

KATE WERBLE

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Sean Nash: Acid Base

By Alfred Mac Adam



Sean Nash, *Acid Base (7)*, 2025. Color pencil on paper, 11 × 8 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.
Photo: Kelci Makana Verdon.

The success of Sean Nash's first solo New York show is predicated on his ability to invert traditional commonplaces. First and foremost is the Renaissance (and later) notion that art should "imitate nature." Nash does this because he takes it for granted that we no longer live in *natura naturans* (nature as independent process) or *natura naturata* (a pre-existing state of being). We no longer live in nature as a living process or as a permanent condition. Our idea of "being in nature" means being somewhere with poor or no cell service. We are artificial beings living in an artificial world, a fact with fatal consequences.

Acid Base
Kate Werble
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So, like the second-wave Romantic John Clare (1793–1864), Nash peers into microenvironments. Consider Clare's poem "Clock a Clay," which views the world from an insect's point of view. Nash moves way beyond Clare and looks through the microscope seeking a way into real but invisible nature. The news he brings back is not comforting. In fact, the overall effect of the fourteen works in color pencil and acrylic he assembles here is downright disquieting. Like Nash, we know that there are micro-organisms living at incredible ocean depths that abound in sulphur and receive not a ray of sunlight, but Nash is telling us that our fate is dubious, that we may be replaced if we continue to allow our environment to metamorphose into something inhuman. We aren't microbes, but we may end up as microbes.



Installation view: Sean Nash: *Acid Base*, Kate Werble Gallery, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

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Nash's discomfort about our future translates into images of zany organisms, often of a curiously sexual nature, vaguely reminiscent of the sexuality in Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers. To be sure, Nash deploys a sexuality of a non-human sort, a parody of human biology. *Octo Vino* (2025), acrylic on canvas, depicts something resembling a fertilized flower bulb. Within the bulb rest six seeds awaiting their moment to bloom. But what will they become? It isn't clear what Nash means by "octo vino," but whatever will arise from those seeds will not be good for human consumption. Nash carefully selects bizarre shades to heighten the strangeness of his fleurs du mal. The same idea that we are about to witness the birth of some aberration appears in the stunning *Magnet TV* (Cephalopods) (2025), a large 36 x 30-inch acrylic on canvas. Again, we have a huge bud or bulb seemingly about to burst dominating the center of the piece. It may be some sort of egg from which cephalopods—squids perhaps—will burst, like some monstrous entity from a horror film.

The two, small *Acid Base* (2025) works, which provide the title for Nash's show, are both 11 x 8-inch color pencil on paper compositions. Nash apparently took a cue from the litmus paper used to measure the level of acidity in any liquid. His unnatural color palette derives from the color of that paper, once again taking us back to the idea that "imitating nature" may produce strange results. *Acid Base* (15) is a riot of biomorphic shapes, all crammed together and fighting their way to the edge of the sheet. *Acid Base* (7) looks like the aftermath of the tumultuous chaos of *Acid Base* (15): Nash's signature egg has taken shape at the center of some monstrous womb.



Sean Nash, *Speculative Speciation*, 2025. Composite resin, muslin, acrylic, and color pencil on panel, 17 x 15 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Kelci Makana Verdon.

Of special interest here is a single sculpture, a wall piece: *Speculative Speculation* (2025), a small 17 x 15 x 4-inch work, made of resin, muslin, acrylic, and color pencil on panel. At first glance, we might take the piece as a version of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the flaming heart of the Savior in Catholic devotional works. In itself, the image is disturbing because of the flames and spears that usually accompany it, but Nash's version removes it from any religious context (yet another inversion of a traditional icon) and locates it instead in the realm of environmental warning. Literally a red light telling us that something is wrong with our world, Nash's heart, with its wonderfully redundant title, is telling us that nature may be about to exact painful revenge.

Alfred Mac Adam is Professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He is a translator, most recently of Juan Villoro's *Horizontal Vertigo* (2021), about Mexico City.