

works offer enigmatic glimpses into the minds of strangers.

Even better, and weirder, was the DVD projection *Quarta-Feira de Cinzas/Epilogue* (2006), a collaboration with Brazilian filmmaker and photographer Cão Guimarães. Black ants, filmed close-up, lug colorful disk-shaped confetti over a scraggly patch of ground. As they collectively create a gleaming, ever changing composition, they are like ecstatic revelers at Carnival. This effect is enhanced by a soundtrack that mixes ambient sound with a samba beat tapped out by matchsticks. Such works, made up equally of chance and system, allow for randomness, flux, destruction, creation and ample visual pleasure.

—Gregory Volk

Dona Nelson at Thomas Erben

What, exactly, constitutes an image, and how that image might be coaxed or coerced into being, are key concerns of Dona Nelson, one of the very few painters with the fortitude to confront Pollock head-on. Since the 1970s, Nelson has worked in both abstract and figurative modes; recent abstract work dominated her 14th solo show, "Brain Stain," which was a balancing act between disorder and control. Adapting Pollock's method of working in inks on a stack of rice paper, Nelson sometimes begins paintings by pouring thinned acrylics over multiple layers of raw canvas so that the paint seeps through these strata in unforeseeable ways. *Gaúcho Groucho* (2005) is thus originated, and across its blotchily stained ground of yellow, yellow-green, red-orange and alizarin are splayed and wadded streamers of cheesecloth and twisted strips of

canvas, soaked with pigment in roughly the same palette. Toilet paper, sausage casings, blood and snot are nowhere employed but strongly evoked in this visceral work. Resting on a brick on the floor, several feet out from the wall, it was held upright by cables wired to the ceiling and displayed its multihued backside.

Surface is image in *No Title* (2005), which hung in the gallery's second space. Over a matte stain of a full-throated red that veers in areas toward purple, lustrous clots and smears of an almost-matching red are scattered and spread. Traces of an underlying gold wash impart a faint metallic sheen to regions of the surface, making visual sense of the impasto's glare, glossy highlights.

The flowing ooze of *Mitchell Street* (2003) is "organic" all right—in murky greens the colors of algae. An untitled 2004 work, another two-sided painting, was suspended off the floor at a right angle to the wall. Gallery information has it that the artist formed its coursing, shadowy, deep-magenta stain by forcing her acrylics through the canvas from the back with a high-powered hose.

Nelson's figurative concerns were represented by *Walnut Way* (1999), a large, vigorously if mechanically executed frottage, in charcoal on canvas, of her *Pennsylvania Nativity* (not in this show). The technique yields a ghostly, derivative image of the artist's interpretation of this genre subject and raises questions about the relation of abstraction to replication, cloning and the Virgin Birth.

The paintings have less in common with the caricatured physicality of Larry Poons's relief paintings from the 1970s than with, for



Dona Nelson: *Gaúcho Groucho*, 2005, acrylic and cheesecloth on canvas, 83 by 106 inches; at Thomas Erben.

example, Cora Cohen's ongoing experiments in pictorial substance and materialized space. Also relevant are Dubuffet's "Empreintes," meditations on the spontaneous, matter-based generation of imagery. Notwithstanding the many ways Nelson's works border on sculpture, they are resolutely paintings, pictures, even when she works on a small scale. A drizzled pool of tinted cadmium green threatens to smother *All American Girl* (2000). It forms a shell that partially encases knots of bunched cheesecloth and loose hanks of twine. The work's crumpled, compacted force wildly exceeds its modest 14 by 11 inches. Its components are in gorgeous visual and tactile equilibrium, slight as dust and heavy as lead.

—Stephen Maine