

Features /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
12 NOV 2003

Vanishing act

Silke Otto-Knapp



The artist doesn't smoke, but her paintings look like they do. Her medium of choice is watercolour on canvas, which lends her works an atmosphere of slow dissolve.

Although German, Otto-Knapp lives in London and has made a lot of pictures that, despite their infatuation with the ether, are curious about risk, loss, fiction, spectacle - and paint. Fascinated by Los Angeles and Las Vegas, she's less interested in their details than in their gorgeous, polluted abstractions: dream factories sprung from the desert and the ocean. She also makes paintings about cultivated gardens and, more recently, showgirls.

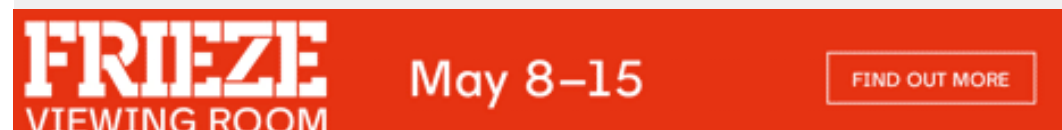
Otto-Knapp tends to work from photographs that she has either taken herself or found somewhere, say, in a magazine. Distorting her copy of the original image to the point of unrecognizability, she is drawn to places and people so iconic and exhausted by their various representations in the popular imagination that, notwithstanding their vivid physicality, they almost cease to exist. Yet, because what she paints is (to a certain extent) imaginary, it's as if she's attempting, conversely, to make it real. The resulting pictures are replete with the suggestion that in spite of its thick skin, the physical world, and by association painting itself, can still evoke the idea - or the illusion of - magic. (And why not? After all, everything and everyone is going to vanish eventually, and where they go is anyone's guess.) If most painters have a time of day that suits them best, I'd say Otto-Knapp's is twilight.

I must digress for a moment. Last year I visited Los Angeles for the first time - in the flesh, that is. Like most people, I had already been there many times, via films or songs or artworks or the news. But when I arrived, I realized there was one aspect of it that had to be experienced in person, one that embodies the gulf between the idea of something and its actuality. At the end of a hard, bright day Los Angeles abruptly dissolved; without warning everything seemed drowsy and candlelit, so fragile I thought the very boulevards might weep. I'm used to London looking tear-stained by day and pulling itself together in the evening, but LA's eyelids seemed to droop with the waning sun. Compared with London's damp urgency there is something deeply seductive about this West Coast twilight. I hope that when I die it'll be like that: a nocturnal, balmy infinity.

I remembered that LA sunset when I first saw Otto-Knapp's paintings. They seem as seduced by the West Coast as only someone who lives in London can be. Yet in the same way that a tough city can look suddenly vulnerable, there's an element of fragile incompatibility in these images, not just in their subject matter but also in their application. Watercolour is not absorbed easily on to canvas. As a result, drips, spray, clogs, washes, stains and blurring are an integral part of what Otto-Knapp wants to happen to a painting's surface - she often abandons paint to its own energy and devices. In this sense her pictures are as much about the nuts and bolts of expression as about place; about revealing the mechanics of the illusion without, somehow, destroying the trick.

As a result, despite their specificity, these locations and people, cancelled out by their repetitions, are nowhere and no one but simply the idea of something imaginary triggered by something real and realized in paint.

Advertisement



Otto-Knapp employs watercolour to capture a fugitive subject so infinite in its variables it's impossible for it not to be blurred in its rendering. Although her pictures are very specifically titled - *Silverlake (Hyperion)* (2002), *Devlin Drive (Gisele's Pool)* (2002), *Palmhouse (Tropical)* (2003), for example - nothing apart from location is clear; in a sense, these could be pictures of almost anywhere. Images fuse, overlap and pull in and out of focus; buildings are flimsy things seen in the process of being absorbed by their surroundings; plants and showgirls are hot-housed yet elusive. In paintings such as *Santa Clarita* (2002) Modernist architecture is swallowed by encroaching desert and voracious shrubs (a brick in Otto-Knapp's world is more fragile than a leaf). In *Eaglerock* (2001) a car is a small stain of red paint; the sky is bigger and slicker than any machine. In *Show Girls* (2003) near-invisible women dance, bleached into echoes of themselves by the glare of stage lights, their faces rubbed as smooth as old coins. I don't think, however, that Otto-Knapp is over-concerned with feminist or ecological issues: like a mathematician interested in music, her pictures are simultaneously formal and dreamy, more enamoured of the mark than of singular meanings. In a recent interview with Annette Freudenberger for her solo exhibition at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen in Düsseldorf, she commented that she found 'hybrid positions with their unresolved status particularly interesting ... it's about putting the transparent quality of the paint into conflict with the clarity of the photographic image. This painted space develops its own clarity and sometimes even surprises me.'¹

Sometimes these pictures look like the remnants of old, hand-tinted photographs left in the rain. If every photograph is an image of a lost moment, then every painting of a photograph is an image of a moment long gone. This goes some way to explaining the elegiac atmosphere that tempers many of Otto-Knapp's paintings. This is particularly explicit in her pictures of Kew Gardens near London and the Huntingdon Gardens in LA, which evoke something of the failed detachment of 19th-century scientific painting by artists such as Marianne North, who, in Otto-Knapp's words 'escaped her conventional life and travelled to exotic countries to document their flora ... [and whose paintings] certainly don't offer a scientific overview, but are testament to the artist's passion and her eccentricity.'² Unsurprisingly, Otto-Knapp's paintings seem equally in thrall to early abstraction. There are murmurs of J. M. W. Turner and Claude Monet here, in the evident pleasure the artist takes in subtle shifts in colour, in the horizons abandoned for no reason other than that the paint demanded it, and in the details sacrificed for sake of homogeneity. The dynamic wavers - in some pictures it's as if a giant piece of muslin had floated down from the sky and settled on all that green, heaving unrest; in others, the veins of a branch or the shape of a cactus are registered with a clinical eye.

Recently Otto-Knapp has been concentrating on making images of the night because it's the only time of day when a lack of definition is a given and when shadows are more concrete than concrete. At night the world can feel more intense. This is something Otto-Knapp understands. She can make you remember seeing the evening lights of a city from an aeroplane, shining like pomegranate seeds; or driving a car through a foreign town on a rainy night, when the windows fog up and the neon signs outside dissolve. These are the moments that make it easy to understand that abstraction isn't simply a theory; it's something we move through.

1. Catalogue to the exhibition 'Silke Otto-Knapp' at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2003, p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze*'s first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

First published in Issue 79
Nov - Dec 2003

Share this: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Email](#) [Pinterest](#)

Features /

MONOGRAPH

JENNIFER HIGGIE

SILKE OTTO-KNAPP

MORE FEATURES

SEE ALL



Welcome to the New Look of Frieze Magazine



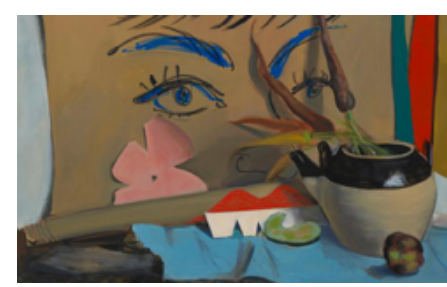
Filmmaker Steve Reinke's Poetry of Perversity



A Dream Journal of the HIV/AIDS Crisis



Art Under Bolsonaro Turns to Brazil's Rural Frontier



Missing Galleries Amid Covid-19? Check Out these Exhibitions Behind Closed Doors



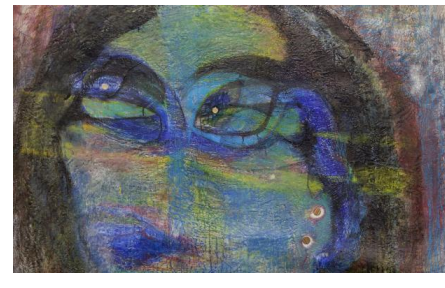
How Artists Have Transformed Their Homes Into Other Worlds

MOST READ

SEE ALL



The Threat to Freedom of Expression in Japan



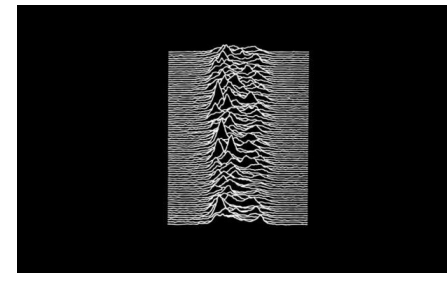
I Learned Enormous Things: Hans Ulrich Obrist Remembers Marisa Merz (1931-2019)



Editors' Picks: Our Favourite Art World Holiday Destinations



An Afrofuturism Show With No Black Artists: What Went Wrong at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien?



Pop Culture Is the Great Educator: An Interview with Peter Saville



'Learning How to Be Queer Again': Remembering Douglas Crimp (1944-2019)

LATEST MAGAZINES



frieze magazine
Issue 209
March 2020



frieze magazine
Issue 210
April 2020



frieze magazine
Issue 211
May-June 2020

Subscribe now and save up to 40%

SUBSCRIBE