

REGEN PROJECTS

Möntmann, Nina. "Silke Otto-Knapp at Galerie Karin Günther." *Artforum* (February 2003) pp. 149 – 150 [ill.]

ARTFORUM



Silke Otto-Knapp, *Huntington Gardens (Palms)*, 2002, watercolor on canvas, 19 7/8 x 13 3/4".

HAMBURG

SILKE OTTO-KNAPP

GALERIE KARIN GÜNTHER

The way catastrophes are reported in the news regularly prompts discussions on the formative influence media images have on our understanding of these events. Much less is said about how our notions about paradisiacal places, unspoiled wilderness, or the oases of the leisure class are also created largely by images from TV, movies, and newspapers. Those who have never been to Las Vegas can imagine it as a glamorous nonplace, far from reality; Los Angeles, to those who don't know it firsthand, is the palm-lined mecca of the stars.

Silke Otto-Knapp, a German artist who lives in London, works with such media-

based impressions. Her watercolors on canvas are always based on either her own photographs or ones found in newspapers. Coming after a series of Las Vegas motifs, which typically combined neon architecture with snippets of nature, Otto-Knapp's new paintings (all works 2002) depict unsettling, artificially planted "nature" in Los Angeles. While the Vegas paintings featured bright color sequences and precise light effects on a white background, these new paintings work with a palette dominated by green. They are wishful images of an untouched, wild nature, staged in a desert climate to create the impression of a paradise—one that in reality would be impossible without the help of costly watering systems.

The palm tree recurs throughout Otto-Knapp's work. In its cultivated form, with its slender trunk and regularly trimmed brown leaves, the palm tree signifies the exotic, suggests luxury, and promises something better. Thus in California, where precisely such associations are paramount, the tree is almost the state trademark. Some of these paintings, such as *Huntington Gardens (Palms)*, show veritable forests of palms—the tight angle of the image gives the impression of a jungle. But it's all fake—the shot on which Otto-Knapp based the painting was snapped in the botanical garden. Buildings, on the other hand, appear in the new series only spectrally, as in *The Valley*, where Universal Studios seems to appear and disappear in the background. The effect is also reflected at the level of production. In places, the watercolor paint has been wiped away from the canvas, new layers finely varnished over, or left alone, revealing the canvas. Otto-Knapp uses her layers and washes to weave together different levels of image and reality. Thus the palms are never rooted, but rather seem to float out of a blurred zone of color. The images in which color fields dominate figurative fragments tend more toward abstraction. The absence of a horizon makes our standpoint unclear and creates a claustrophobic feeling.

Otto-Knapp's images never function merely as representations. Instead, she plays with their capacity to confirm or destabilize our sense of place. California clichés may be taken at face value or, on the contrary, undermined; or they simply become a framework for autonomous painterly effects. What can an image do? What longings can it awaken in the viewer? How do modes of representation mediate between individual experience, cliché, and reality? Posing such questions, Otto-

Knapp's watercolors engage current discourses on the function of images.

—Nina Möntmann

Translated from German by Sara Ogger.

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