

HESSE FLATOW

Miah, R. (2025, December 2). "Where Meaning Hesitates: On Aglaé Bassens' 'VACANT'. Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art. Online.

"VACANT," Aglaé Bassens' exhibition at HESSE FLATOW, on view through December 20, explores emptiness not just as a theme but as a creative state and possibility for painting. Instead of depicting a stark void, the title invites a conceptual space—a pause, a thinning of visibility, a moment when perception becomes tentative and emotionally charged. Throughout the exhibition, Bassens shows scenes that hover between presence and absence: quiet domestic snippets, glimpses of objects without their stories, the lingering trace of activity rather than the event itself. These paintings occupy the border between looking and sensing, offering viewers a slow, thoughtful experience that gains meaning through time rather than through explicit declaration.

Understanding the resonance of Bassens' current work means situating it within the intertwined histories of photography and painting in contemporary art. By the mid-1990s, as Chelsea, NY, was solidifying into a global art center, photography asserted unprecedented influence. Artists such as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans reframed the everyday through the diaristic snapshot, privileging immediacy over technical perfection. Their images, often made with 35mm or disposable cameras, drew power from their casual intimacy; they were less about composition than lived experience, less about the event than its emotional temperature.



Deflated, 2025, Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 39 3/8 inches, 130 x 100 cm

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By the early 2000s, painting re-emerged with renewed urgency, sometimes capturing the spontaneity of snapshot photography but emphasizing the slow, deliberate process of the handmade mark. The recent shift toward figuration, autobiography, and personal mythologies continues this tradition. Bassens operates precisely at this intersection: she starts with photographic notes—often casual, offhand images—but her paintings transform them into reflections on perception itself. Instead of simply illustrating a moment, she stretches it out, deepening its ambiguity. While snapshot culture aimed to freeze the moment, Bassens questions what remains after the moment dissolves.

The origins of this exhibition lie in a small cluster of 2 × 2-inch Polaroids tucked away in the gallery's office. Their subjects are simple: the flash-lit back of a leather sofa, a mylar balloon collapsing on itself, an empty plate on a table. They resemble the discarded frames from a roll of film—pictures without an obvious narrative but with a clear emotional charge. Bassens seems to see in these images a kind of latent tension: the residue of lived moments, the ghost of presence. They are images that don't demand explanation but invite projection.



Idling, 2025, Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 66 7/8 inches, 130 x 170 cm

Her palette also contributes to this suspension of meaning. Bassens favors tonal harmony—muted hues, softened chroma, gentle transitions rather than strong saturated color contrasts. In *Idling*, one of the most quietly compelling works in the show, she creates a nearly monochromatic field that resembles Gamblin's Torrit Grey, the pigment released annually from accumulated dust in the company's filtration system. That this color comes from residue is an apt metaphor: Bassens' scenes feel like residues themselves—half-formed impressions lingering on the edge of perception. The visible car in *Idling*—caught between motion and stillness—seems like a hesitation, a moment paused before it reveals what it truly is.

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This focus on the atmospheric and barely-visible places Bassens within a lineage that includes Uta Barth. Barth's photographs are well known for avoiding the central subject, instead focusing on the out-of-focus or peripheral, encouraging viewers to become aware of how they observe. Like Barth, Bassens shifts the artwork's meaning away from the depicted object and toward the act of perception. In both practices, the ordinary becomes a space of heightened awareness, where the viewer's attention is the real subject.

The exhibition's largest painting, *Slide*, deepens this perceptual exploration. A chrome-like industrial surface dominates the entire canvas, reflective yet blurred to the point of being barely recognizable. The work naturally brings to mind early Photorealism, especially Don Eddy's dizzying depictions of car bumpers and hubcaps—pieces where reflection becomes its own abstract universe. Bassens recognizes this connection but reverses its approach. Eddy sharpens; she softens. Her blurring, however, is neither Richter's philosophical erasure nor a gesture of withholding. Instead, it broadens the perceptual field, allowing multiple visual interpretations to emerge simultaneously. The effect isn't about hiding the world but about expanding how we interpret it.



Stone Tiles, 2025, Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 39 3/8 inches, 130 x 100 cm

This restrained, searching attention also connects Bassens with Vija Celmins. Celmins' ocean surfaces, star fields, and desert grounds are technically precise yet conceptually diffuse, offering viewers a space of suspended attention. Although Bassens works with softness rather than Celmins' precise clarity, both artists rely on restraint—on what is held back rather than what is emphasized. Celmins has said that her surfaces remain "impossible to fully grasp," a phrase that could describe Bassens' quiet, receding images. Each artist creates a vision in which intimacy is inseparable from distance.

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Across "VACANT," Bassens nurtures this subtle instability. Her paintings do not declare meaning; they invite it. The empty plate becomes a symbol of an absent guest, the sagging balloon signifies the afterglow of celebration, the back of the sofa hints at a figure just outside the frame. These modest objects gather emotional resonance not because they are symbolic, but because they create space for projection. What is empty becomes energized; what is banal becomes luminous. In this way, Bassens practices a modern form of abstraction—not abstraction as non-representation but abstraction as suspension. Her images stay recognizable yet resist simple categorization, floating between depiction and sensation. They inhabit the moment before certainty settles, the fleeting interval when meaning is still taking shape.



Slide, 2025, Oil on canvas, 66 7/8 x 51 1/8 inches, 170 x 130 cm

This temporal structure mirrors the logic of the Polaroid, whose instantaneity paradoxically unfolds gradually. The image forms through a chemical process, slowly clarifying but never entirely predictable. Bassens interprets this emergence in painterly terms. Her images do not present themselves all at once; they develop, shift, and solidify over time. What starts as a photographic note becomes a perceptual experience.

Ultimately, "VACANT" suggests that the most powerful spaces are those where little seems to happen—where presence and absence intersect, where meaning lingers without becoming fixed. Bassens grants viewers the rare freedom to dwell in ambiguity, to see uncertainty not as a lack but as potential. In her approach, vacancy transforms into a place of perceptual richness, a space where almost nothing quietly but insistently becomes everything.