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Dona Nelson: In Situ

Paintings, 1973-Present

Thomas Erben

*526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
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There are many ways a New York museum could avoid merely validating the art market; one would be to surprise us all and give the New York painter Dona Nelson a survey. She has painted prolifically and innovatively for nearly 40 years, following her own path through the gap between abstraction and representation. She has been sustained by an adventuresome emphasis on materials, an appreciation of outsider art and an athletic (or, more fashionably, “performative”) approach to process that builds on the art of Jackson Pollock and the Minimalist notion of specificity. For Ms. Nelson, however, specificity evolved into a charged compression of feeling, surface fact and optical experience.

Her restless career has dodged the burden (and thus the rewards) of a superficially consistent style. But this show, which sums up 35 years with only 10 works, reveals some of its underlying unities.

For example, a small untitled black-and-white work from 1973 and the quietly hallucinatory “Fleshy Reflection” from 1997 reflect her pursuit of more complex and organic variations on the Minimalist grid. “My Home III” and “My Home IV” from 2000 and 2001, which have an image of a village church in common, use cheesecloth dipped in paint to conflate the white-on-white of modernism with snowy calendar art. The first painting has the added jolt of crazed, spidery flings of intense blue, and the second has a predella of the Nativity.

“April,” a blue abstraction from 2008 that has been worked on from both sides and is attached perpendicular to the wall, seems willfully eccentric. But “Line Street,” a bright, scabby abstraction from 2007, is excellent, as is “The Palmist Reveals the Future of Painting” from 1992, a bright mandalalike image made entirely of short strips of dyed canvas; it shows an immense indigo hand embedded in designs of orange, yellow and purple.

Ms. Nelson is a bit like Marsden Hartley — that is to say, a great risk-taker and consequently a sometimes uneven artist. But in curatorial terms, her lengthening, adventurous career has produced more than enough to work with.

ROBERTA SMITH