

Captive water: an origin story

Some time ago, Eva Nielsen left a glass bowl filled with water outside her home. Exposed to the elements, the water slowly evaporated, leaving calcified residues along its transparent surface. Then the rain came, and the bowl filled again. It dried out once more, depositing another layer of mineral traces upon the first. Nielsen watched and documented this recurring process, and through our conversations I came to think of this humble physical event as a miniature origin story for *Opsine*: container, water, residue, cell and image, gathering and articulating around one another, set in motion by light and bioelectric pulsations.

A bowl filled with water is already a rudimentary aquarium: a volume of liquid temporarily separated from its surroundings by a transparent membrane. It contains water while exposing it to view, establishing an inside and an outside without entirely isolating one from the other. Light passes through the glass; heat produces evaporation; rain enters; minerals settle against its surface. The container does not preserve what it holds so much as provide the conditions for its continuous transformation.

The aquarium has its own peculiar place within the history of modern images¹. From the nineteenth-century experiments with dioramas, transparency, movement and optical illusion to Matisse's split-angled goldfish², it brings together a recurring desire to isolate life, contain it, render it visible in parts and reanimate it. But an aquarium also complicates the distinction between looking at an image and looking through one. Its transparent surface is simultaneously support, threshold and lens; the water it contains refracts what lies within and beyond it. What appears to be an empty medium becomes an active optical environment. As water disappears, it produces an image on the very surface through which we were supposed to see: a residue, an index of a process, the material record of something no longer there. Nielsen's new paintings perform something similar.

This elementary movement—containment, evaporation, deposition, return—reappears throughout *Opsine* at radically different scales. It can describe the biosphere itself, but also a cell enclosed by its membrane, the aqueous structures of the eye, a photographic image emerging through chemical baths, or a landscape shaped by the circulation and withdrawal of water. Nielsen's works repeatedly collapse these scales into one another. The circle becomes bowl, cell, eye, photographic lens, orbit; the membrane becomes glass, silk, skin or pictorial surface. What begins with captive water therefore opens onto a more unstable proposition: perhaps an image, like a living thing, does not reside within a single surface at all, but comes into being through exchanges and relations across surfaces—through absorption and emanation, exposure and sedimentation, disappearance and return.

The polyptych that lends the exhibition its title carries an echo of the closed outer panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: a world contained within a sphere, suspended between transparency and opacity, mineral matter and living form. Yet where the opening and closing of Bosch's panels establish a succession between different states of the world, Nielsen compresses distinct temporalities and scales onto a single plane. Photographic images printed on silk are superimposed upon painted surfaces, shifting with the conditions of light and the movement of the viewer. Deep geological time—the sedimentation of minerals, the circulation of water—meets the

¹ Guillaume LeGall, *Aquariorama: Histoire d'un dispositif*, 2022, Mimésis, Paris.

² Henri Matisse, *Les Poissons rouges* (Goldfish), 1912.

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cellular scale of ocular perception and the affective temporality of memory. The image becomes fractal: forms recur without remaining identical as one moves between the microscopic and the planetary, between the interior of the eye and the exteriority of a landscape.

Nielsen speaks of a trajectory within the history of landscape painting that moves from Caspar David Friedrich to Turner and Monet³. It might also be understood as a gradual destabilisation of the position from which the world is seen. In Friedrich, however overwhelming the landscape, the viewing subject can still be situated in relation to it: a body faces an expanse and measures itself against it. With Turner, that position begins to dissolve within atmospheric forces—light, water, vapour, fire—whose turbulence exceeds the stability of both figure and horizon. With Monet, scale becomes stranger still: we are no longer simply standing before a landscape; we are, as Nielsen puts it, “in the eye.”

In *Opsine*, this loss of scale becomes a principle of composition. There is no privileged distance from which the image resolves. Instead, Nielsen places us within a horizontality of coexisting scales, where the cellular, bodily, geological and planetary occupy the same perceptual field without becoming equivalent to one another. This absence of hierarchy is more than a matter of orientation or simple hybridity: it proposes relation across difference, and a world in which the boundary between inert and living matter becomes unstable. *Nothing is true; everything is alive*⁴. Cell, eye, planet, photograph and memory enter into relation without collapsing into sameness. Nielsen’s paintings move in time. This is re-animation.

To delve into Nielsen’s process is to find this principle of articulation already at work in the making of the image. Photography enters her paintings not as a stable source to be reproduced, but as matter subjected to successive transformations. In the darkroom, the liquid development of the photographic print introduces a first layer of contingency: chemistry, duration and gesture participate in determining what the image will become. For the polyptychs “Delta” and “Opsine”, Nielsen pushes this instability further. Photographs of marshlands are printed onto acetate or silk, submerged in water and photographed again, before returning as fragments within larger compositions. Each passage introduces a displacement from the image that preceded it. Rather than accumulating toward greater definition, the layers interfere with and partially obscure one another. Superimposition becomes a principle of composition, and articulation takes on an almost prosthetic sense: distinct materials, images and surfaces are joined, sutured together into a body that could not exist without these attachments.

The silk that covers the painted surface makes this articulation physically unstable, especially in “Tidal”, where this principle of articulation is laid bare. At once image and support, it behaves differently according to the light that passes through it and the position from which it is seen. As the viewer moves—or simply as daylight changes over the course of the day—forms advance, disappear and return; colours migrate between orange and violet; contours double and become uncertain. The painting acquires a holographic quality, as though several image-times occupied the same space without ever fully coinciding. This parasitism between layers produces the chromatic abundance particular to the exhibition: aqueous, luxuriant, at moments almost psychedelic. The retina becomes saturated. To look for too long is to encounter afterimages, chromatic ghosts and the peculiar hallucinations produced by vision itself. The image is no longer simply something received by the eye; it activates the eye as a material organ, with its own limits, delays and residues.

³ Conversation with Eva Nielsen, 20 July 2026.

⁴ Edouard Glissant, *Rien n’est vrai, tout est vivant*, Lecture delivered on April 8, 2010, at the Maison de l’Amérique Latine, Paris.

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Nielsen speaks in this context of “earthly emanations”: something retained by the earth that later escapes from it, an invisible residual force becoming momentarily perceptible. The term introduces a spectral dimension into works otherwise grounded in resolutely material procedures. What emanates is both there and no longer there, much like the retinal persistence of an image after its source has disappeared. Earthly emanation and retinal persistence begin to mirror one another: matter remembers, just as the eye does. This is another consequence of the fractal logic running through *Opsine*. Processes that seem to belong to radically different orders—the sedimentation of a landscape, the chemical formation of a photograph, the persistence of light upon the retina, the emergence and erosion of a memory—can be placed alongside one another without becoming equivalent. They vibrate at different scales and durations, momentarily brought into relation by the painting.

The exuberance of *Opsine*, however, carries its own counter-image. In “Aster”, the liquid clarity and chromatic proliferation of the titular polyptych give way to something drier, opaque and mineral. Its circular form suggests a lunar landscape, although there is no certainty that what we are looking at is the Moon. It could equally be a planet, a cell, a photographic lens or an eye seen from within. Here, however, the eye seems to have calcified. Veins become fissures; organic tissue approaches bone; the fluid apparatus of vision hardens into a mineral surface. If “*Opsine*” begins with the photosensitive biological mechanism through which light becomes signal and the world becomes visible, “*Aster*” approaches vision from the other end of its trajectory: deterioration, macular degeneration, the gradual clouding or disappearance of what could once be seen. The calcified trace in the glass bowl with which this story began returns here at another scale, no longer merely as the residue of vanished water but as an image of what time does to living matter.

It is through this tension that another temporality begins to emerge beneath the exhibition’s visual abundance. *Opsine* may take its name from a photosensitive mechanism, but its invitation to see—or perhaps to sense—beyond the visible ultimately leads toward the problem of time. Perception itself is temporal: an image persists after its source has vanished; memory overlays the present with what is no longer there; anticipation makes what has not yet happened seep into the moment. We cannot inhabit the present without continually infusing it with past and future. Nielsen’s superimpositions give material form to this condition. Her images are never simply present. They arrive carrying earlier images within them, while changing according to light, movement and duration.

Time, then, is not only a question of the vertiginous movement between cellular and planetary scales that structures *Opsine*. It is also a question of passing, and more troublingly, of our own passing. Water evaporates. Light fades. Bodies age; vision clouds; memory loses its contours. Seen from here, the exhibition’s psychedelic luxuriance acquires a darker undercurrent. Its abundance does not overcome disappearance but seems to arise precisely against it: layer upon layer, image upon image, as though accumulation might answer the knowledge that everything visible is already changing.

Perhaps this is the exhibition’s subconscious: a grief lodged beneath its chromatic exuberance, not for one thing that has been lost, but for the ordinary and irreversible work of time itself. What remains is not preservation but residue—mineral, photographic, retinal, affective—the traces through which what has passed continues, however imperfectly, to emanate into the present.