Joan Nelson: *Miniatures*

25 November 2026 – 16 January 2027

American painter Joan Nelson seems drawn to the miniature as if to the vanishing point in a composition: to the idea that a sign or a mark gains in significance the closer it comes to disappearing.

– Thad Ziolkowski

Herald St is delighted to present its third solo exhibition with Joan Nelson, comprising a new body of painted miniatures created in the artist's studio in Stamford, nestled in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York. Nelson has been persistently making imagined miniature landscapes since the late 1980s, and this is the first exhibition dedicated solely to these intimately scaled and jewel-like works.

For over four decades, Nelson has been recognised for her depictions of vast natural spaces – caves, desert landscapes, volcanoes and waterfalls – capturing both the immense beauty and formidable power of the natural world. Informed by art-historical research, with references to artists such as Albrecht Altdorfer, Albert Bierstadt, Edward Hicks, George Caleb Bingham and Caspar David Friedrich, as well as found imagery and childhood memories of exploring the Midwest and the banks of the Missouri River, her works are typically devoid of any signs of human life. Often read as both celebrations of the landscape and meditations on its ecological destruction, they suggest, through the absence of a human spectator, that the world existed long before us and will endure long after we are gone.

While Nelson is also known for medium- and sometimes large-format works measuring over five feet, she has consistently made paintings on a very small scale – at times no bigger than a postage stamp. These were notably presented in her two-person exhibition *Fragments of Imaginary Landscapes*, alongside the work of Swiss writer Robert Walser, at the Swiss Institute, New York, in 1994. While Nelson has cited Indian miniatures as an inspiration, in 2014 she began a series of silver jewellery lockets containing very small paintings, drawing on a European tradition. Before the advent of photography, such lockets typically held painted portraits of wealthy and aristocratic figures; Nelson subverted this tradition by placing sweeping, unpeopled landscapes within these intimate spaces.

"It's really soothing to sit and work in these really tiny spaces," she says. Despite their diminutive scale, Nelson's paintings possess a remarkable material and spatial complexity. Working with acrylic, inks and matte pastes on both board and acrylic sheet, she creates richly textured surfaces that reflect light in different ways, lending the works a sculptural quality and a sense of expansiveness. Nelson's paintings reclaim landscape painting, a genre historically associated with male artists, through the incorporation of materials often coded as feminine, including glitter and iridescent powder in the works presented in this exhibition.

Nelson began the series presented in this exhibition in the winter of this year, as the US administration went to war with Iran. Some works make clear allusions to the catastrophic destructive power of weapons through their depiction of the symbolic shapes their impact leaves in the sky. "I reflected on the grave reality of their ability to trigger total destruction with a single press of that button," Nelson says, acknowledging the fragility of life, our planet and our very existence, while at the same time recognising the spectacular aesthetic impact that weapons can radiate and their visual alignment with forms found in the natural world. "I don't know why, but I have to concede that I love the way those things look, those explosions. They recall cumulonimbus cloud formations, caused by updrafts of warm air meeting cool air. Yet even these same atmospheric conditions can also contribute to the formation of natural disasters, such as tornadoes."

The luminescent group of works on view, all defying the specificity of a particular time period, depict an expansive, complex and ever-changing world: water crashing over waterfalls and diffusing into the sky; the sun slowly setting, bathing the sky in pink; and mountain rock formations shaped over millions of years by tectonic plate movements, volcanic activity and erosion. Nelson invites us to consider how our lives are entangled with this world and subject to constant flux, in ways we can influence but cannot control. As critic Donald Kuspit once wrote:

Nelson's "post-Modernist" landscapes, with their rhapsodic ecological character, bespeak a yearning for the pastoral that is typical of an alienated, urban culture. It is our overcivilised – in some cases overestheticised – condition that has led to this particular nostalgia, and our typical response is to create equally estheticised islands of private ecstasy to escape from the surfeit of "civilisation". Nelson's paintings reflect this paradox, being at once overcivilised in their memorialising, antiquarian manner and primitively rapturous in their tone.

– Text by Laurie Barron

About Joan Nelson

Joan Nelson (b. 1958, El Segundo, California, US) lives and works in Stamford, New York State, US. Recent exhibitions include *Joan Nelson*, Herald St, London, UK; New Mountains, Adams and Ollman, Portland, US and Chapter NY, New York, US (both 2025). Nelson was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship, New York, in 2023.

Writings on her work have appeared in Art in America, The Los Angeles Times, Artforum and ARTnews, among other titles. Across her career, Nelson has exhibited at institutions and surveys including the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (both New York); Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; among many others.

Works by Nelson reside in major public collections including Brooklyn Museum, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among many others.