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Painterly Pastoral, A Path Connecting Sources.

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"I watched the lightning tear the sky apart,
Watched waterspouts, and streaming undertow,
And Dawn like Dove-People rising on wings —
I've seen what men have only dreamed they saw!
I saw the sun with mystic horrors darken,
And shimmer through a violent haze;
With a shiver of shutters the waves fell
Like actors in ancient, forgotten plays!"
Arthur Rimbaud, *Le Bateau ivre* (1871)

All destinies are anchored in the river. Rainwater runs over the earth, penetrating the soil, collecting to form the sources that combine here to become the Isère. Eva Nielsen had been invited to the confluence of these merging and eroding waterways so that she might take her painting to realms she had not explored until then: leather and silk. Every month of this year, she thus made her way to Romans-sur-Isère, where Les Tanneries Roux is located, during a period in which our relations with others, our movements and our bodies were upended in hitherto unimagined ways. She set up her temporary painter's studio in a space on the top floor of the tannery. From her very first visit, she instantly caught the warm and strong natural light of Romans. Captivated by the personal narratives and collective stories built up locally in layers, Nielsen became adept at navigating these unknown landscapes, departing from the usual paths to literally immerse herself in new avenues for exploration and production, always a treasured opportunity in the life of an artist. When I stand before a Nielsen canvas, I often have the feeling of being both there—in front of the painting—and somewhere else—an elsewhere brought to life by the painting. The first sensation is that of a closeness or remoteness from the landscapes that you know, that are dear to your heart. Stranger still, you call to mind places you've never been before. To achieve this, Nielsen experiments, bringing together and superimposing work from her archives that rises to the surface of the canvas and of memory. She delves tirelessly into a personal collection of images, the fruit of her searches over several years, consisting of reproductions of works by other artists, images she herself has captured during her travels, and numerous pictorial or literary references, both classic and contemporary. An uninterrupted flow of images that never leaves her, in order to move forward and "get the studio going," as she says. Ellis Island, the title of an earlier work by the artist, resurfaces within this iconographic repertoire like a vision, a ghost, a spectral image. More than a motif, it's a recollection, a vibrant emotion in confronting history and these places marked by the human tragedies of centuries past. A here and an elsewhere that hold the artist's attention, forever bearing the imprint of current tribulations, eventually leading to the disappearance of a number of urban, industrial and natural landscapes, a transformation in which the intensifying human impact is indisputable. At times disenchanted, her pastoral painting can be seen as a temporal loop, continually revisiting this age-old pictorial and literary theme to give shape to a multitude of visions, between profane illumination, fantasy and destruction.

Leather, silk and canvas as atmospheric surfaces

Hiding, showing, altering, coloring and dissolving are all painterly gestures. By revealing the suprasensible quality of the pictorial medium, Nielsen's works reinforce our relationship with the world by

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reconnecting us with it. She constantly feeds the nearly sentimental, or even melancholy, connection between painting and photography through a variety of techniques, styles and supports employed to rediscover and reiterate certain gestures learned by producing her own images in the darkroom. On a different scale and in a different production context, the tannery is also a place where materials are soaked in solutions, where the impact of time is decisive. During her residency, Nielsen planned out several series of new paintings, mainly in very large formats, beginning with residues of images printed on transparencies mounted on the studio walls, then making use of scraps of leather or canvas, whose potential she explored, with increasing mastery, over the weeks and months, by working with the teams at the tannery and those at a silk printing workshop. Little by little, all of these images filtered through, saturated the leather and then the silk, more specifically organza, to achieve the granular and iridescent dimension favored by the artist. On leather, the sfumato effects painted in oils cause the printed or silk-screened images to rise to the surface like particles floating in water. Through chance encounters between overlays and sheer coverings, her painting becomes cinematic, kinetic, catches its breath, allows air to pass between the elements of the composition.

Through an approach both arbitrary and extremely precise, Nielsen was also keen to bring these materials together in unexpected, even novel, ways by joining tannery gestures with those of painting, but also sewing. The irregularity of surfaces as well as the dimensions of certain leather pieces steered the conception of each of her works in specific directions. As the painting and silk screening were done directly on the pieces, with the leather providing the scale, time was needed to select the scraps and dyes that would work well together, moving from earth tones to darker hues and eventually black. The silk reveals the painted background of the leather-canvas with the printed image, which thus enter into dialogue. The fabric becomes a new protagonist, in the manner of a more or less translucent membrane: it acts on and reacts to the refraction of light by absorbing the invisible to bring it to life. Given the varying consistency of these materials, the way they behave, their symbolic power and their latent force, Nielsen gradually affirms the magnetic, photochemical and alchemical dimensions of her painting as dyeing, and vice versa. Her painting takes on a mirrored aspect, becomes turbid, agitated. Although sight is the sense always thought to be the one that enables us to see and know everything, organizing the world from our perspective, in this case our eyes do not immediately grasp what they are observing because the hybridization of these materials becomes solar, not to say cosmic.

River at work, or the sedimentation of painting

Like a waterway by turns appearing and disappearing, filtering techniques are a constant of both pictorial and silk-screening processes. Pieces literally bathe in liquids to create images, just as leather might spend long periods soaking in the riverbed. Silk brings yet something else, a vibration, a rhythm. In this dialogue with painting on leather, silk opens up a closed space and seems to tear back the veil laid over architectural forms by bringing in light and air. An entire social geography, shot through with geology, history and urban planning, is revealed by the artist, from the rocks of the Vercors mountains to the concrete of more or less recent buildings. The ties with landscapes and architecture are very strong and essential in Nielsen's work, which breaks into its constituent elements little by little, comes back together in other places, and is often built up from several fragments. Building, then tearing down, breaking, cutting and smashing into pieces in order to rebuild. This back-and-forth motion between desertion and activity shapes our relationship with the city, its suburbs and its exurbs. Neglected areas are dotted with prefab structures like roadside shelters: parks, campgrounds and holiday villages in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, used as venues for sports and leisure by some and as a means of survival by others. The fragility of these spaces resonates with the ruggedness of landscapes contemplated

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through a car or train window, or while hiking in the mountains and woods. Several references, in particular American ones, are essential for Nielsen, who draws inspiration from the political writings of Henry David Thoreau. The landscapes he explored gave force to his words. Based on his experiences, Thoreau presents the desired life as one reduced to its essentials and reflects on the intellectual and spiritual alienation of his nineteenth-century contemporaries. Just like literature, painting can become an act of resistance, rebelling against the dominant ideas and beliefs of one's age. Nielsen spent a great deal of time and care exploring the countryside between Grenoble and Valence, with its network of routes and roads leading to Romans-sur-Isère. Each of her paintings is a reservoir of observations and perceptions that lay bare the looming threat for the natural environment. Cyclical in its attention to light variations and seasonal changes, circular in its economy and iconography, her painting creates an archaeology of memory, that of natural resources and the preservation of spaces.

In spite of this need to satisfy our thirst for the unknown and the imaginary, it is this other vision of the world that Nielsen discovered in reading Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* during her residency. Revealing the fault lines within an American family, one of the central settings in this book is a tannery, a "magical spot" where parallels are drawn between the expertise at work there and the lives of its characters. Flirting at the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, Roth explores themes as powerful as the weight of history, cultural heritage and family, or the handing down to the next generation at the heart of the American dream, along with the latter's rise and fall. A dream given shape through work, successes, enticements and masks can collapse like a house of cards at the slightest crack. This multilayered construction lends itself to different readings and varying perspectives, all speaking to the dissolution of a myth. As in this novel, Nielsen's painting articulates present and past through a series of recollections and jolts between what was, what can no longer be, and what's next.

Scarred worlds at the boundaries Powerful, inspired and poetic, painting as fabric becomes the support for several contexts. With silk screening, it's as if a vision machine has drawn the image, both a tracing and a photocopy, caught between transparency and opacity. These virtually magical processes allow the artist to intervene directly in the chemistry behind the development of the image. Not really a collage, a photograph or a print, not really a painting either, but instead all of these things at once. Between hybridization and weaving, a palimpsest of superimposed images and materials overlap to create ecosystems with ambiguous compositions, between flatness and depth. Playful, liberating and transgressive, these alterations, enlargements, reframings and blurrings are a way of pushing the limits of our resistance to images and their widespread dissemination. Far from a simple depiction of the places Nielsen roams through, crosses or observes, more than anything else her painting suggests a relationship with these places, which can be evocative, affective or instructive. Leading us toward an interlaced web of parallel, multiple and hybrid universes, the artist broadens her own capacity for imagination without setting any limits for herself, exploring the infinite possibilities offered by these combinations. The fusion of elements characterizes all levels of her process. Her plural approach is at the root of this search for constellated possibilities. Nielsen makes her painting the foundation of her perambulations and she shapes it by walking, by driving to discover other places until she returns to its drop-off point, the studio. The experience of being on the move, journeying, traveling is crucial.

With architecture, with the fitting together of places within places, new forms and modes of life emerge, resulting in a complete symbiosis between the living and the mineral, between the human and the non-human which, like the traveler of Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, explores ways of being.

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Flouting boundaries between mediums, practices and motifs, Nielsen remodels their readability and offers an anatomy of a devastated urban landscape. Adopting the principle of construction and deconstruction, her painting speaks to us of economic decline and the exodus that has led to the abandonment of numerous buildings. It is through her perspective on this modernist and postmodernist urban heritage, between preservation and dereliction, symptoms or phantoms of aging urban infrastructure, that she puts together a kaleidoscope of images and free associations that reappear between the folds of her works. Everything can be regenerated, recycled, brought back to life, diversified. Here or there, it is the frame of an urban planning project emphasizing the time periods of architecture, a lived and experienced time that shares with us the creative evolution of a city like a living thing recounting its life and not merely its history. The entrails of architecture reveal social layers through building facades. Unknown forces and energies rise up to their surface: holes, hollows and filled areas, things in and out of focus, hollows strangely filled, and empty spaces. Light and air pass through these architectural feats, cities, landscapes. A feeling of incompleteness, like in a dream, becomes palpable through this direct take on the acceleration of urban transformation. As in a Cubist collage, multiple time dimensions run into each other and are juxtaposed in flat and hybrid shapes that impose their materiality.

With these territories that are constantly being rewritten, Nielsen paints the strata of imaginary or invisible cities, from industrial wastelands to country-cities, source-cities or garden-cities, containing transposable pathways that converge and diverge as if they were shifting from one shape to another. Shapes that circulate and migrate like a city copying itself². This is certainly what gives her painting its living dimension. By carrying out an analysis, in a chemical sense, of the components of a city or territory caught between movement and motionlessness, plan and disorder, real and imaginary, past and future, emptiness and proliferation, weight and etherealness, invisible and elsewhere, Nielsen is constantly surveying her own cosmos to delve deeply into our multiple ways of being.