

Pathfinding

By Maria Porges

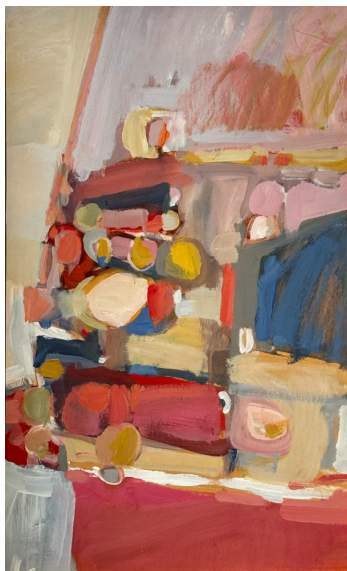
On the occasion of *Open Geometry for Emotional Use*, an exhibition of work by Nancy Mona Russell, on view at Nelson Duni, August 1 – 26, 2026.

I

There are no rules. Let the picture lead you where it must go.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

For six decades, Nancy Mona Russell has been making paintings in a unique visual language: creating a world that has remained as personal as it is accessible. Already in her third year at Scripps College when, in a painting class, she realized that she was going to be an artist rather than an art historian, Russell remembers thinking that the other students were considerably more advanced than she was—not realizing that they, in turn, considered her work to be *sui generis*, admiring how directly and intuitively she had found her own vocabulary of shapes and marks. She had no skills, she has remarked, but neither did she have inhibitions.



Nancy Mona Russell, *Altadena*, 1967–72.
Acrylic on poster board on board, 32 × 19.5 in.

NELSON DUNI

Raised by art-loving parents, Russell fondly remembers trips with her mother to museums. When offered a chance to select a reproduction to hang in her childhood bedroom, she chose a Cézanne landscape—demonstrating an early attraction to abstraction that has continued throughout her life. *Altadena* (1967–72), begun soon after she graduated from college, already contains most of the elements that characterize her mature work. Fields of layered, vigorously brushed color are punctuated by circles, bars and dots of complementary hues. Brilliant primaries—yellow, red and blue—are framed by areas of pastels and darks.

The title of this exhibition, “Open Geometry for Emotional Use,” suggests that paintings like *Altadena* are the result of a mathematics of feeling rather than one based in numbers: something more open-ended, in which there is more than one answer to our questions. Russell welcomes the idea that viewers, bringing their own experiences to the contemplation of her paintings, each see something slightly different, depending on their mood and even their need.

Encouraging that diversity of experience, she often chooses titles for her work that serve as a point of entry without being overtly directive: an obscure place name, for example, or a descriptive term. Some examples include *Banos*, *Boonies*, and *Moraine*; *Summerhill* and *Waterway*. Others suggest humorous allusions to the deliberate way Russell applies strokes of thick pigment—*Cakewalk*, *Fondant*—while others still are like tiny poems, offering a moment of idyll. *Soft View*. *Slow Geography*. *Dapple*.

Many of these imply a place or landscape without making specific references, suggesting locations or experiences the artist remembers or imagines rather than recording a scene from life. In *Bend in the Road* (2025), a curving, twisting band of pastels (punctuated with segments of brilliant red, blue, and yellow, as well as black and white) bifurcates the composition’s rectangle. On either side of this band, roughly rectilinear forms in blues and greens pop forward and recede, as the whole composition begins to spin around a central pivot point.

Postern (2025) features a series of curved arching lines. Similar forms appear in a number of paintings, though here they seem as though they might be a reference to the title: a somewhat archaic word for small, concealed doorways once used to exit or enter a castle or fortification unseen. The boldness of the three curves descending across the middle of the canvas, the center one framed by strong dark blue verticals, seems to contradict the idea of secrecy or discretion. But maybe that’s the point. Russell often seems to be asking us to just allow ourselves to open the door, figuratively speaking, and experience emotional resonance—to look long enough to find our own stories in her shapes and colors.



Nancy Mona Russell, *Postern*, 2025.
Acrylic on canvas, 30 × 40 in.

II

*Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn't need
to use words, but colors and lines.*

ETEL ADNAN

From the beginning of her career, Russell has used acrylic rather than oil-based paints. Still novel in the mid-1960s (having only been introduced by Liquitex a decade before), water-based paints made of pigments suspended in a polymer emulsion were being adopted not only by artists like Andy Warhol and Helen Frankenthaler, but by many colleges and art schools as well.

Russell recalls little practical instruction in painting methods while in college; experimenting on her own, she found that she preferred tubes to jars. She relished the thicker product's brilliant color, rich textures, and its resistance to her brush's deliberate strokes. Additionally, she found that water-based products worked better than oils in a life in which she did not always have a dedicated studio space or shared one with another artist.

With only a few exceptions, she has consistently used the same method for constructing a composition. She begins intuitively, drawing shapes and lines with charcoal on a primed

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canvas. Paint largely covers the drawing; over time, her palette has invoked diverse artists, including Vuillard, Kandinsky and Frankenthaler.

Some recent experiments have gone in new directions. In *Moraine* (2026), for example, the charcoal lines of the drawn structure are still largely visible. (Once seen, lines remaining in other compositions—*Fondant* (2007), or the also-recent *Saddle* (2026), become apparent, offering tantalizing clues.) And in *Vessels* (2026), forms of color have been brushed directly on the canvas's unprimed surface.



Nancy Mona Russell, *Moraine*, 2026.
Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60 in.

Russell has also been working on an expanded scale—up to ten times larger than previously. Panoramic compositions like *Confluence of Possibilities* (2026) fill our field of vision, inviting us to not just imagine ourselves looking into the world she pictures, but to be surrounded by it.



Nancy Mona Russell, *Confluence of Possibilities*, 2026.
Acrylic on linen, 84 × 132 in.

III

To create a work of art is to create the world.

VASSILY KANDINSKY

Russell's recent experiments coincide with a period of astonishing productivity. For the past three years, freed from other responsibilities, she has found herself able to explore these different avenues, drawing on intuition and memory. She has spent most of her life in northern California—some of it in San Francisco, where a sixth-floor view featured the street's sprawling grid; some of it in various cities in the Central Valley—but mostly, she has lived in Pacifica, in a house so close to the water that it has storm shutters to keep rogue waves out. For Russell, though, the view in the other direction, of wild hills and constantly changing clouds, continues to be equally inspiring. That, and the constantly changing light.

Maria Porges

art writer, artist, and professor at California College of the Arts.

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THE EXHIBITION

Open Geometry for Emotional Use is a solo exhibition of paintings by Nancy Mona Russell, curated by Andy Nelson.

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ABOUT MARIA PORGES

Maria Porges is an art writer, artist, and professor at California College of the Arts. A longtime contributor to the Bay Area arts community, she has written extensively on contemporary art for publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *SquareCylinder*.

ABOUT NELSON DUNI

Nelson Duni is an art gallery in San Francisco dedicated to presenting significant artists and artist estates through exhibitions, publications, and public programs that deepen understanding of artistic practice and cultural history.