

Art in Review

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Dona Nelson

Thomas Erben Gallery
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 21

Dona Nelson is in midcareer, and her work process is getting more experimental than ever, on the evidence of the four large paintings in this show. One, "Mitchell Street" (2003), looks like a monochromatic painting in green with patterns and textures that grow more complicated the longer you look. Ms. Nelson executed the picture by hosing it down repeatedly with water between paint applications to create an effect somewhere between marbling and expressionist gesture.

She painted another, untitled piece from the back, the stretcher side, so that pigment bled through to the front, making the finished product reversible. A third piece, "Walnut

Way," looks like a giant charcoal drawing and is actually the ghost of an earlier painting. The artist spread the canvas over the original work, a Nativity scene, and rubbed its low-relief surfaces with charcoal to make the impression seen here.

Finally, "Gaucho Groucho" (2005) is emphatically about surface-as-process, with its intricately stained canvas festooned with ropes of stiffened fabric. A lot of abstract painting these days seems to be mooning over issues of formal beauty. Ms. Nelson messes around with form, throws performance into the mix and lets beauty fall where it may, which makes her art feel exciting and awake. *HOLLAND COTTER*

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