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How to (Make One) See with Painting

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What do I see when this Eva Nielsen painting is looking at me? What do I feel when transfixed by another? How do I experience its material, its surface, its depth? In what way does my eye pass over it? What links are made by my brain when faced with Nielsen's portrayals of reality and its double? Do they invite me to join them in their remote landscapes? When there, will I better understand the reasons for their familiar absurdity? Or can I simply stay on the edge, without projecting myself into these spaces at the heart of which I will remain forever the only human being?

What do I take away with me when I leave a Nielsen painting behind? A sensation of dismay, of erasure, of intrusion? How does this visual memory permeate my retina? What do the Bedouins feel when calmly leaving the oasis in which they have found refuge? Is the life of the oasis the same once the caravan has departed? And what do they feel when the palm grove seen from afar reveals itself to be a mirage? Is painting similar to an oasis or a mirage? Do you like to see each canvas as an optical illusion that you must simultaneously elude and elucidate?

These are, without doubt, the questions that Eva Nielsen has also been asking herself, as a painter and as her work's first viewer, since her emergence in the late 2000s and early 2010s. She is constantly renegotiating these questions from the starting point of a simple, almost immutable (and therefore fertile) protocol: a form – a simple or complex structure – occupies the foreground of the pictorial space; a more or less dense landscape stops the gaze like a curtain in the background. The production procedure is equally elementary: a tight imbrication of the painting and of the silkscreen print that rub up against each other, overlapping and mixing with each other during the creative process, sometimes in unexpected ways. But the very simplicity of this "primitive scene" offers the artist huge freedom of execution: the possibilities to confront a presence and a setting are infinite, as are the frictions between the effects of reality and the effects of painting, as are the optical illusions generated by these frictions.¹

The power of illusion—of which painting constitutes without doubt a magnified, archetypal expression—resides in the meeting of opposites: uncertainty and virtuosity, blurring and precision, presence and what remains out of view. It's equally this that fascinates in the mirage and the oasis, beyond our own desire to believe in it: this sudden apparition—truthful or not—in the middle of the desert and pure flatness, of a true chunk of reality with palm trees, the sound of running water and the promise of repose. This apparition is not so much optical as mental. It exists at the meeting point of the eye's pupil and the neurones: scopic impulse and cerebral self-suggestion brought together. (What if the waterfall and the origin of the world of *Étant donné*s : 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage [Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-1966] by Marcel Duchamp was ultimately a mirage, out of place in the Swiss mountains?)

In her successive bodies of paintings – belonging to different technical and iconographic registers, expanded methodically by the artist – Nielsen follows this quest: to give substance to illusion and visual

¹ Facing the canvas, Eva Nielsen is interested by "the moment of choice, experimentation, the work of composition, that is carried out whilst working from rules and principles that never become obstacles, so as to take charge of the facts of painting and to test how they can interact or repel each other", remarks made by the artist on 30 October 2014 during the "Surimpression" conference at the Collège de France, Paris, in the context of a panel titled "La Fabrique de la peinture".

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mirages, which act as much on the retina as on the intellect, and which exist at the surface of our orbits as much as in the backs of our eyes. These mirages take on changing appearances: sometimes the proud monolithic forms of concrete architecture that fill the space, almost invading it, and of which the immanent certainty constructs the landscapes around it; elsewhere, kaleidoscopic scenes of genres, pleated with infinite folds or covered in scars, which enable revelation, breaking the linearity of reality. These images, maybe marked by the human adventures that play out there, reveal their narrative and cinematographic potential.

In a recent study, Judith Lyon-Caen analyses, as a historian, one of the stories of *Diaboliques* (*The She-Devils*, 1874) by Jules Barbey d'Aureville, "La Vengeance d'une femme" ("A Woman's Revenge"). In a chapter entitled "Interlude. Détaillisme", she concludes one of the axes of her research – looking in fiction for traces of reality – in this way: "the true detail is the condition of success of the novelistic lie²." It is helpful to regard the practice of Eva Nielsen in light of this reflection: the true detail is the condition of success of the pictorial lie. With what the artist borrows from the here and now – children's playgrounds, suburban roundabout sculptures, abandoned elements of civil engineering, sleepy second homes, forgotten shop windows, architectural ruins – she transfigures reality in her own way, with a glaze or a trompe-l'oeil, the layering of a composition, the repetition of a motif, the overlapping of silkscreen prints, flirting with abstraction, or the indiscernibility of a blur or a shimmering. The artist is not looking to imitate a reality that the eye might discover by itself, but instead offers us precipitates of her visions, collages of forms, atmospheres and landscapes perceived, photographed, gleaned, then reconstructed. Eva Nielsen's paintings thus offer a certain idea of vision: made of bedazzlements, of discrepancies, of cascading adjustments. The white escapes from its "reserved" zones to produce violent flashing³. From an architectural motif, metal vines become an all-over structure. Her subjects, purposely unattractive, present the standard in dialogue with the anecdotal and the non-recognisable, in a permanent back and forth between scales: from the technical scale of the plumbing tools, to the larger-than-life scale of land art. The perspective of the microscopic close-up vision, the eye reacting to contact with elementary particles, alternates with the faraway point of view, as if we were controlling the "pictorial battle", constantly repeated.

Each time, the represented scene, reconstituted from elements of reality, is incomplete, seen across an obstacle, a structure, that acts as a kind of "visual tool", influencing the perspective and the partitioning of elements on the canvas. The images, somewhere between landscapes and still lifes, are blocked by inert objects, where the cul-de-sac of vision does not represent that of thought. Or else open, almost gaping images, where the immobile vortex creates a dynamic of vision. "It's also a way of seeing the landscape, of framing it. This vision approaches the very essence of painting. A rectangular prompt to the emergence of an 'elsewhere', but with an important point: that elsewhere is made of paint and that is all it is. But it's a shared, consensual fable."⁴

² Judith Lyon-Caen, *La Griffe du temps. Ce que l'histoire peut dire de la littérature*, Gallimard, NRF Essais, Paris, 2019, p.171. "Painting is just a tissue of lies," Eva Nielsen told me in an interview carried out during Feedback, her first personal gallery exhibition, Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, 2010.

³ In her 2014 conference at the Collège de France (op. cit.), Eva Nielsen declared: "In the paintings of Francisco de Zurbarán, Filippo Lippi or the Dutch masters, I am amazed by the sense of the air circulating."

⁴ 10 Remarks made by artist to the author, 2019.

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Thanks to her open approach of the pictorial medium⁵ and her vision of painting as at once *cosa mentale* and as a window of sensation, open onto the world⁶, Nielsen offers traps for the eye, receptacles to project yourself into, cognitive instruments against which we measure ourselves. The spaces thus fixed onto the canvas are most often places of transition, in-between spaces, anonymous thresholds where something circulates, where emotions and memories seem to float. Paintings as landscapes of memory, a visual memory as rich with real images as with mental apparitions.

⁵ Eva Nielsen never envisages painting like a *terra isolata* but rather connected to photography, literature, cinema, installation and the practice of curation.

⁶ The image of the window is intentional: "I live on the periphery of Paris: the landscape is as if criss-crossed, its vision always fragmented. The landscape tends to become a sublimated horizon, out of reach. One cannot grasp it other than through the window, behind the grid, between two buildings, from the car or the RER train... Seeing this landscape upfront is a rare experience. It is from this very simple observation that I have organised my work. By structuring it, the parasitic object disrupts the landscape." Remarks by Eva Nielsen to the author, 2019.