

Joan Nelson

For over four decades, Joan Nelson has created majestic and potent visions of the natural world, playfully subverting the long-standing art historical genre of landscape painting. This March, Herald St presents an exhibition of new works made by the artist in her studio nestled amongst the Catskill Mountains in Stamford, New York.

It was growing up in Manhattan Beach, California – a picturesque area on the Pacific Ocean close to mountainous regions and state parks – that germinated Nelson's devoted attention to the natural world. Her parents were from the Midwest and eager to explore the variety of landscapes an hour away in any direction. 'It was all magic to my eyes,' she says, about the areas she would often traverse as a child with her family. 'The intense beauty, the smell of pine trees. I still have strong emotional ties to those places.' Her teen years were spent on the banks of the Missouri River. 'Ever changing, the river was a powerful, even dangerous source of beauty and awe'.

In her newest works, produced for her second solo exhibition at Herald St, Nelson remains interested in geological phenomena: depicting the sky, clouds, caves, sunsets, mountains, valleys, and rivers. Drawing from both observed reality and imagination, Nelson's meticulously rendered compositions depict a world seemingly untouched by human life. 'I don't want a human presence, or even an animal presence,' Nelson previously observed. 'Because then the painting has a specific focal point, and it's about that focal point.' Indeed, while this allows her paintings a universality to project one's own experiences and memories, Nelson's paintings also imagine a world pre-, or perhaps post-, human civilisation. 'I think of a world in which humans don't exist, and I'm a little gleeful about it,' she once conceded.

Alongside traditional painting tools, like acrylic, oil, and pencil, Nelson has previously experimented with burnt sugar, shoe polish, nail polish, mascara, cinnamon powder and turmeric, and now uses unconventional mediums like highway glass beads, glitter, mica mineral dust, and nail adornments, that all play with light in dynamic and atmospheric ways. Her newest works for Herald St's exhibition use beads, glitter, and shellac. Using such materials associated with 'craft' and cosmetic makeup, Nelson defies their original design for use on small areas (like the body) to instead represent areas of vast scale, colliding 'feminine' materials with the male-dominated tradition of landscape painting. These materials also allow her paintings to conjure a glinting effect whereby ambient light reflects off the canvas surface, visually recalling the intensity of how sunlight bounces from raindrops and water. Describing Nelson's approach, critic Donald Kuspit once remarked her paintings are characterised by their 'smouldering, luminescent atmosphere that gives them an aged, old master look.'

Nelson is within a long lineage of artists – from Yang Dynasty scholar painters to Caspar David Friedrich, the Barbizon painters or the Hudson River School, for instance – who seek to indicate the sheer sublime power of nature in their work. In the works on view, waterfalls cascade with heaviness, mounds of rock indicate centuries of gentle erosion, and the sun beams strongly over land. Yet while in previous generations these phenomena might be read to indicate a feeling of powerlessness over nature, today the direction of this power is of course muddled, as the reality of human impact on the climate and the complex ways that global warming is seen to affect the natural world become increasingly apparent. While gently inviting us to consider and appreciate our relationship and role with the environments we encounter – both positively and negatively – Nelson's paintings, depicting dramatic sunrises, resplendent waterfalls and spectral rainbows, do also radiate an energy of hope: that each day is a potential new beginning.

'My work is just a continuous daily exploration of how to make a landscape with methods and materials that help me render a lifeless future world,' Nelson writes over email. 'It's a world that we can mourn in advance, speculate about its nature and the future of its beauty. A reminder to enjoy every precious moment of the now.'

Text by Laurie Barron