

Cult Hero

Words by SASKIA NEUMAN Photographs by JOSÉPHINE LØCHEN

In a church-turned-gallery in Copenhagen, Ditte Ejlerskov presents a cult of her own making. While the Danish artist once looked to external factors to inspire her work — including tabloid images of Rihanna — she now looks within, exploring her own being through pieces that enchant and mystify.



Silk duchesse dress, €3,335, Freya Dalsjø.
Tulle mockneck top, €460, The Row via Mytheresa.

Lying on a carpeted floor at a church-turned-exhibition space in Copenhagen, I stare up at the vaulted ceiling. I have removed my shoes – the universal indication of getting comfortable.

Projected high above me is a 13-minute video work entitled *The Gateway* by artist Ditte Ejlerskov. It's a dream-like journey; you're met with the impression of outer space, small shiny stars move over black matter, later intertwining with shapes of works by Ejlerskov that appear in adjacent rooms.

Suddenly, the projection launches into cascading colours, oscillating in and out of the abstract dream world to a more recognisable architectural setting. The visuals are accompanied by a melodic soundscape and a script written by Ejlerskov. A calm, cool voice with a non-descript English accent asks questions such as, "How often do you allow adrenaline to take over?" I lie there in the dark, transfixed, mind-blown. Next to me lies the artist, who can only see the work's imperfections. "There's a slight glimmer of pixels that don't land right," she says.

If Ejlerskov would have known her current exhibition would take two decades to realise, it is entirely possible she never could have done it. "I'm impatient by nature, so there are many ideas that I've left unfinished – shows that never became reality," she says. "But I could never have made this exhibition in my twenties."

Entitled *The Cult of Oxytocin*, Ejlerskov's show at Nicolaj Kunsthal, the former St Nicholas Church in Copenhagen, explores themes only visible from the artist's current vantage point – having navigated the challenges many women face: finding work-life balance, becoming a mother. "Oxytocin is the hormone our bodies produce during labour, it's the love hormone," she says. "These works are about maturing because they came out of experiencing childbirth." She cheekily runs through the list of what's

expected of us as women today. "Have children, become a superstar – really accomplished... Oh, and go to the gym and eat organic food," she says. She adds a couple more. "Don't have a mental breakdown, stay sharp." But for the artist, what's required is much simpler: "For me, life is lived through art – making my art. I can't separate them."

Ejlerskov is from northern Denmark, a small town in the countryside, "far away from anything cultural." Both of her parents came from humble beginnings, working their way to a comfortable, middle-class existence. "My father is an engineer. He had artistic aspirations, painting once every 10 years, but would always buy me paints, and leave them on my desk, semi-encouraging me," she says.

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That encouragement took a more pointed form after high school. Ejlerskov was backpacking when she received an email from her father. "My dad had paid tuition to this introductory art school. My money was running out, so I went home," she says. "That's how it started. No one in my family ever knew you could be an artist. An art teacher maybe, or a designer."

When she was accepted to the Royal Art Academy in Malmö, in the south of Sweden, she invested everything she had into her practice, forgoing "clothes or a TV," enjoying success and several gallery exhibitions early on. "I received a stipend right after art school, which helped enormously," she notes, but Ejlerskov has worked full-time as an artist ever since. "My partner and I received

that very same grant. Socially it became quite awkward with our classmates," she says. "We were so in love, we were flying."

Her work packs a punch. The first time I was introduced to her artistic practice was in 2013, via a series of paintings she made of world-renowned pop star extraordinaire Rihanna, aptly named *The Rihanna Works*. Mixed into the series of paintings were not-so-hidden messages from the artist, clearly questioning Western society's obsession with fame, fortune and the constant objectification of women. In addition to portraits of the singer, the series included more abstract work – paintings depicting a small fragment of Rihanna's clothing, such as a phrase from a T-shirt. One memorable piece entitled *The Perfect Painting* screamed, "SHE DIED

OF PERFECTION." Alongside the paintings were meticulously organised files dubbed *The Rihanna Reports*, which categorised the singer and entrepreneur's various looks, correlating them with runway images of the clothes worn by models. Later Ejlerskov moved onto Beyoncé, painting magazine covers of the iconic artist.

Almost ten years after making these impactful paintings, Ejlerskov found an altogether new form of expression. In her series *The Cleanse*, which first debuted in 2017, she presents a completely unique visual language, devoid of external inspiration like "mainstream culture, politics, general negativity, fear and the expectation of related input." The work is mesmerising – cascading gradients of colour

with an otherworldly quality, gently transporting the viewer's eyes from hues of yellow to green, or pink to subtle blues. Hand painted, the works create dazzling visual effects. You feel it's possible to dive right into them.

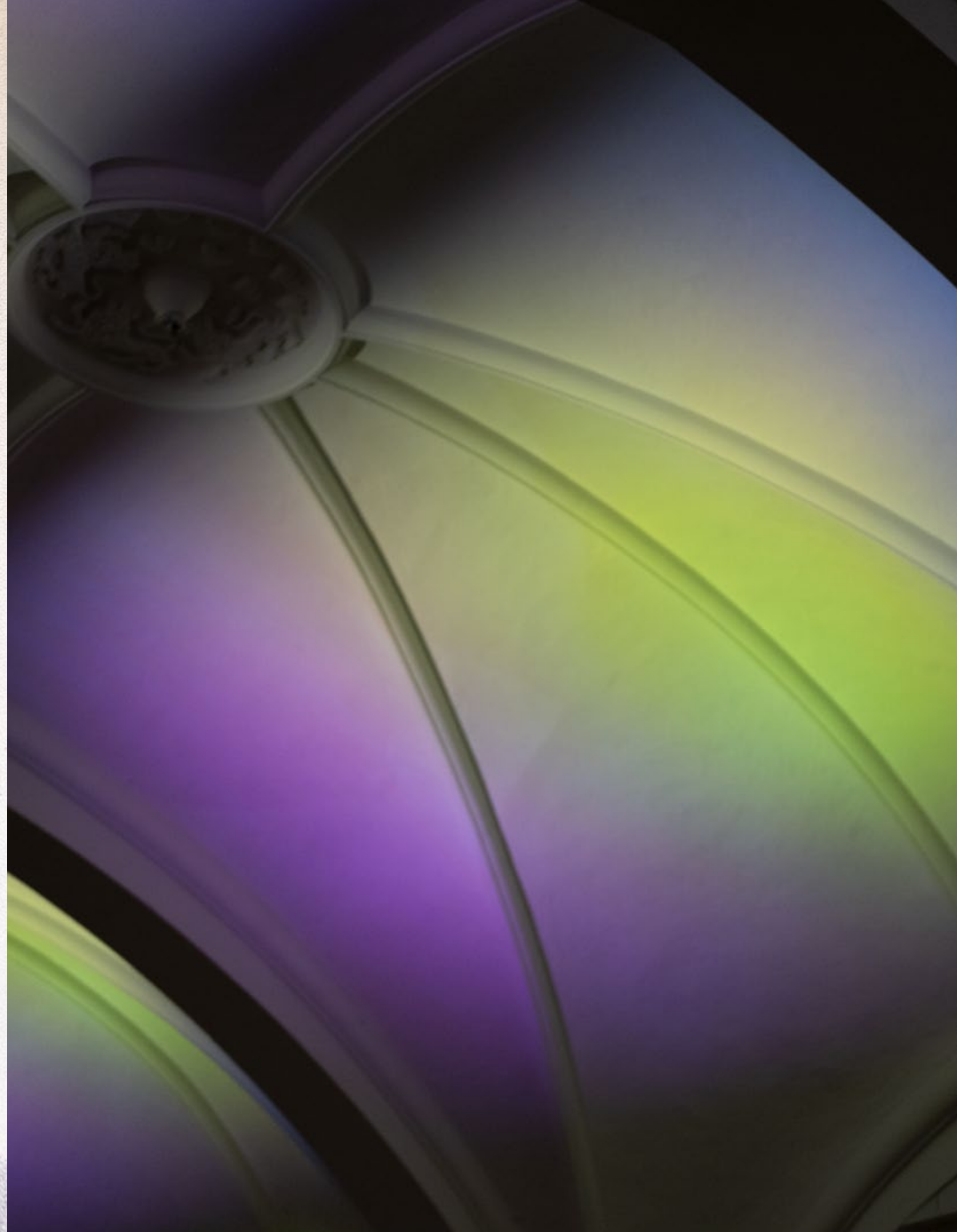
In *The Cult of Oxytocin*, the artist has taken this painting series a step further. Her gradient paintings are on full display, in larger formats than ever before, rising to the challenge presented by the huge white rooms of Nicolaj Kunsthal. The next chapter in her practice reveals itself in the small 3D printed sculptures the artist has made of two wrestlers, mimicking the famous sculpture *Wrestlers* (a Roman marble sculpture, which was in turn a copy of a Greek sculpture from the third century BCE).

The original is on display at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and has been copied by artists several times throughout the centuries. Unlike the original, where the two wrestlers are men, Ejlerskov's version presents two women, overcome with passion and strength, one on top of the other, one woman pulling the other woman's arm backwards. The women reoccur through the exhibition. Their image is blown up to enormous proportions on machine woven carpets that hang on the walls, in limited shades of red, white, black, and grey. "I wanted to move away from my previous work. Like when entering a church, I want for you to forget everything that is out there," she explains.

After spending so much time focusing on outside influences – tabloids, celebrity culture – Ejlerskov dove fearlessly within. "If you're in a spaceship, you can only deal with what is inside the ship," she says. Here, she has built an entire narrative – a cult – from scratch. The impulse to do so came from a deeply personal place. "After having a traumatic experience in the hospital during the birth of my first child, I chose to have a home birth for my second child," she says. These experiences, along with some intense

Jacket, €590. *Isabel Marant*.
Silver earrings, €160. *Inger Grube*.





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research into how oxytocin interacts with the survival hormone adrenaline, drove her to start reconsidering the human body and its healing process.

“Even though on paper, the two births are the same – both took more than 18 hours, both my children were placed slightly off-kilter in the womb – the home birth was the better experience,” Ejlerskov says. “No alarm bells, no stress, it was the most peaceful, romantic, warm-hearted encounter I’ve ever had. My experience was that giving birth in a hospital wasn’t intuitive to a woman’s body, or at least not to mine.” This led the artist to start reevaluating different facets of her life, via one big question: “If I wasn’t willing to accept this panic that I felt in my first birthing experience, then what else could I change in my life?”

She learned that if you’re driven by adrenaline, you’re constantly in fight or flight mode “and your body isn’t able to heal properly.” The artist explains that when it comes to oxytocin and adrenaline, it’s an either/or situation. “I am constantly reminding myself to be calm,” she says. “That’s why I created the cult of oxytocin. I proved to myself that I could manage in the extreme situation of childbirth, and I wanted to see what else I could change and manipulate in my life.”

A steadfast believer in the power of cryptocurrency, the artist has recently veered into the world of NFTs (non-fungible-tokens) and VR artwork. After scanning a QR code etched into a marble slab on the floor of the exhibition space, a 3D rendering in AR of the two female wrestlers appears. The technology is seamless, allowing you to infuse scale into the sculpture. Peering through your phone, the wrestlers can either engulf the

physical certificates for the exhibition. A visitor takes one, and can go online to start minting an NFT, in a sense democratising the form. Normally artists mint their own NFTs, making them scarce and valuable.

An early adopter, Ejlerskov has been making NFTs for over a year, and has been a part of the overall discourse for a long time, believing in its longevity wholeheartedly. One of the crit-

icisms NFT minting and crypto mining have garnered is how environmentally unsound they are. Pressing her on these sustainability issues, she responds, “The first cryptocurrencies are those receiving the most mainstream media backlash right now. They are mining in a super safe way, which makes them highly energy intense,” she tells me. “While mining is the only method to validate cryptocurrency transactions and mine new crypto coins, it’s the meth-

od still used by Bitcoin, for example.” The artist explains that this is the “proof of work” method, in which miners “compete” to mine. Those who do not arrive first waste computing power, energy and time. There is, however, a more sustainable alternative. “The Ethereum blockchain, where I have minted several projects, has a 2.0 version in the making. It will be ‘proof-of-stake build-up’, a consensus mechanism, not a competition.” While this method is “super green” it has more of the corruptible elements of “normal money.” Still, Ejlerskov tells me that the Ethereum founders claim their new network will consume the energy of a small town of 2,000 homes per day, relatively small by crypto standards. “People really use this. It was not made for art. Provocative as it might sound, I believe society should seriously consider how much energy we are willing to spend on a safe and fair economy,” says Ejlerskov. “It is not always about counting the carbon footprint. It takes energy to create something valuable.”

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entire room, or shrink to thimble size. Although she’s fascinated by the technology, it is always “a compliment to the art, part of it, but not instead of it.”

It’s unclear to the artist how this technology might be used in her practice in the future. “I don’t really have a roadmap for the NFTs. Right now, they’re really connected to the wrestlers,” she says, noting that the piece began as “a digital sculpture I saved on my computer.” In addition, she created individual

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Cotton jacket, price on request. *Rikke Krogsgaard Mikkelsen.*

Dress, €873. *Sportmax.*

Silk trousers, price on request. *Emilie Axters.*

Silver earrings, €160. *Inger Grube.*

Shoes, €395. *Mark Kenly Domino Tan.*



Jacket, €590. *Isabel Marant.*
Tulle skirt, €650. *Maison Margiela via Mytheresa.*
Wool trousers, €1,100. *The Row.*



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