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Interview  
March 2019

Joël Riff      This is your first monograph. When you open this type of work, what do you read first?

Eva Nielsen      I am always curious to read the words of the artist and to find out if they correspond (or not) to what I am projecting from my own thoughts. Reading the words gives me the same sensation as when I visit artists' studios: the desire to know if the materials that they use, and their working methods, are those that I imagined.

Joël Riff      Your technique specifically combines painting and screen-printing. How do these two practices work with each other?

Eva Nielsen      The relationship to the printed image is very present in my family history. When my father studied at the Aarhus Art Academy, he chose to specialise in engraving, and I was used to seeing prints and lithography in my parents' home. Notably, my father made a series of engravings using the motif of the printing press itself as a sculptural object. These images made a big impression on me. When I studied at Beaux-Arts in Paris, my discovery of screen-printing was a revelation – the word "revelation" has real meaning here, as revelation contains within it its own malleable properties. I was drawn to photography whilst developing a painting practice. Screen-printing possesses infinite possibilities: a multitude of parameters can be changed and the result modifies itself ceaselessly in accordance with its movement. It is at once an imprint, a stencil, a photographic extract. My discovery of this technique is also connected to a feeling that I had one day whilst walking: the road, the building, the sky seemed to me particularly flat, as if they'd been cut out. I had a sense of vertiginous flatness. I was suddenly able to explore that feeling through screen-printing, because I could cut around the architectural elements, flatten their volume in the landscape and confront them at the vanishing line.

Joël Riff      First of all you log things in a journal. Do you need to write in order to paint?

Eva Nielsen      I have several notebooks, which have no logic in terms of classification or chronology. There are about ten of them, and I grab whichever is lying around in the studio or elsewhere and carry it around with me for a period of time. These notebooks form quite a fragmented group. For example, I might find my drawings from Beaux-Arts or sketches of architecture that I did in Croatia. I also reread snatches of words, instructions that I've given myself. Sometimes in an organisational frenzy about future work, I make lists of things to do in the studio, but nothing ever happens as expected. There is an immediate sense of relief to write it down, but, essentially, I know that what will happen in time, more precisely during my time in the studio, will not truly correspond with what I've planned. All the better.

Joël Riff      In one of these notebooks, you've written in capital letters "SHOW THE STRINGS." What are these?

Eva Nielsen      I split up photographs, print extracts of them on slides, make images of the layers and then manually print each fragment. This creates a strange puzzle, which evokes an a priori form, which is recognisable but has ruptures and irregularities. In the first instance, when I work with screen-prints on canvas, the canvas has to be covered in order to preserve it. This masking is a meticulous step, which I

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value because what I have just made appear by way of the screen-print disappears once again. The consecutive unveilings and concealments maintain a tension in the creation of the painting, since I am myself in a sense of expectation about what might happen. In the second stage, the painting appears – acrylic, ink, oil – and it collides with the printed forms that are again camouflaged. These successive steps, which are those of the stages of production, respond to the layers within the final image. It is only once the painting is almost finished that I remove the coverings from the prints; this is the final apparition, the (re)appearance of the printed form, this time inserted within the whole composition. It's a crucial moment, because the canvas then "takes or breaks," and I'm unable to predict its power or its autonomy. A single painting is in fact, in my studio, a succession of paintings and distinct times that meld together at the time of the final unveiling. To "SHOW THE STRINGS" is precisely to show all these steps within the same painting, to tease out an insane hope of synthesising time whilst cutting each layer out neatly. And reminding oneself that it is above all about the painting.

Joël Riff      Your painting recalls ardour, depth, strength, vitality, vigour, brutality.

Eva Nielsen      I have always been fascinated by the energy of female painters like Helen Frankenthaler or Joan Mitchell<sup>1</sup>, who seize the painting, physically. Their whole body is engaged in the painting, in its production and the reception of their work on the part of the viewer. The motif of the landscape, in historical painting, the panoramas, were often associated in the history of art with a masculine register. I really like the idea of countering this image of virile possession of the painting, this vision of the "great male painter in his studio". Painters like Emily Carr, Georgia O'Keeffe or Hilma af Klint have, in my opinion, a strong vision of what a landscape can arouse, both physically and ontologically. I like the fact that they add a new dimension to the sublime and the grandiose, a more detached and almost facetious perspective. Once again, showing the strings!

Joël Riff      There is a real sensuality that emerges from your compositions, in contrast to the feeling of nostalgia that can be provoked by the desolation of a ruin. In your studio, you are at one with your medium, it's very athletic and voluptuous. How do you see this contrast between the subject and its production?

Eva Nielsen      This energy that takes place in the studio is, in fact, a response to an inherently voluptuous aspect of the forms themselves. When we are faced with a piece of architecture, a solid mass, a landscape that escapes us, the feelings aroused are powerful: the sense of scale related to one's own body, the dynamic of perspectives, the impulse to look... I have never seen ruins or huge scale constructions as conveying pessimism. Their volume and their fragmentation seem to me full and exciting, whilst giving off a certain irony when it comes to our condition as mere mortals! I always think of renewal after the ruin, of what is then possible. During a visit to Mexico, I became fascinated by the construction of temples, erected on the foundations of previous ones: it's a perpetual movement. Nostalgia scares me, I find it a dry feeling. That's the reason I like Flemish vanitas still life paintings: the painter is not in a state of morbid fascinating but, to the contrary, engaged in a joyful mental game with his subject. Painting artefacts that are linked to a notion of mortality allows for snapshots of life and its possibilities. Combined with the influence of sensitivity, it is one of the acute joys of painting. For a long time, I've kept in my studio a reproduction of Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette by Vincent Van Gogh<sup>2</sup>, which, in my opinion, encapsulates this feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> American painters belonging to the Abstract Expressionist movement.

<sup>2</sup> Oil on canvas, 1886, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

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Joël Riff Which images have moved you? Who are the artists who are in your mind whilst you work?

Eva Nielsen I have hung on one of the walls of my studio several images related to my working process. This wall of references sees successive changes: amongst several postcards, there are printed images and, over the years, these have been altered... the colours have changed, the paper has decayed. When one of them becomes completely oxidised, I change it. For a long time there has been an image on the wall of Babylon, an Anthony Caro sculpture inspired by the Ziggurats<sup>3</sup>. This image sits side by side with Glass Windows, Bahamas, by the painter Winslow Homer, as well as an illustration by David Pelham created for the publication by Penguin of The Drowned World by James G. Ballard. In the perimeter are two prints, now dulled with age: Intérieur, bocal de poissons rouges (Interior with Goldfish) by Matisse and Black Cross with Stars and Blue by Georgia O'Keeffe. There is also an indestructible postcard of Paul Nash's Equivalents for the Megaliths, which resists decay despite being smeared with paint! More recently I've added reproductions of works by the American artists Vija Celmins and Alex Katz. I am fascinated by the series of paintings that Alex Katz did of landscapes<sup>4</sup>. The overlaying of materials, the rhythm of the paintbrush, the layers, the simplicity... it's a series that particularly touches me. There are also books in the studio, which I'm permanently consulting: Leap Before You Look by Helen Molesworth about Black Mountain College<sup>5</sup>, works by Ettore Sottsass, Amy O'Neill, Carlo Scarpa, Zoe Leonard, Charline von Heyl, Luigi Ghirri, Ed Ruscha... In general, I'm ceaselessly in love with the work of authors. For me it's a real joy to go to a studio, to discover an exhibition, to open an artist's book. You remember that phrase by Héliou, which struck me: once old, he realised that he had passed his life trying to invent whilst above all he needed TO SEE.

Joël Riff You also cultivate a lively dialogue with your contemporaries. Notably, you evolve at the heart of a pack of painters.

Eva Nielsen From my first days at Beaux-Arts, I understood that the teaching would also come from my fellow students. I met artists who became close friends. The impartial, direct gaze that they brought to my painting made it evolve and grow. I am receptive to discussions which develop over years, to this form of stratification... Also, I like the idea of a dialogue between works, and the links that it can give rise to. It's for that reason that I've participated in several duo exhibitions. I have the feeling of learning something about another practice, and, like a ricochet, about my own painting. The artist is not isolated in their ivory tower, prey to their solitude – on the contrary, I see the artist as a gregarious being!

Joël Riff To return to your canvases, why so many holes?

Eva Nielsen This question of piercing, and the orbit, that which leaves you to guess something whilst unveiling its totality... it's an obsession, and seems to me to be connected to the question of painting and accepted make-believe. The principle of exhibiting a postulate, of the possibility of something painted that is more real than reality itself. It's also the peephole, closing one eye in order to better see out of the other. Only seeing a fragment, in order to better imagine that which is hidden from us. Fragments of concrete and sections of wall obstruct our vision, but also a large part of the canvas: does a

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<sup>3</sup> Religious edifices of Mesopotamian origin in the form of floors of pyramids.

<sup>4</sup> Serpentine Gallery, London, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Yale University Press, 2015.

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layer of paint already exist under the print? And one returns to that slightly insane idea of considering the painting in its totality, this surface between four corners, like an extract of something bigger. As if the painting could have ramifications that would come out of the rectangle, in the mental game of viewing it. This is also the question of what scratches away at you, what arises, layer after layer, in order to arrive somewhere.

Joël Riff      In order to arrive where?

Eva Nielsen      That question is so linked to my progression as an artist: suburban train lines, car journeys on the outskirts, whether near or far. One's eyes follow the line of the horizon, as if on a train when one has the stroboscopic sensation that the line is blinking. A return journey between our projection on the landscape and our own body, sat on a moving train. Capturing this overexposure of this line is equally an obsession that has taken form within the practice that is screen-printing. It's an urban journey that I make in a systematic way, looking for a completely new connection, a transition that will reveal itself. Over the years, these itineraries have made up the typography of my painting, settling into its form. The painting has then made its own path in order to exist outside any precise geographic landmark.

Joël Riff      Your spaces are empty. Has life left or definitively disappeared?

Eva Nielsen      I am not sure I have the answer! Human life, if it's what it seems, is huddled there. Human beings have manufactured the fragments of walls or the concrete constructions that appear in my compositions. Above all, I love the moment when humans lose control. The object is linked to a construction but transforms over time, becomes autonomous: the materials modify themselves and decay. Screen-printing is a fascinating tool that acts like carbon paper, emphasising the roughness of the materials and bringing details to the surface that we had lost from view. I told you once about the pleasure that I take in printing pieces of concrete, I like to observe the granularity of the surfaces that appear once the scraper has been passed over the canvas... I believe that the forms I choose to highlight in my paintings, these portraits of objects, are also vanitas paintings. Construction is a futile act: the buildings are erected, structures assembled, elements cemented... but for how long? What seems important at a given moment may seem peripheral to the next generation. The sense of permanent renewal here is an exciting feeling rather than a melancholic one. Melancholy only interests me if it is unsettled, perturbed by something else, something even stronger. To return to the question of absence, to include a person, as if for a portrait, is not for me (or, right now, for my work) an imperative wish. I think above all that there are two strong presences within a canvas: that of the viewer, and that of the painter.