

ART IN R

Dona Nelson

Cheim & Read
521 West 23rd Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 24

There's a stalwart inviolability to Dona Nelson's paintings. Abstract or representational, they present a solid, challenging front to the viewer. Some of the 13 recent paintings in this exhibition refuse to budge and look, frankly, as if more work might be needed; but others unbend to reveal an inner expansiveness. In these, Ms. Nelson is painting up a storm.

With a series title — "12 Stations of the Subway" — that nods playfully to Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross" and one painting called "The Deep," after a famous Pollock, the Abstract Expressionists and the city where they worked are clearly on Ms. Nelson's mind. Like Newman, she is not afraid of red, yellow and blue. As she did in the early 1970's, she begins each work with a field of orderly squares or circles, adds equally orderly cookie-like blurs of batter-thick paint and finally pours on the careful yet often havoc-wreaking swirls and plumes that she developed in the late 1980's.

In essence Ms. Nelson is using Pollock's drip method, slowed down, to mess up Newman's more fastidious approach, creating intricately knitted fields that imply different speeds, decisions and degrees of chance. They shuffle spatial illusions like a croupier: glass curtain walls, street maps and aerial urban photography; the subway's tracks, tunnels and tiled walls, as well as train lights blurred by steam to the point of hallucination.

In "High Lounge" space opens, closes and opens again. Indigo, white and lavender conspire to imply skyscrapers against, within or reflected by other skyscrapers, seen through an oddly visionary proscenium of zebra-stripe spills. "Street of Walls," with its grids and then dots, blue and yellow flooded with white and trailings of red, finishes with a relaxed zip of blue-green that sluices top to bottom, like Broadway heading downtown. Along with the blue and white meanderings of "The Deep" and the snowy primaries of "Holiday," these works suggest that the dead horse of modernism still has plenty of kick.

ROBERTA SMITH

that have both body and technical associations. One untitled piece here from 1960, of squarish shape with irregular spokes radiating out from a central hole, can be read as the engine cowling of a turbo jet engine, but also as an orifice of the earth or the body. Ms. Bontecou's craft matches the sinew of her concept.

The two younger artists stake a claim on the attention, too. Ms. Outlaw's big, "Black Hose Mountain" (1998) is quite what it says it is, a many-faceted irregular pyramid made from short lengths of rubber dishwasher tubing filled with plaster. As you walk around its elegant structure, the facets change from silvery black to white and back again, depending on the angles at which the lengths of tubing have been placed. Workaday as its materials are, this fantasy image is evocative of a peak in, say, a Chinese landscape.

"Missed Once" (2000-1) by Diana Cooper is a Rube Goldbergian free-standing relief wall that gives new depth to electronic bewilderment. Crawling with mock switchboxes, fake controls, wires made of pipe cleaner, computer circuitry diagrams, the marks made by instrument readings, manic instructions for use and other macrocosmic microchippery, the wall is a witty takeoff on the entropy of systems, but it also makes anatomical connections.

Presenting an older mentor with younger talents of similar spirit is a nice idea, and in this case the match seems right.

GRACE GLUECK

Greg Colson

Sperone Westwater
121 Greene Street, SoHo
Through Feb. 24

With deadpan wit, Greg Colson, a Los Angeles sculptor, addresses our modern need to bring order to chaos. Each of his round, retro-style "Pie Chart" paintings is just that: a pie chart of neatly lettered and illustrated sections representing the results of some quasi-scientific survey found in a newspaper or magazine.

In "Musical Instruments Americans Play," the two largest sections are taken up by piano and guitar



Cheim & Read

"The Deep" (1997) by Dona Nelson, in her show at Cheim & Read.

Furniture in Los Angeles. The J. Paul Getty Museum commissioned him to furnish some of their offices. After a 10-year break, he started to show in galleries again. This is his New York solo debut.

The installation has a vaguely surreal showroom atmosphere. Much of the work is painted a wan white. It looks both scuffed up and unfinished, as if still in the process of sorting out its exact identity. A refrigerator turns out to be two stacked tables lying on their sides with built-in bookshelves behind (or underneath.) A cupboard is actually a painting with graphite lines to indicate doors; it's like a Minimalist triptych altarpiece. Another three-part work consists of a chest of drawers without knobs, another chest with no drawers and a set of drawers with no chest.

So, painting, sculpture and design change places; form floats free, though always not entirely free, of function. All this is accomplished with unpretentious simplicity, so that each piece manages to look stripped down but unsleek, candid but also mildly abject. It's almost impossible to tell where the show ends and the gallery starts, which is a real sign of success.

HOLLAND COTTER

Luca Pagliari