take in the other side, a whole new variation on these colors explodes, mostly in blue, but with lines of congealed paint spraying as if blown by a high wind.

Most works here are largely nonrepresentational, but a few have objects we can identify — trees, a house, newspaper pages with pictures, and a group of four paintings showing a church in a country village. (Some of Nelson's most recent figural work is not in this show.)

"Wavelength," a 1986 oil painting on loan from the Guggenheim (which came with a stipulation that it have a separate gallery guard watching over it) seems almost autobiographical. It features a table with some works of art in progress on it, plus a pair of glasses. Above, in the gray, monochrome distance, the world sulks in the rain, the umbrella of one figure added with an additional layer of canvas.

There are a few less-extroverted works that deserve a pause, like the rough-hewn, large drawing in graphite and other mixed media. Even 20 feet up on the gallery wall it expresses energy and, even more, the hand of the artist. Here, in a messier way, we can feel her presence directly.

When all is said and done, amid the larger world of hundreds or even thousands of talented painters also teaching at colleges across the country, it seems that Nelson's work feels rather "safe." That might sound laughable when so much of the work pushes formal boundaries and is so forcefully energetic, but her painterly inventions are very considered, and her content (what little we can discern) pulls its punches.

That doesn't mean this isn't a terrific show. It's big and exciting, and you can look and look. And look. There is an almost endless ability to find new details, undiscovered physical facts in every inch. And the work flaunts its material fullness in the gallery space while remaining, at least spiritually, two-dimensional.

William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.