

For the love of light



Credit: Olafur Eliasson *Your uncertain shadow (colour)*, 2010. Photo: María del Pilar García Ayensa/Studio Olafur Eliasson Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, Vienna © 2010 Olafur Eliasson

Running until 5 January 2020 at the Tate Modern art gallery in London, the exhibition *In real life* spans three decades of work by Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. The retrospective brings together over 40 works that challenge our senses and perceptions.

I'm not easy to please when it comes to contemporary art, but *In real life* impressed me. I was intrigued by how many of the evocative artistic installations are, in the end, about physics and materials.

Even before entering the main exhibition, you walk through two installations. The first arises as soon as you enter the elevator — not that you are told. Something felt amiss, and after a few seconds I realized I couldn't see colours. The elevator was washed in yellow light. Because the light is produced by a mono-frequency lamp everything appears on a grey (pardon, yellow) scale.

In the hall, as I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, readjusting to the usual coloured world, a fan hanging down and flying in circles over the stairs caught my attention. Its initially steady movement became chaotic over time. Is the fan propelled only by the air it displaces while

moving, I asked myself, and is it sufficient to kick it the right way to send it flying in perfect circles for a while? According to the artist's website, the answer is yes. It's Eliasson's way of attracting attention to the space around us and to air itself. The air is dense enough to keep the fan going. In a way, it's a material in its own right.

Eliasson openly draws inspiration from science and geometry, and he is strongly associated with the interpretation of environmental issues (a lot of his work concerns arctic ice and its melting). As the exhibition reveals, he enjoys experimenting with physics, light and materials as well.

Sometimes the connection with physics is impossible to miss: standing waves moving back and forth in water containers, kaleidoscopes bouncing back endless reflections of your face mixed with snippets of life from the rest of the room, and mirrors beaming back an upside-down image of yourself.

Other works are designed to inspire awe by skilfully playing with the interaction of light and mist. In *Beauty*, the observer is led into a dark room where an ethereal, shimmering shape

floats mid-air. It takes a moment to understand that you are looking at a beam of white light impinging on a curtain of droplets sprayed from the ceiling, reflecting and refracting to create colours and, as the title says, beauty. *Your blind passenger* plunges you in a corridor filled with a fog so thick the other visitors disappear as soon as they move a few steps away, and the walls are nowhere to be seen. Coloured light gives the air an almost solid quality.

In a completely dark space, sudden flashes of light illuminate what appears — at first glance — to be a sculpture. In reality, it is a water fountain that is visible only for a split second. *Big bang fountain* exploits a simple trick, but majestically executed.

Finally, there is the *pièce de résistance* — *Your uncertain shadow* — that features prominently on leaflets and in online videos. In this room, people move and wave and jump looking at their multiplied coloured shadows. The effect is created by coloured light beams coming from slightly different angles. Combined, these beams illuminate the wall with unremarkable white light, but as visitors walk through the room they cast multiple shadows of luminous magenta, green, blue and yellow.

“The beauty of Eliasson's work is that the tricks are not hidden. The magic (or, more correctly, the physics) is in front of your eyes”

Afterwards, your mind occasionally returns to one piece or another, thinking about the clever use of artificial and natural materials and the way light interacts with them. The beauty of Eliasson's work is that the tricks are not hidden. The magic (or, more correctly, the physics) is in front of your eyes. The result is stimulating, inspiring and at times disorienting but, for sure, memorable.

Reviewed by Giulia Pacchioni

e-mail: nrmaterials@nature.com

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41578-019-0158-4>