



Zoe Nelson
Recto / Verso

Cleve Carney Art Gallery

Zoe Nelson: Recto / Verso

Sunday, Oct. 18 to Saturday, Nov. 21, 2015

For her solo show *Recto / Verso*, Zoe Nelson has transformed the Cleve Carney Art Gallery into a shifting landscape of pulsating and vibrant paintings that embrace a plurality of holes, simultaneity of sides and folds, and chromatic movement. Sometimes violently, other times sensually, and oftentimes playfully, Nelson slices into the canvas in order to open up her paintings. Formal frameworks of absence and negation are paired with exuberant colors and playfully immersive surfaces of paint. Nelson paints on all sides of the canvas and her paintings hang from the ceiling or perpendicular to the wall, dancing with the viewer as one moves throughout the gallery, and in so doing, inviting expansive, individual and temporal possibilities of viewing. The effect is a reversible painting installation, where no single angle looks the same, and paintings each contain their own logic of dissonance or harmony between recto and verso sides.

In response to Nelson's work, the *Leopold Group* modern dance company will perform new work choreographed by Artistic Director Lizzie Leopold through and around Nelson's paintings installed at the Cleve Carney Art Gallery. Pairing this installation with dance allows for a fundamentally sculptural expansion of painting beyond the frame.



Three Holes, 2014, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 34" x 30", verso

Bonus Holes

"But a woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—who stimulate each other."¹

The verso sides of Zoe Nelson's multi-sided paintings on canvas remind me of the cover of Jill Johnston's *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information*. At the time that Johnston and her publisher Thames and Hudson released the book in 1996, it included a note saying they regretted "that Jasper Johns has refused permission to reproduce his work in Jill Johnston's book."² Instead, the blank backsides of paintings grace the covers—wood stretcher bars edged in a fringe of canvas. The text contained therein—what *New York Times* reviewer Grace Glueck called "a psychobiography" that reads the painter's opaque homosexuality through the author's own assertive "commitment to lesbianism"—examines what is behind an oeuvre of paintings' frontal view. Writes Johnston, "Neither Johns nor his three friends [John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and lover Robert Rauschenberg] consciously created a homosexual aesthetic. But their closet status was reflected in the aesthetic they fashioned ... work of puzzling, subtle, internal contradictions."³ Likewise, the book's cover develops its own aesthetic: in looking at a painting's backside, checking out its ass, a possibility is presented of a complex form in which backside becomes outside, full frontal is within, and reading becomes looking through.

To read the similarities between Johnston's characterization of Johns' internal aesthetics and Irigaray's structure of female sexuality destabilizes presumptions around the gender and sex of form: The female rebel from psychoanalysis' phallogormorphism and the gay, postmodern painter share the ability to turn inward and onto oneself. A comparison of the two texts also proposes that painting and sexuality could share turns of language and their material effects, while resisting any presupposition of what physical, visible traits should correspond to what identity.

¹Irigaray, Luce. "This Sex Which Is Not One." Translated by Claudia Reeder. *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Edited by Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print, p. 324.

²Johnston, Jill. *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996. Print, p. 11.

³Ibid, p. 137.

Nelson's painting practice has led her to the reverse side of her canvases, at times painting around the edge to explore the structure of crossbars that support the taut surface of the object, or otherwise working through the canvas by adding cuts and folds to her formal vocabulary of stripes, squiggles, spots and patchy patterns. When I visited her studio, she pondered, "I feel like I spend a while formally deconstructing, figuring out, opening up. I knew there was something in the hole, in the crevice, in the space, in the fold, in the cut, because I identified with that from a philosophical, feminist, queer perspective ... The way I think about the world, or these paintings at the very least, questions how absence—how cutting out something that is perhaps the most emotional or beautiful part of the painting—is actually a necessary sacrifice to make it whole, but also to have that contrast. It's not that I see things in a binary structure, but just to have an opposing point or multitude of points."⁴

Nelson's most recent canvases patter with "zones" traced off of their wood understructures into compositions, front and back. Chill gray scales redolent of Johns' playful identity-in-absentia aesthetics press against areas that are flush with a rousing palette of intense, ebullient color. Throbbing hot and cool reds pervade amidst coy harlequinades and dancing tangles of lines. These presences wrap around gaps and orifices incised into the paintings, a condition that for Nelson achieves wholeness rather than any subjugated, partial status of otherness.

In most cases, these works are suspended from the ceiling with wire, showing much more than paintings are typically prone to do. For each viewer, from each vantage [stand] point, the surrounding environment, including other artworks and fragmented views of viewers' bodies, are incorporated into the work's image. This compounded form may be complicated in perversely imaginative ways, with crotches, arms, grins, gallery attendants and the world beyond Cleve Carney's windows filling in the spaces between Nelson's brighter-than-life color-scapes. But just as provocative is the possible stretch of white gallery wall that may be framed by these works. For viewers, the gallery (and the institution that is behind the gallery walls) is visually incorporated into the objects. These views disorder (which might be one working definition for queering) the sets of relations among artist, object, institution and viewer. What was previously (and still usually) a shallow,

⁴All quotes from Zoe Nelson are taken from an interview conducted on July 21, 2015, at the artist's studio in Chicago, IL.



Three Holes, 2014, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 34" x 30", recto

compressed gap between artworks and the buildings/cultures/traditions upon which they are hung is here widened—new openings are optioned—allowing viewers to transgress and choreograph their own navigation through an engagement with overlapping pictorial and art institutional spaces.

This augmentation of one's view is just the start of the place-making that occurs around and through Nelson's perforated paintings. Hung as they are, a room nearly solidifies within the larger gallery that carries its own atmosphere with it, its own alternative logic that is neither befuddling maze nor separatist fantasy, but a wavering place where more different kinds of desires can be appreciated.

Says Nelson, "There is a slightly rebellious stance against the straightness of the walls. There's also an invitation for the viewer to move around the space in a pattern that is not a straight pattern. That relates to the formalism, too. I'm engaging with these painterly terms, but there's also ... a playful 'f**k you,' a queering, an opening up. And just desire. Desire to insert desire into a narrative that's formal in a way that's expansive through absence and exuberance, too."⁵

This is not a space in which to 'come out,' but rather to come apart. It coincides with, if not directly depicts, a turn in the culture around LGBTQIA* identities that reveals contention, crisis, a prismatic shift away from that acronym's cohesiveness, and the assumption of shared experiences and beliefs. We've dispensed with the expectation to fully know or comprehend one another's backgrounds and positions; Nelson makes paintings whose parts cannot be seen all at once. "So much has shifted since I was coming out. I'm not certain what identifying terminologies embody, and that's wonderful. I'm interested in fluid spectrums, many spectrums." Nelson's paintings give form to this productive, irreducible confusion.

Or, returning to Irigaray, "Thus woman does not have a sex. She has at least two of them, but they cannot be identified as ones. Indeed she has many more of them than that. Her sexuality, always at least double, is in fact *plural*."⁶

⁵Several words have been cut out of this text at the behest of the host institution. The author and Nelson have agreed to these adjustments insofar as these may operate as disorderly views of the institution, in keeping with the installation of paintings under consideration.

⁶Irigaray, p. 326.

Following this configuration of plural form, discourses around gender and sexuality have recently insisted, at times vehemently, for multiple linguistic alternatives for speaking to and about bodies and the holes by which they are defined. In his 2014 study on genital body-part terminology in an online discussion community for trans men, Lal Zimman observed that, "It is common for participants to mix typically male-referential language (e.g., *d**k*) and typically female-referential language (e.g., *c**t*) in reference to the same body. Zimman argues that this is accomplished most fundamentally by severing the ostensibly unbreakable connection between gendered body parts (e.g., a vagina) and the sex categories with which they are associated (e.g., female)."⁷ Further, "One of the most salient practices that trans men engage in when talking about their own and one another's bodies involves the coining of new words, such as *bonus hole* or *front hole* to refer to the vagina ... [thereby questioning] the reading that says particular physiological characteristics are inherently gendered."⁸

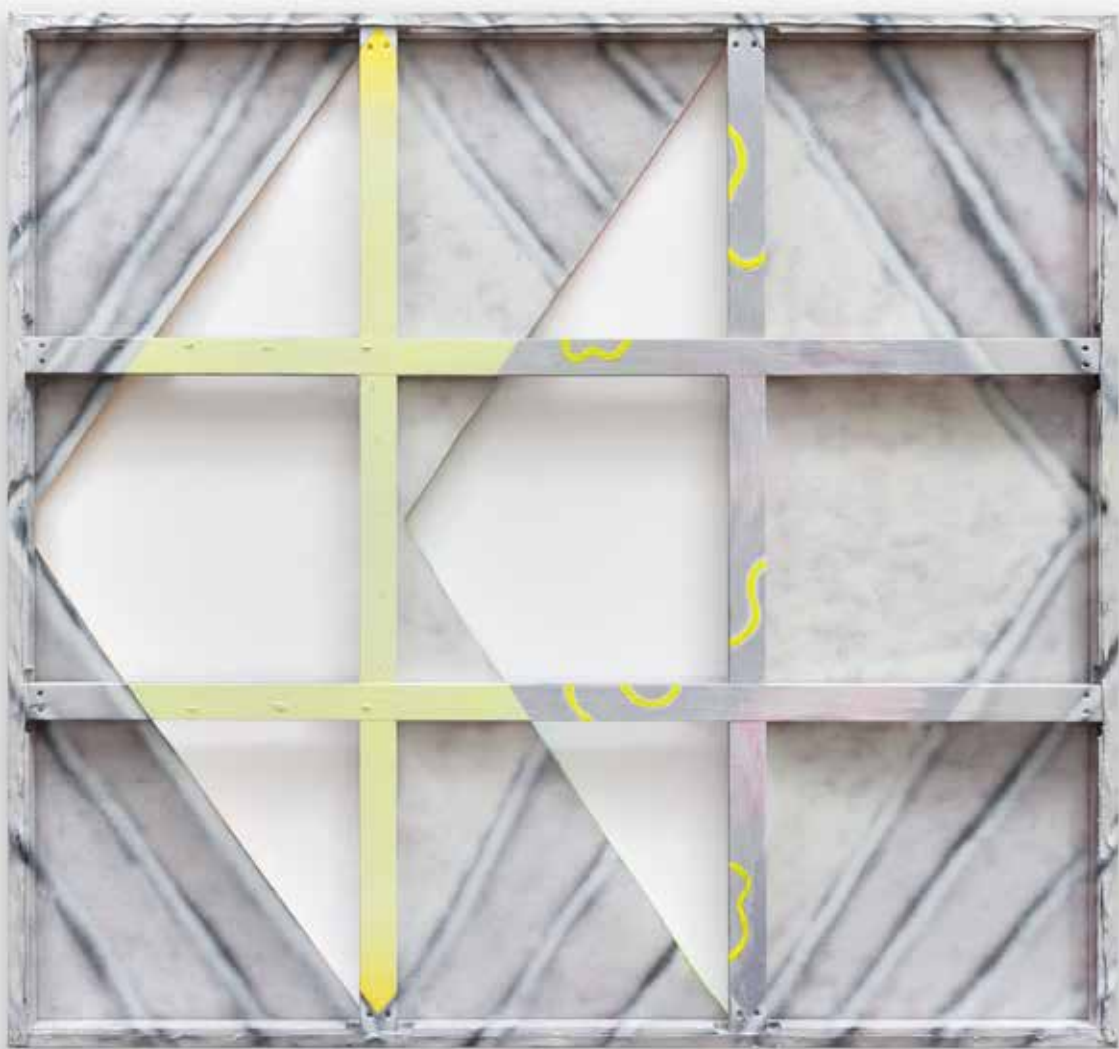
Nelson's paintings include bonus holes that introduce new access points between body and space, missing nothing, envying nothing. Their sides which are not one don't privilege a singular view or the gaze that would capture it, rather a kind of ongoing looking is traversed by viewers around the canvases and beyond their frames. Whenever these works turn away, they reveal even more.

—Matt Morris

Matt Morris is an artist, writer and curator based in Chicago. He has presented artwork throughout the United States and in France. Morris is a transplant from southern Louisiana who holds a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati, an MFA in Art Theory + Practice from Northwestern University and a Certificate in Gender + Sexuality Studies. Recent curatorial efforts have been presented at Western Exhibitions and The Hills Esthetic Center in Chicago. He is a lecturer and teacher at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Morris is a contributor to Artforum.com, ARTnews, Art Papers, Flash Art, Newcity, and Sculpture; and his writing appears in numerous exhibition catalogues and artist monographs.

⁷Edelman, Elijah Adiv, and Lal Zimman. "Boyc**ts and Bonus Holes: Trans Men's Bodies, Beoliberalism, and the Sexual Productivity of Genitals." *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 61, 2014. Print, p. 682.

⁸Zimman, Lal. "The Discursive Construction of Sex: Remaking and Reclaiming the Gendered Body in Talk about Genitals Among Trans Men." *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. Cary and New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2014. Print, p. 22.



Pigeons on the grass, alas (G. Stein), 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 56" x 60", verso



Pigeons on the grass, alas (G. Stein), 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 56" x 60", recto



Flamingo Anus, 2015, oil and spray paint
on cut canvas, 60" x 54", recto



Flamingo Anus, 2015, oil and spray paint
on cut canvas, 60" x 54", verso



Many Eyes, 2014, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 34" x 30", recto



Many Eyes, 2014, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 34" x 30", verso



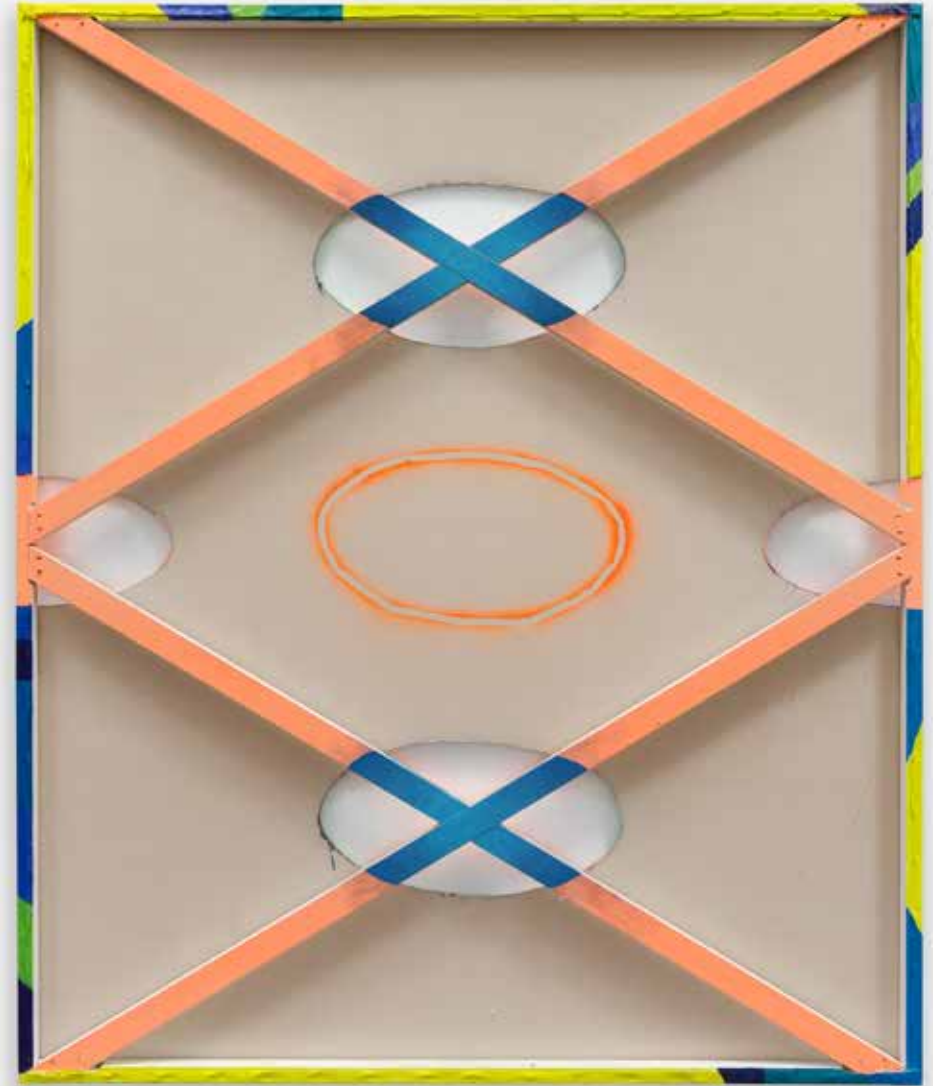
Touching, 2015, oil and spray paint
on cut canvas, 72" x 56", verso



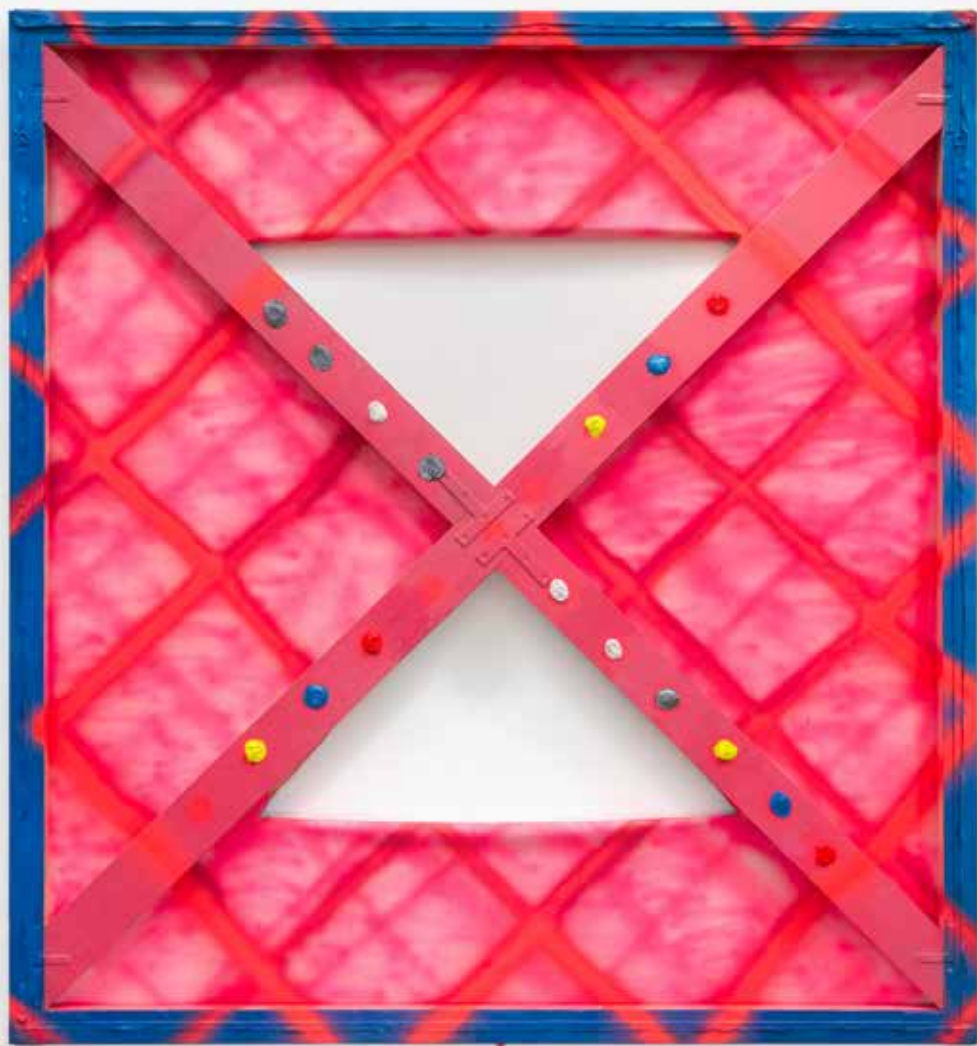
Touching, 2015 oil, and spray paint
on cut canvas, 72" x 56", recto



Psychedelic Psychic, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 72" x 60", recto



Psychedelic Psychic, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 72" x 60", verso



Lips, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 60" x 56", verso



Lips, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 60" x 56", recto



Zoe Nelson was born in Rhinebeck, NY and currently resides in Chicago. She received an MFA from Columbia University and a BA from Barnard College. Exhibitions in Chicago include Western Exhibitions (solo), Lloyd Dobler Gallery (solo), Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center (two-person), Robert Bills Contemporary, and Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, as well as the Elder Gallery (Lincoln, NE), Usable Space (Milwaukee), NurtureART (NYC) and The Fisher Landau Center for Art (NYC). Press includes The Huffington Post, Bad at Sports, Newcity and New American Paintings Blog. Nelson's work was selected for the 2013 and 2011 Midwest editions of New American Paintings. She has attended residencies through ACRE (WI), Ox-Bow (MI), The Lighthouse Works (Fishers Island, NY), Pont-Aven School of Contemporary Art (France) and Yale University's Norfolk Summer Program (CT). This past spring, she presented her work as part of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's *Artists Now!* public lecture series, and she currently teaches at Harold Washington College and DePaul University.

More information about Zoe may be found at zoenelson.com.

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The Cleve Carney Art Gallery would like to thank Zoe Nelson for putting together such an engaging and challenging exhibition, Matt Morris for writing an excellent essay, Lizzie Leopold and the Leopold Group for putting together a fine piece of dance to correspond with the paintings, and all of the students who have helped install and produce this exhibition.

Front cover: *Folding into Triangle*, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 60" x 54", recto
Back cover: *Folding into Triangle*, 2015, oil and spray paint on cut canvas, 60" x 54", verso



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**CLEVE CARNEY
ART GALLERY**

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