

It seems very pretty,...but it's rather hard to understand!... Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas...only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear at any rate...
Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

Working in the relative isolation of Arizona for the last ten years, John Nelson has synthesized his illustrative and sculptural experience into a unique body of work that combines painting, drawing, and text with narrative content.

Nelson embraces the concept of artist as story teller, a chronicler of contemporary culture. His symbolic amalgamations, which often consist of a central image superimposed over a collage of symbols and text (anything from art criticism to nursery rhymes), make intuitive sense of the inundation that we experience in what Nelson sees as our “overcommunicated, how-to world.” Bits and pieces from daily life are placed, layered, painted, sanded and repainted; in this persistent, almost obsessive editing and rearrangement we find the grammar of Nelson’s private language. And because the constant reworking of the surface and the rearranging of form describe the process of discovery and creation, the paintings end up being narrative in two ways: they ask us to invent our own stories based on the images and messages that Nelson uses, but they also present the “story” of their own creation and invite us to share the restless, somewhat anxious journey of the art-making process.

Nelson’s work appeals on several levels. To begin with, it is extremely approachable, even talkative, and yet there is an aching, searching quality to it. In accepting the challenge that Nelson’s work offers, we enter into a conversation that quickly turns inward to become a kind of conversation with the self. Nelson’s work is also seriously funny, like an urgent joke or a prophetic cartoon, a word of warning disguised as a pun. Mostly it puts me in mind of Shakespeare’s fools – deeply ridiculous, and utterly right. Nelson readily acknowledges his formal ties to caricature, cartoons and comic strips. In much the same way that Chinese or Egyptian languages are written pictographically, Nelson’s world is made up of symbols that speak to us in a deeply preverbal sense. Universal icons – devils, wishbones, serpent tails – are ordered, processed and reinvested with meaning. The end result is that humor, longing, passion, phobia, and anxiety all find their rightful place in his work.

Nelson’s paintings speak to us with the immediacy of pictographs, but it’s the personal references (spontaneous sketches, text from books, subheads from advertisements – all incorporated like subversive subliminal messages) that give the work a material richness and provide a window into Nelson’s personal world. In *Mixed Witness*, for example, Nelson pairs a series of disembodied heads – a man, a woman, a devil – with the relentlessly positive messages from Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*. “Expect the best and get it,” the barely visible text reads. “I don’t believe in defeat.” And yet even the devil looks vaguely worried, or at least preoccupied; either the characters depicted here haven’t read Peale’s work and aren’t going to, or they have and it hasn’t stuck. Also mixed in are pages from *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*, as well as playing cards (mostly hearts, diamonds and jokers – the cards that hold extra meaning). As with much of Nelson’s work, every element in the painting comes loaded with meaning, and each element changes in relation to some other equally loaded element. The Peale text, for example, instructs us to believe that we can influence how people see us, but the chattering, powerless heads and the playing cards (luck of the draw) say otherwise.

The strength of the work lies in the terrain between the narrative and the abstract, between what is immediately accessible to the viewer and what remains obscure. Masked in Nelson’s faux-naïve style is a complex formalism designed to both present and obscure meaning. “Ambiguity and metaphor are central to my work,” says Nelson, “and certainly to the work of most of the artists that I admire. Michael Ray Charles, Manuel O’Campo, Italo Scanga, in different ways they walk that line between sincerity and satire.” Nelson is quick to point out that there is no one message or one right way to read his work. “I think the ambiguous is more interesting, more engaging. Because there is always something more to discover it reveals itself more slowly and it has greater longevity.”

Nelson crafts images that he ultimately relishes for their emotional quality. He infuses his figures with a romantic purity far removed from other contemporary art making strategies. Quite unlike Michael Ray Charles or Manuel O’Campo, whom he mentions as influential painters, and whose paintings are politically charged with reference to race, class and wealth, Nelson strips his figures of philosophical and political intention. His work is motivated by a rhetoric of symbolic distortion and an iconography of free association. By manipulating the relationship between form and symbolism, Nelson encourages viewers to create connections, to assert their own ideas and interpretations. Each painting is a visual crossword or jigsaw puzzle that every one can complete or interpret as they choose. The rich symbolic metaphors are both idiosyncratic and universal. “Each of us confronts a work of art with visual references built on our own experiences and emotions,” Nelson says. “I always hope that people see something of their own inner qualities in my paintings, their own inner voices. It should go further than just my fascinations. You hope to touch a part of the human collective conscience, touch upon shared experiences. In the end, I guess I really hope that people see themselves in it.”

Deborah Sussman Susser