

***Interview with Dona Nelson***

**Jonathan T.D. Neil, Claremont Graduate University, 2018**

The following interview took place in October 2018 between Dona Nelson and Jonathan T.D. Neil, Director of Sotheby's Institute of Art, Los Angeles and Head of Global Business Development at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont.

**Jonathan T.D. Neil** I'd love to start off with a little retrospection. Can you tell me what the Whitney Independent Study Program was like in 1968?

**Dona Nelson** I was there because it was started by Ron Clark and Gary Bower, and they were graduate students at Ohio State University, and I was an undergraduate there. At that time it was mostly painters and now hardly anybody paints in the Whitney Program. For me it provided a place of freedom, being in New York in the '60s with Fillmore East and the hippies and all of the excitement of New York at that time. And to come from Ohio where I had lived and then just be put down in New York was fantastic. I spent all my time walking around in the city. I was very young and my main education was the city of New York—looking at the city and looking at the great shows.

**JN** Can you tell me a couple in particular?

**DN** Yes, there was the first Donald Judd show at the Whitney Museum, the painted plywood boxes and so on. I remember a great show at the Jewish Museum . . .

**JN** *Primary Structures*?

**DN** *Primary Structures* . . . Jasper Johns . . . I remember looking at the first Agnes Martin show at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery on Madison Avenue. I remember every painting. I remember them by name. So that was the big thing to me, that was the education for me, rather than reading and writing papers.

**JN** It seems like you have more recently come to land on the self-definition of yourself as a materialist in your painting, and I'm wondering how much of that time in New York in the late '60s and early '70s informs that idea of your practice.

**DN** I had my first show at Rosa Esman Gallery in 1975. I was doing a kind of a grid-based abstraction . . . I don't have those paintings anymore. They were very composed paintings, but I was always interested in what the paint did. Even in those paintings I would take oil paint and put it on cardboard for fifteen or twenty minutes and scrape it off so it was stiff, dense paint. I didn't quite know what to do at that time with that love of paint and the compositions didn't exactly go with that materiality which is why the paintings don't exist anymore. I come from a family of farmers and I always feel that painting and farming is kind of related.

**JN** Why's that?

**DN** Because it's dirt and pigment you get out of the ground and stretchers are made of wood and fences are made of wood. I don't like the idea that the material that you make the painting from is less important than the painting. The paintings I made subsequent to the Esman show are actually more related to the paintings I did in high school than what I was surrounded with in the late '60s early '70s.

**JN** At the same time in the late '60s early '70s there were so many artists who were leaving painting behind, and who were working with the materials of paint but leaving behind the kind of structure or

address that has to be there for something to qualify as a painting . . . So thinking about Lynda Benglis doing these pours on the ground and taking latex and taking material and kind of letting it exist on its own . . . What kept you committed to painting? Or committed to that arrangement?

**DN** I'm very interested in the contradiction between the materiality of paint and the natural illusion that paintings have. It's a profound contradiction; it's like a human being . . . in our flesh, we think. Painting is a profound philosophical form, so I never wanted to actually let go of painting. Also, I was resistant to a lot of stuff that was going on in the '70s because there was a big idea about progress and painting, and I've always been interested in the world tradition of painting, the ancient tradition of painting, Chinese painting and Basholi painting and all kinds of painting. I always thought the idea that we were somehow progressing was absurd because the cave painters were very sophisticated.

**JN** Right, so this idea that somehow painting was dead, this thing that keeps getting announced over and over again . . . this thing about illusion of materiality is very interesting as a commitment to what painting can be without needing to impose upon it a kind of image or impose upon it a figure or iconicity or something like that in order to tell a story, and yet, by the 1980s, you were painting figures. What attracted you to the figure?

**DN** At a certain point I felt that my paintings were not mine enough. They were too formalist and too much what was being done, and I thought, somehow, I have to work through who I am. I started painting from life, which I hadn't done—just a little bit at Ohio State. That painting on the left was one of the first figures, and I couldn't get the face right at all, it looks like a mask. I was looking at Picasso's Rose Period at the time so it's not quite the political statement that it might seem, it's just that I was inept at doing the face and I started with the feet and worked up to the face and I just could not get her face. I worked all week on the face and finally the model got mad and left.

**JN** I'd like to segue into your double-sided work, and what could be the front of the canvas and the back of the canvas and the way these images relate to one another. Do you consider, let's say, the B side of the canvas or the back side of the canvas, as a kind of decay?

**DN** I often flip a canvas a couple of times and the original back will end up as a front, so I don't consider the back the B side. I'm interested in the two-sided paintings because people don't look at the back the same as they look at the front. They tend to look at the back close up and at an angle. When they go around to look at the front they take a few steps back, so you never completely see a two-sided painting. If you saw a photograph of the painting, you'd say you saw the painting, but in an exhibition, the paintings keep producing themselves. For the last one hundred years, paintings have been photographed. Photography totalizes a painting's image. Even a Cézanne that has a lot of empty space—if you see a photograph of it, it's a very different painting than if you see it in life.

**JN** Is that why you once made a comment about Barnett Newman, about his painting as a work that stops you?

**DN** Newman is different than a lot of abstract painters like, say, Ellsworth Kelly, because he does keep the space moving. It's never static. So much contemporary abstraction has become so graphic, like graphic design. If you look at Newman's painting, compared to Stella's black paintings for instance, it's a different experience because it's not a graphic fixed image, and even in the photograph of that painting, it's still moving.

**JN** The word that you had used in relationship to Newman's painting was "convinced by" which is interesting to me, because it seems this notion of being "convinced by" is a kind of closure, and listening to you talk about this and about *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and other Newmans, the sense is that they kind of resist that closure.

**DN** Yes, they do. It's about looking at the painting on a certain day . . . here not there . . . that's what Newman said. It's about being there and experiencing that painting.

**JN** And so is that, in some sense, the philosophical piece for you? That is, to try and produce paintings that have this quality of never being finished?

**DN** Yes.

**JN** Not the sense of, "I don't know when the painting is finished" as this kind of cliché, but painting in a way that leaves this openness even once the paintings are final.

**DN** Yes, I'm very interested in that.

**JN** Deleuze says the "blank canvas is never blank," that the painter's job is to paint away or to excise the entire history of art which lays embedded within any "blank canvas." You take that into a more material direction and say that no canvas is blank because there's the warp and the weft and the material of the paint, the stretcher bars and the grid, so these are givens that are there. Do you find the practice of applying paint and working the surface and applying these other elements to it as simply producing more givens?

**DN** The painting at the end is not a given, like the stretcher bar is a given and the canvas is a given. It goes into some other place that's quite mysterious. I am a true process artist and I do not predict paintings at all. I don't even quite remember how I made the paintings half the time. They just kind of happen. I am the agent of doing this, but they aren't me and that really interests me.

**JN** I find that very compelling because it seems like it could fall off into this world of self-expression.

**DN** No, but it's not!

**JN** I know that you're resistant to that, but that always seems to be the place that many artists go, that there's this internal part of the self, whether emotional or spiritual, that is being externalized, and I know that you are resolutely against that idea.

**DN** You can never look at your own art with complete objectivity, but in looking at other people's art, what I find most expressive is size and scale. Scale is not something that can be taught. If you look at Pollock's scale, for instance, he can make a huge amount of space on a postage-stamp etching. I find that deeply expressive but I don't know what it's expressive of. It's a lot different than Expressionism, which is really one of the worst words ever. The descriptions of categories of painting are worse than useless because they send people down the wrong paths of thinking so people can't think for themselves. They can't stand in front of a painting and analyze for themselves, which anyone can do if they don't read the labels too carefully.

**JN** So, when someone's standing in front of these paintings, I want to ask, what do you want someone to get out of them, but I know you're going to say, "I want them to get out what they're going to get out"—but how do you want them to analyze them?

**DN** I have no idea about other people and how they're going to see it. Therefore, I have no want about it.

**JN** So take yourself as the first viewer, the first analyst of your own painting. How do you take them?

**DN** I look at them quite neutrally. I generally don't like them a whole lot or dislike them a whole lot. They just are. I work outside. I have an asphalt apron and it's all stained with paint and I often say that apron is the best painting I ever made. A painting is more like a rock that you would find than it is like the house that you built. In a sense I'm the opposite from a lot of the conceptual and minimalist heroes because I am the agent and I do stuff and the paintings do get made. They must be an expression of me somehow, but I don't know how that is.

**JN** So, I like this word "agent" that you're using rather than an artist that is expressing something. Essentially, you're reducing your role down to another set of causal activities and undo the need for self, persona, ego, expression—all these kinds of things. But I appreciate that you're saying you're the opposite of this minimalist push, so why not present the material as is?

**DN** You mean like buckets of paint?

**JN** Yeah, like buckets of paint.

**DN** In a bucket of paint, the paint is just this little round top and when you throw it on the canvas you can see it a lot better, and the thing with color is that the more expanse of a color you use, the more the color is going to express itself.

**JN** So there's an intention there.

**DN** It's an intention not to control it.

**JN** It is an intention to not control it but it's also an intention to get a better vantage on the material.

**DN** To see it better.

**JN** "To see it better"—even that sounds subjective because, to see it better, just get another pair of glasses. All of a sudden you could go down this rabbit hole, but you want an objective version of being able to say this is better than it is in the can, like Frank Stella saying he was trying to get the paint as good as it was in the can, but on the canvas.

**DN** The thing about Stella is that he wanted to get rid of illusion, but I really don't. Paint changes when it gets out of the can. When you put the color on that canvas, paint is not the same material that it is in the can. On that canvas, it changes, just like you're not the same person when you talk to someone as you are when you're not talking to somebody.

I think the whole idea of the paint being in the canvas makes the canvas very important. It's what weight canvas you choose. When I look at a Morris Louis unfurled, I'll stand really close to the painting because I really like to look at the canvas. It's a beautiful number eight. So the paint gives me this space, and I'll stand really close if the guards don't stop me.

**JN** Can you give us a little bit of background as to why the Mercer Museum is particularly important for you?

**DN** The Mercer Museum is in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. It's one of three handmade concrete buildings that Henry Mercer made in the early part of the twentieth century from about 1908 to 1916, over a period of eight years. The buildings were made with six men and a mule and a very early gas-powered cement mixer. He was a tile maker. He had been a curator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and he became interested in primitive methods of tile making. His first tiles involved simply casting stove plates, and then he mixed images together. It's very postmodern what he did; his tiles are amazing, but more amazing to me are his concrete handmade buildings. They have all of these holes in them, and you see things through the holes.

**JN** So that raises the question of how architecture relates to your own work. I understand at the Tang Museum there were paintings stacked and hung very high in the gallery.

**DN** Yes, Ian Berry suggested this.

**JN** These stacked arrangements . . . did that reveal anything to you?

**DN** Yes! It did. The architecture was activated in an interesting way. There was no place in the gallery where you could see one painting without another painting. It's this idea of experiencing the paintings as fragments and activating the viewing process. Every individual is looking at the show in a different way. A painting was resting on a two-inch high cement block. That was a revelation for me to get the painting right down on the floor, because even my stands are six to ten inches off the floor so that painting had a relationship to gravity, rather than using that upward expanse of the wall.

**JN** Would it be fair then to say that it doesn't make a lot of sense to approach your paintings in the standard mode of address, which is to the single panel on the wall; that, in fact, the work demands either to be seen with these armatures, with the double sides, or in these kinds of installations that also capture the architecture—that that would be the most valid way to do justice to the work.

**DN** The photographer is very important. Three people did installation shots. A different photographer activates the show in a different way.

**JN** There was something you said in an interview in which you describe how the paintings are a kind of constant activity, and when that tool is broken or when it doesn't function anymore, then it becomes present to hand, that's when it becomes analytical and when it becomes the situation in the studio when you sit back and become analytical with it rather than being engaged with it. And it struck me, as you were talking to this other interviewer, that you were talking through the process of making paintings as you're in the painting and you're doing it; and as you say, you're neutral, you're not in love with it, you just sort of step back, which seems to me to be this sort of melancholic way of making paintings because it's not this sense of having achieved something. It's this sense of working it to the point where it's almost broken or it's ruined, and that becomes the moment that you have to step back from it and put it on display and let others look at it analytically in the same way.

**DN** I don't think of it as melancholic because if something goes on living, I mean, the broken thing, you can either contextualize that word as a final thing or you can contextualize it as something that keeps on producing itself, and that's the opposite of melancholic. I find very refined paintings painted to the nth degree to be kind of melancholic. I went to the Whitney with a class, and I went to the American floor

where they have their collection. I've always loved Edward Hopper. He was one of the first painters I loved. I lived in the Midwest and identified with the images, and they had other '30s and '40s American representational paintings. I couldn't look at them. They were so closed. It felt so provincial and closed; and luckily there was a huge Clyfford Still hanging on the same floor. I went to it gasping for air and looked at the way he moved the paint to the edge, and not a tight edge, but a messy edge. I was like, I can breathe, so it's not finished. That's the possibility of abstract painting, that it's not finished.

**JN** I don't disagree with you. I think about the melancholic as productive, unfinished. Melancholic is the inability to work through some sort of material in the past, not like nostalgia. Melancholy, even though it has this negative connotation, is this kind of continuation of a state of being. There was this great quote by Hollis Frampton from the late 1960s about how once video had been produced and was on the scene, it was great because that now meant film could be what it was always meant to be. Film was obsolete because now you have video, and so film is released from the charge of what it had to do and that charge can make good on that utopian revolutionary promise that was always there in the beginning.

**DN** Yeah.

**JN** So that melancholy is always combined, right? Like the end of something, the outmoded, can be combined with this other continuation, this unleashing of potentials; it becomes vibrant again potentially, and that is my way of trying to talk about this thing that you were saying about your paintings, about getting to this neutral spot, because I don't think many people articulate getting their work to a neutral spot, that getting to neutral is a way of making it open to go on.

**DN** To go on, yeah, that's the main thing.

**Audience** Is there a point in painting when you say, "I'm done with it. I don't want to deal with it anymore," or is that a moment when you take a break from it, and you come back to it?

**DN** That's a very good and difficult question. A lot of times, it's the blank material backs that tell me the end, because a lot of times the paintings are made by seeping the paint from the back, so the color is really on the back. The painting is face down on milk crates. It's receiving the paint, and so I tend not to put more paint on those backs. The paint soaks through the canvas and a lot of times it's held in place by the cheesecloth on the front, and then I put it up and it doesn't feel right to go on adding paint to the back, so a lot of times it's determined by the way the back is, because the back is kind of blank. It's the real thing blank. I often like the backs of my paintings better than the fronts because they are so blank and blank is a kind of neutrality.

**Audience** Over the years has your understanding of your work's relationship to pleasure changed?

**DN** I've always found painting to be very difficult. When I was in high school, I thought I would be a writer. I wanted to go away to a good writing school. I was in Columbus, Ohio, and my parents said, "Absolutely not, we have a very good school right here at Ohio State University, and you're going there!" The painting department at that time was very good, where the English department wasn't that good at all. As soon as I got there and started hearing about conceptual art, I got really interested because I always thought I was inept with my art making. I follow my ideas about making, so I've never admired the idea of being a "good artist." It isn't like I don't really appreciate good artists—I do—but I know I'm not one, I know I'm something else.

**Audience** So the pleasures are intellectual pleasures?

**DN** Yes, very much so, intellectual pleasures.

**Audience** And has that stayed pretty constant from the beginning?

**DN** Yes it has, but I didn't have the intellectual materials when I was young, because art was very authoritarian, and I always resisted that very much. I've always felt that a young artist can think through the history of art themselves, and you do not need these authorities to tell you what's good and how art should be developed. So I think that the fact that I grew up in a time with a lot of authoritarian ideas, with Greenberg and the minimalists . . . my whole practice is pushed to a resistance.

