

**6.25.18 — [A DOCK IN THE DARK](#)**

Topics: [Donna Dennis](#), [Lesley Heller](#)

Nothing quite prepares you for [Ship and Docks / Nights and Days](#), an installation by [Donna Dennis](#) at [Lesley Heller](#) through June 30. If you know her only from the works on paper just outside, you may be totally unprepared for its mass. Even if you know her from past work, you may be unprepared for its changing light.

If those sound like opposites, they sum up much of its presence and its mystery. An artist known for sculptural installations, she has added a video component, on top of the light from within. She has also brought you closer than ever to her bulky construction, while leaving open just how far it may reach.



The title, too, sums up both her subject and its puzzle. Is it day giving way to night or night giving way to day, and just how many nights and days? Where, for that matter, is the ship? The work lies beyond a black curtain, in a room that you might never have known was there. You must first pass through a bright, upbeat summer group show at that, fixed more on the human body than on passing ships and passing hours. It may come as a chastening darkness or a much needed rest.

The gallery links her to others of her generation in [Alice Aycock](#), [Jackie Ferrara](#), and Mary Miss. Each deals in sculpture and weight, but also in [feminism and land art](#). Dennis, though, is not bringing art outdoors, but rather bringing the outdoors in. She represents a specific place that she knows well, Lake Superior. Her construction takes the shape of an ore dock—or loading platform for natural resources, for shipment to steel mills and the like. She is not making earthworks in the manner of Miss, [Robert Smithson](#), or [Walter de Maria](#), but rather recalling those who move earth for a living.

Not that she is all that literal, although she shies away from Aycock's abstraction. One finds oneself within reach of the work with no clear place to take its measure. (A real ore dock might reach half a mile into the water.) To someone new to steel country, the crossing diagonals could belong to anything from an oil rig to a pier by the beach. Here they include a chamber fit for a watchman or a lighthouse keeper, lighted but strangely empty. It is just one of two structures, as it happens, one facing the viewer and the other away.

The works on paper give a preliminary view of the structures and the light. Points of light interrupt the gouache and points of black the paper, like pinpricks. They add luminosity and, by their resemblance to constellations, root the scenes in the imagination and the night. It may come as that much more of a surprise, then, when the sky behind the installation fills with a softer glow. Its yellows and blues play off against the artificial light of the two interiors. Together, they offer an extended view into the changing light.

Is it dusk or dawn? It may depend on when you enter and thus which comes first, day or night. The impression remains, either way, of an artist in control of landscape and light. It remains, too, of something almost too close for comfort but just out of reach. It feels like a stroke of luck to find the bench on which to sit. It may feel in turn like a disappointment to exit into plain old gallery lights.