

**ART & DESIGN**

Dona Nelson: 'Phigor'

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Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH

*Thomas Erben Gallery
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
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Incrementally and without nearly the attention she deserves, Dona Nelson has become one of the best artists working today, partly by spending over two decades wrestling with the idea of a painting as a free-standing object with two distinct sides and, in many ways, a mind of its own.

Just as the Minimalists plunked sculpture into the viewer's space, minus pedestal, Ms. Nelson has liberated painting from the wall. She may not be the first to do so — Rauschenberg, Ryman and Polke are precedents — but she does it with her own specific flamboyant rigor, a noun that is both evoked and possibly ridiculed in "Phigor," the show's title. The dropcloth look so endemic in contemporary auction art may be buried in these works, but Ms. Nelson's results are the opposite of zombie formalism — quite alive, distinct and infused with an adamant, difficult beauty.

Ms. Nelson also builds on the Abstract Expressionist tradition, in Harold Rosenberg's words, of treating the canvas as "an arena in which to act." For her it's an arena in which different painting materials are forced

to interact with help from gravity, chance and intermittent control, while taking full advantage of the facts of canvas, stretcher, color, contrasting viscosities and paint-dipped string and strips of cheesecloth. What develops in the arena of each work is so physically present and visually complicated that issues of abstraction and representation fade away.

The paintings simply are, and they demand that you deal with how they came to be that way. What happened first, and which side was she working on when it did? Was the canvas on or off the stretcher at the time? What seeped through, what was prevented from doing so, and how? What was stained, what was thrown, what was carefully outlined? What was added or removed, and when? How many previous paintings has that stretcher served under? Among the profusion of colors, textures, punctures, drips and coarse needlework (that paint-dipped string), the mysteries mount, resolve and mount again. You keep looking.

In the current Whitney Biennial, Ms. Nelson's paintings are among the two or three standouts in the large, crowded, color-crazed fourth-floor gallery that is its beating heart. And this show is among the strongest of her career.

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