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The Alchemy of Phigor and Others

By Fabian Lopez

Dona Nelson: *Phigor*

At Thomas Erben Gallery

Through May 17





Installation views, *Phigor*, Dona Nelson, Thomas Erben Gallery.

Filling a blank canvas is similar to learning a place. What is that place? According to Dona Nelson's latest solo exhibition *Phigor* at Thomas Erben Gallery, it's a place to play "on – purpose –ness".

In "Formalism" an essay by Dave Hickey, which is in his latest book *Pirates and Farmers*, he reasserts what Clement Greenberg insisted, "that one's sense of a work's quality, virtue, or intensity is as instantaneous as the mind's ability to sense pattern and to infer their 'on-purpose-ness' without knowing that purpose."

Vibrant splashes from one work to another lead us through a maze of freestanding large paintings and finally to the paintings on the wall within the gallery. As some artists seek to maintain the freshness of painting using non-traditional techniques, Nelson continues to reinvent her work while sticking to traditional methods. In the right hands the redundancy of simple techniques and the usage of color will flourish. A splatter here and there, some stitching, some greens, some yellows, some mud and other complementary colors found throughout the exhibition give way to found structures and form within the canvas.

Nelson's fearlessness in painting encourages reactions of both splashes of intuition and allusion, suggesting heroism and at times wit found in such works and titles as *Phigor*, *Red and Green Noses*, and *Bright!* Recognizable materials and colors start to develop

content by association. Nelson's paintings are not about defining an answer, but rather evolving thoughts.

Echoes of her earlier works ultimately reside within the methodical gestures of her current works with Nelson directing the surface just as a conductor repositions an orchestra. Fast, slow, patient, neurotic, colorful, muddy, ugly, and beautiful all play an important role in the transition of the new works. It is the work of painting itself that moves and generates an intuitive process where "play and place" can come together.

As in the writings of Willa Cather's novels such as *Alexander's Bridge* and *My Ántonia*, Nelson's paintings give us a taste of the old American romanticism with a sense of the current American satire. The exhibition at Thomas Erben brings us to an understanding of the alchemy of painting at its best.

Fabian Lopez is an Assistant Professor of Painting at Skidmore College. He lives and works in Saratoga Springs and Los Angeles. Lopez has participated in both group and solo exhibitions in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Rome, Italy.

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