

Katie Paine, *Windows*.

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The Soulless Eye: Technologies and mythologies of visuality in the work of Katie Paine

by Tara Heffernan

As he crossed toward the pharmacy at the corner he involuntarily turned his head because of a burst of light that had ricocheted from his temple, and saw, with that quick smile with which we greet a rainbow or a rose, a blindingly white parallelogram of sky being unloaded from the van—a dresser with mirror across which, as across a cinema screen, passed a flawlessly clear reflection of boughs sliding and swaying not arboreally, but with a human vacillation, produced by the nature of those who were carrying this sky, these boughs, this gliding façade.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, 1938.

When August Strindberg placed his camera on the ground and let it take pictures of the clouds in the sky, it was that progression he was pursuing and trying to complete, towards the world beyond the human world, the way it is in itself, seen by the soulless eye.

—Karl Ove Knausgård, “*All that is in Heaven*”, 2023.

The word mirror is derived from the French term *mirour*, originating from the Latin *mirari*, meaning “to wonder at”. However, the Romans used the term *speculum*, from the Latin *specere* (“to look, or behold”). These etymological associations—with wonderment, and a medical tool for internal inspection—are activated in Katie Paine’s *Windows*. The exhibition offers two poetic, screen-based essays on mirror-making and the study of the human eye respectively, alongside a set of related photographic works. In this pairing, Paine confronts the interlinked technologies and mythologies of visuality, acknowledging how bureaucratic and geopolitical concerns shape ways of seeing.

Featuring images of elaborate antique mirrors Paine recorded on a research trip in Italy in 2023, *The City of Glass* recounts the stories of 16th century Venetian glassmakers, an intriguing historical tale about an unprecedented innovation in mirror making shrouded in secrecy and conspiracy. Moving focus to the sensory organ, Paine describes *Myopic Gaze* as “a speculative science fiction narrative.”¹ Shot largely in the doctors’ offices occupied by her father, a neurologist and neuro-ophthalmologist, much of the footage depicts medical instruments and machines used to measure cognitive responsiveness.

Emphasising the parallel between the hospital and the art gallery (both clinical institutional spaces dedicated to the objectifying practices of preservation and examination) Paine’s video works are presented in a sterile environment. Each screen is supported by a custom-built stand. *City of Glass* rests flat on a gurney-like bed. The screen’s horizontal placement, barely elevated from the ground, might suggest a rejection of the verticality of easel painting (and mirrors). Simultaneously, however, it

¹ Katie Paine, “Spectral Permutations: Indelible Apparitions, Myopia and Phantom Interlocutors” (Masters thesis, Victorian College of the Arts, 2022), 27.

subtly references Ovid's Narcissus gazing down at his reflection in a pool of water.² *Myopic Gaze*, on the other hand, confronts the viewer at eye-level. The screen is mounted on a wheelable support, resembling one that might appear in a medical setting, used for demonstrations or examinations attended by masked, white-gowned figures behind austere antimicrobial curtains.

Advances in technology, particularly imaging technologies, have often inspired superstition and experimentation. Notable examples include spirit photography and the enthusiasm for x-ray imagery, a technology that harmonised with theosophical notions concerning the existence of energies beyond human perception.³ *City of Glass* recounts another intriguing historical example. An opening line describes the mirrored reflection as "a fine glittering seam between life and its image." Tracing the history of the mirror, the film begins by listing naturally occurring mirrors (dark pools of water and reflective surfaces forged by "chance encounters between magma, seawater and sand"), and early, crudely made hand-mirrors. Centuries ago, the video explains, to behold oneself was a privilege reserved for the elite. The extreme rarity of mirrors therefore imbued them with a mystical quality.

City of Glass refers to the Venetian Island of Murano. In the 16th century, it became the epicentre of glassmaking. While prior techniques could only produce small, concave, or convex mirrors, the artisans of Murano perfected the flat-mirror technique, enabling the creation of mirrors of unprecedented scale.⁴ Moreover, by inserted gold dust into the glass, the artisans imbued their products with an eternal shimmer. The images surpassed the beauty of the reality they perfectly—and expansively—reflected. This prestige meant that the technique had to be guarded, and the glassmakers were forbidden from leaving Venice lest they share their secrets.

Though a gulf of centuries separates the Venetian mirrors in *City of Glass* and *Myopic Gaze*'s medicalised language, the subjects of Paine's video essays are united by a concern with the pursuit of knowledge as literalised through visibility and representation. Indeed, as historians hasten to remind us, the Renaissance and the Scientific revolution are indebted to innovations in optics facilitated by glassmaking and mirrors.⁵

In the context of art, alongside the mirror's pivotal role in shaping the concept of the self, the window recalls the Renaissance innovation of perspectival drawing. This method offered a convincing emulation of the way objects appear in space. Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti compared the method to an "open window" that allowed a command of the natural world, therefore positioning the artist "at the center of seeing, knowing, and making", as Amelia Jones summarises.⁶

² Indeed, Ovid's Narcissus is an iconic tale about the dangers of the obsession with the reflected self.

³ "Edvard Munch: Color In Context", *National Gallery of Art*, 2017, <https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/press/exh/4998/munch-wall-text.pdf>.

⁴ Charles Le Losq, Maria Rita Cicconi, G. Neville Greaves, Daniel R. Neuville, "Silicate Glasses: Historical and Industrial Importance", in *Springer Handbook of Glass*, J. David Musgraves, Juejun Hu, Laurent Calvezeds, eds (Cham: Springer, 2019) 445.

⁵ Alan McFarlane and Gerry Martin, *Glass: A World History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 182-184.

⁶ Amelia Jones, *SELF/IMAGE: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

When mirrors feature in the “open window” of the picture plane—a trick that has been utilised repeatedly in rather gimmicky examples of European painting—the opportunity to depict a range of perspectives at once is often relished. Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656) is a prime example. The painting depicts, with the help of multiple mirrors, a cast of characters including royal family members, a guard, a chamberlain, and a chaperone. The painting appears to be the inverse of a royal portrait, with the King and Queen reflected in a tiny mirror at the back of the room. Like an early example of institutional critique, *Las Meninas* illuminates the systems operating behind the image (including the artist himself).

The presence of mirrors in easel painting also functions to draw the spectator in. Velázquez, from his vantage point in *Las Meninas*, gazes out at us over the centuries. Similarly, in Édouard Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), the mirror behind the bar maid implicates us because it implies a spatial relationship with the world outside the picture plane, *the world behind us*. It’s a strangely prophetic gesture considering the emphasis on relationality in contemporary art. Indeed, art used to be a window to another world, something incompatible and ambiguous. In fact, the idea of being trapped in a painting was once so terrifying that it became a minor literary trope. But today, we expect nothing less than participation, immersion, or “representation”. A clear symptom of the virus of rampant philistinism, this cultural tendency is evident in the ubiquitous catchline “I feel seen.”

What of the unseen? Does anything remain in the shadows?

Myopic Gaze documents a fictive neurological study searching for a spectral presence haunting peripheral vision. In one scene, a beam of light emanating from an ophthalmoscope (a small torch used to examine the retina) dances over indecipherable medical notes. The dancing orb recalls a searchlight seeking scattered trespassers shrouded in darkness. Paine was partly inspired by the tales of “shadow people”, a documented phenomenon in which people report seeing dark, ghostly figures in the corner of their eyes. Sometimes it’s a sign of a detached retina, but not always.

Later in the film, an eye, scaled up much larger than life, is probed with harsh, penetrating light. The light source is a slit lamp biomicroscope, an apparatus used to look inside the eye. During the examination, while the doctor has access to the interior of the eye, the patient is blinded by the aggressive light of the medical apparatus. In the end, the study is inconclusive.

The film offers a meditation on the objectifying, deindividualising influence of scientific managerialism and the limits of institutional knowledge. Indeed, in a culture without religion, faith is reinvested in scientism, “true stories”, “expert opinions”, and—that horror of horrors—factoids (typically launched with the vacuous preface “fun fact” or the cloying rhetorical garnish “did you know...?!”). In this atmosphere, there is little room for ambiguity, poetry, or genuine play.⁷

Numerous cultural theorists have identified the corrosive influence of managerialism on art and culture. In her introduction to Christopher Lasch’s essay collection *Women*

⁷ Although a highly creative, obfuscatory shorthand language born of poststructuralist trickery runs rampant online.

and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism (1997), Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn eloquently summarises Lasch's encompassing critique:

The encroachment of professional expertise, and its reduction of human interaction into its component parts for the purpose of analysis, also have drastic results in the realm of intimacy modern life seems "too highly organised, too self-conscious, too predictable." Reliance on purely scientific ways of understanding humanity and ordering experience results in a reductionist view of human nature "unadorned" by artistic and literary insight. The role of mystery, play, passion and other qualities cannot be easily managed. Lasch believes that the rationalization of life has in fact caused a "drastic shrinkage of our imaginative and emotional horizon."⁸

Nevertheless, the eye isn't soulless. The eye can't meet everything directly, and some bodies of knowledge flow free of rigid taxonomies. Peripheral ambiguities persist.

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⁸ Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, "Introduction", in Christopher Lasch, *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), xiii-xiv.