

FRIEZE

"Oliver Osborne Asks How We Picture Childhood"

By Nicholas Gamso

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There are a handful of photographs I've saved from early childhood. They show my brother and me, four years apart, with wild hair and big eyes. My parents, much younger than I can remember, look tired but happy enough. That's my impression. It was the late 1980s, we lived in West Texas, and the rooms were wood-paneled. One picture, taken by my father using his Ricoh KR-5, shows the rest of us puddled on the carpet with pillows and woven blankets.



Oliver Osborne, *The Card Players*, 2026, oil and acrylic on herringbone linen, 80 × 45 × 3 cm.

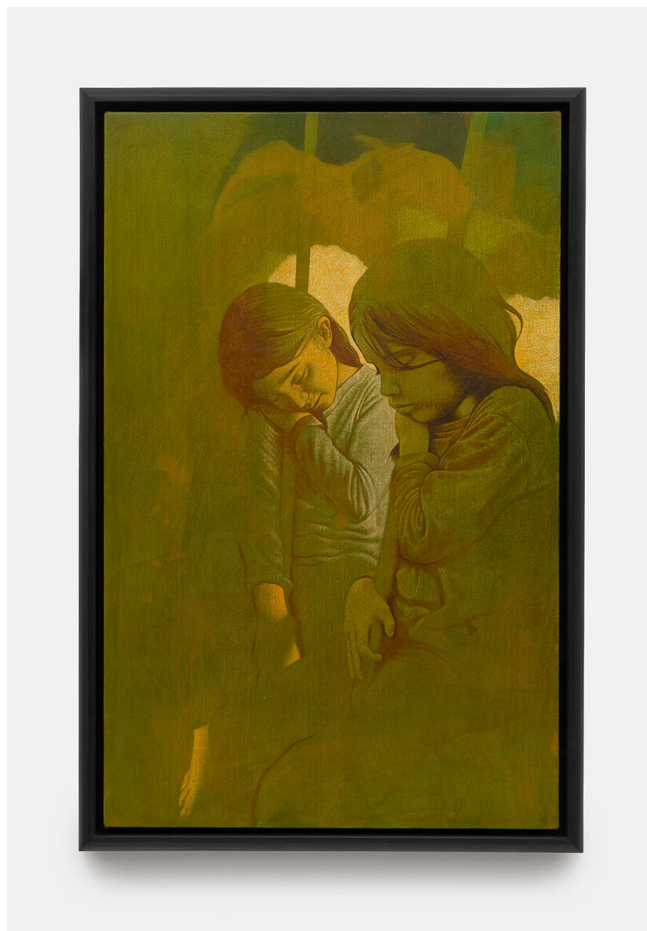
Courtesy: Jessica Silverman; photograph: Benedicte Sehested

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These pictures came to mind as I was studying a suite of eight paintings by the Scottish artist Oliver Osborne at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco. Painted on herringbone linen and mounted in thick lacquered frames, the works depict Osborne's young sons, though like much of his recent output, they also reference masterpieces from art history, particularly tempera painting of the Italian Renaissance. In a solo show last year at London's Union Pacific, Osborne exhibited two studies of Filippino Lippi's Portrait of a Youth (c.1485). Certain periods of Florentine painting really do feel like childhood: idealized and evocative of a vague but indelible innocence.

The title of Osborne's exhibition, 'The Card Players', alludes again to the history of painting – here Cézanne and Caravaggio – but there's something else at work. Painting is a game of cheats, repeated gestures and sleights of hand, inviting viewers to wonder how a given work was created. With Osborne's paintings, you question whether the figures were ever actually present in the same time and place.



Oliver Osborne, *Sleeping Guards*, 2026, oil and acrylic on herringbone linen, 110 × 70 × 3 cm.

Courtesy: Jessica Silverman; photograph: Benedicte Sehested

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A vertical portrait bearing the exhibition's name (*The Card Players*, all works 2026) shows a boy in wire-rimmed glasses; a second child, maybe a year older, emerges behind the first in three-quarter profile. Clearly the latter figure was placed there by the artist: the light sources don't match, and neither do the boys' expressions. One, brainy and preoccupied, holds what appears to be a playing card. The other, serious, self-conscious, focuses on something beyond the frame. That same hovering presence appears in other paintings: *Velázquez Boy (With Leaves)* and *Multi-figure Composition with Leaf*. In another, *Arezzo (The Sleeping Guard)*, a dozing, longhaired child is nearly washed out by a layer of expressionistic ochre brushwork. The painting references a recurring character in the frescos of Piero della Francesca.

When I meet Osborne during the show's installation, he tells me that he paints what is in his vicinity: a young family passing time together. But there are other sources too. A painter has friends, a body, a city to live in, books and clippings cluttering the studio. A portrait by Velázquez could be as close by as a magazine cover or a photo of the painter's child; the idea is appealing because it suggests an intimate relation to even the distant past. Yet digital life makes everything near at hand, and this is the unstated tension in the visual world Osborne is conjuring.



Oliver Osborne, 'The Card Players', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: Jessica Silverman; photograph: Phillip Maisel

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We are always looking at our devices, using them to document our lives and to mediate our relationships. These paintings, though remarkable for their naturalism and quiet tenderness, do recall the screen interface. Osborne points out that some emanate a slight greenish glow. But what really strikes me is the paintings' flatness. A feature of quattrocento panel painting, the effect is redoubled on the two-dimensional screens we operate daily.

Osborne admits that digital life has shaped his own vision considerably, telling me the paintings are based on collages he made in Photoshop. Now I imagine him in the studio, poring over Vasari, dreaming of his children's futures, then putting it all together in solitude.

Oliver Osborne's 'The Card Players' is on view at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, until July 11.

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