

Monday, June 18th, 2018

## Passage: Donna Dennis at Lesley Heller

by Annabel Lee

**Donna Dennis: *Ship and Dock/Nights and Days* or *The Gazer* at Lesley Heller Gallery**

May 31 to June 30, 2018

54 Orchard Street, between Hester and Grand streets

New York City, [lesleyheller.com](http://lesleyheller.com)



Donna Dennis, *Ship and Dock/Nights and Days* or *The Gazer*, 2018. Installation view (Day). Courtesy of the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery

Have you ever wanted to walk inside a painting, sit down and experience the work from the inside? *Ship and Dock/Nights and Days* or *The Gazer* is like a painting: you have to keep looking at what is before you so you know not only what you're seeing but what you're feeling as well. This mixed media assemblage, the primary work in this exhibition, takes up an entire room and carries psychological power.

Entering a darkened space through a floor-to-ceiling black curtain, you encounter a structure beyond which, in one direction, is a slowly, gradually changing sky beginning at the horizon line. The whole installation is miniaturized yet human-scale, like a great big, exploded-open Joseph Cornell box.

A bench is placed conveniently against a dark wall pierced with scattered holes that allow tiny and tinier lights to shine through. Sit down with the starry wall behind you and gaze at, and through, the structure. It's mesmerizing and invites you to linger and contemplate the passage of time. The structure and the walls on either side and behind are dark with a greater depth than any empty black because this color is, in fact, a dark marine blue.



Donna Dennis, *Night Dock and Stars*, 2016. Gouache on paper, 11 x 14-1/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery

The structure is a dock with two sheds. One weather beaten shed, nearer the viewer, to the left on the dock, is clad in corrugated metal with authentic signs of aging: dings and scrapes. Its door has a weathered, cross-hatched safety-glass window through which a lit bulb exudes orangey-yellowish light with a brighter center, like the glow from a gas lamp, only the filament identifies this lamp as an industrial-type, if delicate electrical bulb. On entering the space with its many parts, darkness and this light, this lamp suggests a Bec Auer gas lamp of the type familiar from Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*. We look through something to see a view beyond, a light on the other side of the solid structure. Only there is no figure here except oneself and a haunting feeling of loneliness. Like Duchamp, Donna Dennis has controlled the conditions under which the viewer experiences the work. One must be part of the work to see it.

The piece changes, even though nothing moves but light. This is not a static sculpture. There is a subtle though constant state of change, augmented by the gentle sounds of water lapping up on a shore, swirls and eddies, droplets of water, tidal sounds. Waves pull back, rigging that is not tied fast quietly clatters, breezes funnel through the dock and over water. There's an eerie cosmic whoosh that complements the surrounding darkness.

The other shed, further from the viewer and to the far right at the end of a walkway, stands on an elevated structure with a dark side facing the viewer and a light side facing left. This light side lends a surreal quality to the scene. The gravity and sharp contrasts of light and dark on the sides of this form suggest the melancholy of Giorgio de Chirico's abandoned cityscapes and the relationships he creates between buildings in space.

The dock is set on what look like concrete pylons whose square footings suggest water underneath. The viewer may be walking on that water. The crossbeams, the gangplank and stairways create many geometric shapes, like erector sets or metal shelving: crisscrossing patterns and a variety of axes and

rectangular framing. Drooping cables or fuel pipes connect into stanchions that resemble plumbing fixtures, rounded at the top, as if they have shut-off valves or switches for the flow of liquids or current running inside the sheathing. Or they are hawsers, , protected from the elements inside metal tubing where those strong cables penetrate the deck.



Donna Dennis, *Dock*, 2016. Gouache on paper, 11 x 14-1/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery

This is a durational work because beyond the dock the projection of sky above the horizon changes gradually from day to night to day, from painterly sky blues to dark night with brushstroked stars as a ship changes from white against the night sky to black against the daytime skies in the distance. Thus the elements of engineering and technology that exist here in a three-dimensional space, also includes the fourth dimension of time. And, though that horizon changes, it's always night for the viewer with the stars shining behind us..

This scene may represent a vast lake in northern Minnesota where typically fish houses and small cabin structures can be seen from the shore. The scale of the work suggests that this may represent one of the Great Lakes because the ship, an ore ship carrying coal, is so small, so far in the distance. And what looks like a heap of rubble under the dock suggests piled up coal

The viewer is struck by the precision Donna Dennis employed in creating the overall construction, the sound and the lighting. This reflects the attention brought to bear on the locations where the artist made her beautiful gouache drawings that hang in a separate room, and the elaborate preparations to accomplish her installation, first constructed in the studio, then disassembled and recreated at Lesley Heller.

Lee, Annabel. "Passage: Donna Dennis at Lesley Heller." *Artcritical*, 18 June 2018. [online]