

Wild Messiness

“That the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past.”

- Lee Edelman, *The Future is Kids Stuff* from *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

binarism \ noun \ bi·na·rism \ | bī-nə-riz-əm \

a mode of thought predicated on stable oppositions (as good and evil or male and female) that is seen in post-structuralist analysis as an inadequate approach to areas of difference; also: a specific dichotomy subscribed to or reinforced in such thought <the binarism of West and East>

- Merriam-Webster

Unfortunately, our contemporary moment seems increasingly structured by a political climate based in binarisms. These binarisms foreclose conversation and alternatives by attempting to reduce thought into distinct categories and imply an ideal of progress based on defeating the other (side). The most glaring and obvious example is the recent election cycle featuring Trump and Clinton, which reduced any alternative feelings and thoughts into two, in my opinion, deeply depressing options. It is with this structuring in mind that I come to Dona Nelson's work, which consistently seems to deny distinct categorization in favor of wild messiness at every turn, unfolding into non-finality and less-hierarchical fantasies. In a moment when our present seems continuously regulated by reproduced structures, I'm going to argue that with the help of Nelson's work, an embrace of messiness might not be a bad place to start generating ways out of the setting we are limited to. At the same time, my goal is to allow this text to be influenced by Nelson's work, to mimic linguistically what Nelson accomplishes formally: to allow digressive moments and personal rants to brush up and overlap with art history; to not shy away from blunt references, and awkward segues.

At every turn Nelson's work exudes a messiness, and I would like to note three (amongst many) examples to keep this present in our minds. First, their status as paintings is compromised by their materiality which includes mark-making made up of strings, cheesecloth, and various types of *paint* on surfaces of canvas, linen, and fashion linen. On top of this material plurality, the surfaces are subject to alteration as Nelson may cut canvas off one, poke holes in another, spills and stains so paint can soak through. The material plurality produces a dense experience, as it requires registering a plethora of techniques, maneuvers, and applications. A second messiness could be conjured from the breadth of art history she is pulling from, which is seemingly endless: for example, a moment borrowed from Cezanne's palette might dominate one section, and a Thornton Dial-esque figure produced through abstraction in the next. This is a gesture that blends and lumps histories and conclusions together in favor of awkward minglings, aesthetic surprises and unlikely similarities. Thirdly, her paintings often live a double-life as walls, stagnating movement in space and forcibly refusing the structure of a given room. By filling spaces with walls that double as images, the viewer experiences a messy interaction with works that simultaneously create imagined spaces while piercing existing ones. The way in which messiness seeps through multiple aspects of Nelson's work expresses a rigorous desire, and should not be confused with sloppiness or carelessness; messiness is a sustained aesthetic endeavour.

Nelson's newest works, 'abstract boxes' as she calls them, exemplify the ways in which her practice continues to locate more forms of this messiness. Physically these works are comprised of two two-sided paintings, roughly the scale of doors, displaying a front and a back that are held together by a wood base. These paintings are coupled, creating four surfaces in each artwork to be considered. Since these surfaces are placed in close proximity, one obscures the other, requiring the viewer to move around to engage the different angles and overlaps. Put simply, the interior sides of an abstract box can only be appreciated at an angle. Outside of their objecthood, these paintings are portraits which depict, in various degrees of representation, models and assistants from her studio. The figure will be my case study to explore Nelson's approach to depiction and learning, which isn't based in a single aesthetic form, but rather insists on being unbound as she moves from painting to painting. It also provides a clear anchor to

consider her collaging of Art History, which is intensely diverse, and as such adjusts its way around advancing a single form—standing against a notion of progress as a consistently upward spiral toward the future, evoking my opening quote from Lee Edelman.

The figure in Nelson's newest work is a bit of an Art Historical shapeshifter. In one work, a figure can dominate the picture plane with broad Frankenstein shoulders, awkwardly looming over the viewer, while in the next a figure's lumpy body becomes part of a provisional space, only recognizable by the faint shape of a head precariously perched atop the vaguely body-like forms. Considering the expanse of this new work, one would be hard-pressed to see an evolution in tactic or development in technique. Notice the two figures from the work, *Autumn Andrew*. On the interior side of one of the paintings is a depiction of a person sitting. This figure, built texturally out of cheesecloth and paint, is cartoonishly minimal in form as the body and clothes are comprised of a sticky dense black, a simplified white skin tone and a vibrantly bright blue shirt. Just above his head hangs a rectangle the color of the figure's blue shirt; a sky acting like an anvil. However, just underneath the figure is a ghostly white and glossy floor that literally collapses the space above it, being a physical and flat abstraction. This stretched out form commands a relation with the viewer more akin to Eva Hesse's skin-like sculptures than the surrounding pastoral scene. In contrast, we can look at a figure on the front side of the same panel, which depicts a model with deep legibility; a bearded figure staring out wearing a blazer, a blue patterned dress shirt, and a blue undershirt. Whereas the other figure feels like an entirely imagined scene, this rendering appears like an artist interested in the way hair sculpts a face and the way one blue shirt sits atop another. It is steadfastly more studious, and is not dissimilar to a student discovering ways to depict a body with blotchy blocks of color. The academic rendering expresses how Nelson's practice doesn't shy away from any process of learning, and the work utilizes messiness to stand against the presumption of education as structured or linear. Each is a new painting, and what is learned across the surface of one isn't, necessarily, transferable. Here, painting is a chance to *rethink* the body, and each surface is an opportunity to start the process of *rethinking*, again.

The way Nelson reaches this variation in form is by encouraging her intuition to come into contact with an expanse of historical influences, which transgressively produces a set of relationships not built on adoring or furthering a single narrative or style. By allowing a diversity of Art Histories to enter the scene at the same time, Nelson discourages aesthetic hierarchy; all the histories are present on the surface, which is to say that any historical influence could become smudged, blurred, covered, or poked through. Here is more messiness, as Nelson's work is subject to the same smudges, blurs, covers, and pokes and her history is, *additionally*, placed on the same unstable grounds. Her artistic output embraces, and is part of, a less-hierarchical fantasy. I'd like to note two effects of this approach to Art History. First, by maintaining this stance across the expanse of her oeuvre, Nelson intransitively values presentness and non-arrival; each painting exists for its own wild messiness. Again, what is learned across one surface is not, necessarily, transferable. The work exists as a series of explorations that are not interested in advancing art history or arriving at a better future, but rather to reconsider what we thought we knew, to see what we miss when we are consumed by the fantasy of conclusion. Second, they are expressions and witnesses of complexity, as they summon a diverse set of historical narratives at once and confound the viewer with differing modes of seeing. When our present moment feels increasingly reliant on stable oppositions, this witness of complexity and multiple histories (not limited, at all, by borders) resists falling into the same traps and structures by insisting that any idea should only be seen in relation.

While thinking through Nelson's work, she shared a few texts that she had recently read. One was an essay in Harper's Magazine by Simone White, who was writing about her own work in relation to the current political climate during the rise of Trump, she states:

"There are no words yet for what is happening, but I listen for them gathering. The work is to wedge some language into the gap while the great change happens, to keep the space for language open. I will not be governed like that, I will not be governed by them"

White also states the work “is now and always has been imagining the possibility of un-bossed thought and life.” Nelson’s use of wild messiness keeps space open by never allowing either a single surface, the four surfaces, or the space that they inhabit to settle comfortably into a structure. These are works that resist being bossed or controlled by a singular form or cohesive narrative. Perhaps we can view these works as wedging open a way of thinking that accounts for collisions of diverse thought and attends to a political possibility of poetry in form. Hopefully, my brief pasting of Edelman and White into this essay can operate similarly to Dona’s collaging of Art History as fragments of content shattering outward as potentially useful lines of thought. Through moving in and out of various styles these newest works produce bodies informed through, and built out of, abstraction; swipes of color tether bodies to certain picture planes while comfortably keeping other spaces at a distance. These are depictions of bodies that collapse into the fluid drip of pictorial space while also, physically, asserting themselves as walls. They are uncompromising works, that require the viewer to be in motion, consider from multiple angles, and to cogitate the collision of relationships. Perhaps, most broadly these are works that fantasize a form of painting and a form of life that, wildly, cannot—or will not—be dictated by a single form.