

ARTFORUM

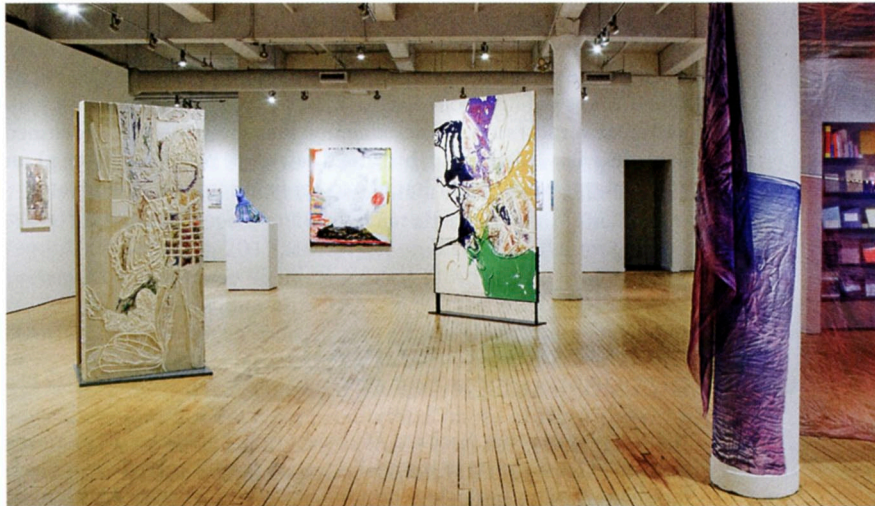
PHILADELPHIA

"Painters Sculpting/ Sculptors Painting"

FLEISHER/OLLMAN

While critics frequently compare Dona Nelson to far more celebrated postwar painters, "Painters Sculpting/Sculptors Painting" instead placed her work in conversation with that of a diverse group of younger artists. Nadine Beauharnois, Matt Jacobs, and Marc Zajack, like Nelson, are based in the Philadelphia area and remain anchored to traditional forms of painting and sculpture as well as to evergreen dialogues between figuration and abstraction. Staking her claim as the exhibition's linchpin and underscoring her importance to subsequent generations, two of Nelson's freestanding large-scale double-sided paintings, *String Turn*, 2015, and *Studio Portrait over Time*, 2016, faced off in the center of the gallery with the heft of opposing sumo wrestlers. Mounted on a black metal armature, *String Turn* features poured, dripped, and brushed acrylic, in hues of purple, yellow, green, and black, which has seeped through to the work's verso, where the folding and stapling of the canvas over the wooden

View of "Painters
Sculpting/Sculptors
Painting." 2017.
Photo: Claire Illtis.



stretcher is visible. Perforations threaded with brightly painted string pock the work. *Studio Portrait over Time* consists of two stretched paintings on linen, each roughly the dimensions of a household door, secured nearly parallel to each other on the same plywood base. Additionally comprising glued-down muslin and cheesecloth ribbons, this slightly newer work depicts, on one side, two approximately life-size figures, one seated and shown in profile, the other standing directly facing the viewer. The shirt of the latter bears a grid pattern, the nonperspectival rendering and raised texture of which press the figure against the picture plane. All four sides of the work—the two facing outward and the reverse sides of these—feature similar motifs, creating the sense of a structure in rigorous dialogue with itself. Figuratively, this assemblage recalls Nelson's representational paintings of the 1980s, which show people rendered in a childlike manner against shallow backgrounds; materially, it speaks to her 1990s abstractions, such as *Moonglow*, 1993, whose balled-up strips of cheesecloth bulge from the painting's surface.

Perhaps inspired by Nelson's canvas- and linen-wrapped frameworks, Jacobs, who was Nelson's student at Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art, draped swaths of pink-and-purple-dyed silk organza across a corner of the gallery and around a supporting column. Viewers could stand inside *A Purple Solution*, 2017, which tented off a small section of the gallery, and look through the sheer fabric to take in the rest of the room. Whereas Nelson's most recent work directly addresses the viewer's body by means of scale and imagery, this installation offered a subtle filter to visual perception. Nearby, Beauharnois's brightly colored, tactile absurdist sculptures inhabited wall and plinth space. Equal parts erotic, violent, and humorous, *Topless*, 2016, is a papier-mâché lump in cartoonish shades of peach, magenta, and blue that variously resembles collarbones and bound breasts, a severed hand, and a plucked and trussed chicken. The work evidences a slippage between multiple representational possibilities and near-formless materiality; it is animated via this very irresolution. Similarly, the productive tension between abstraction and figuration—enacted in the confrontational staging of Nelson's two large-scale works—appears to propel the artist's practice.

The exhibition also included, surprisingly, one of Nelson's much earlier and smaller square enamel paintings, which hung inconspicuously on the wall to one side of her other works. In swift, economical brushstrokes, the high-contrast black-and-white *Waiting in the Park*, 1982, depicts businessmen seated in front of looming trees. The work served as a reminder of the commitment to the pictorial that reemerges in varying degrees throughout Nelson's oeuvre and additionally united many of the other two- or three-dimensional exhibited works. For example, close viewing of Zajack's paintings *Nude on Confettied Bike*, 2014, and *Pomping the Bust*, 2016, revealed the titular images slowly emerging from a morass of highly textured oil paint. Beauharnois's *Circus Escapee*, 2016, is a plaster and papier-mâché rendition of an anthropomorphized electric-blue party dress with a warm red mouth or vagina orifice at its center, and a defined front and back, both highly patterned with pink and green vertical stripes. The exhibition thus showcased the established artist less as a calcified art-historical reference point and more as an active player whose contributions to her field continue to resonate.

—Becky Huff Hunter