Dona Nelson at Cheim & Read

Dona Nelson has chosen an interesting moment in her career to cut back against the stylistic grain. Her last show at Cheim & Read, "The Stations of the Subway," suggested that a geometric classicism might be emerging from her process-intensive expressionistic esthetic. Grids and rows of circles were rising out of her pours of paint in a manner that suggested the architecture of the city from a distance and Viennese and Deco ornament from close up. The palette was reminiscent of Al Held's go-go colors of the early '60s.

Nelson has always had a vigorously physical way with paint, but until the "Stations" show her imagery had been dominated by collage elements—paint-soaked fabric that coalesced into figural passages or physically enhanced signage. The "Stations" were a breakthrough to a new synthesis of abstraction and representation that was weighted toward the abstract and urbane.

But Nelson's Symbolist streak may be stronger than her classicism. Her most recent exhibition returned with a vengeance to the organic imagery of her paintings from the late '70s and '80s, while invoking a great deal more personal history than we have come to expect from any abstractionist project. Several of the paintings, most obviously *Mountain Road IV*, are copies of landscapes by her mother—Opal Marie Cook—blown up to monumental scale. This shift in scale, together with Nelson's expressionist elaborations, such as the milky ropes of gel in *Mountain Road IV* or the applied fabric elements to which she has returned in about a third of the works, imbue the rather conventional forms of her mother's paintings with a deep strangeness. In addition to copying her mother's paintings, Nelson also makes rubbings of the more textured of her own paintings, using graphite and charcoal on raw canvas. Both the copies and the rubbings are completely different in spirit from postmodernist appropriation. In Nelson's recyclings, the original image lives on in the new painting as a kind of alternative universe that is defined by an entirely different approach to material than that evident in the source work.

A number of the stronger paintings in this texturally diverse show were, in fact, rubbings—essentially big charcoal-and-graphite drawings on canvas. The warm tone of the raw canvas provides such a beautiful surface for Nelson's graphic materials that it is a surprise to find so little precedent for this practice in the painting canon. One thinks of Picasso's charcoal washes and Lee Krasner's collages of cut-up charcoal figure studies—neither of which involves rubbing—as well as of Max Ernst's fleshed-out nightmare landscapes that use frottage as a starting point. But there's nothing out there with the scale or impact that these canvas drawings have, and when the contrast deepens, as in the dark, turdlike clouds of *Black Sheep/December House Two*, the image monumentalizes Freud's concept of the uncanny.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins proposed the term "inscape" to suggest the way psychological states may be analogized to the forms and textures of the natural world. This seems an apt description for Nelson's project, except that by reclaiming her mother's art as source, she suggests that it is memory—i.e., consciousness—that ignites and shapes the meaning we assign to nature.

Nelson is making art for our moment, when confidence in the utopian address of geometric order has faltered, and the roiling organic surfaces of a reinvigorated Symbolism give form an unexpected beauty to our anxieties and longings.

—Stephen Westfall