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Silke Otto-Knapp, *Sun and Clouds (detail)* (2020).
Watercolor on canvas, 31.5 x 23.5 x 0.75 inches.
© Silke Otto-Knapp.
Image courtesy of Regen Projects.

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Inhabiting the In-Between

Silke Otto-Knapp's Permeable Worlds

Upon her death of ovarian cancer in October 2022, a brutal disease that she battled for two years amidst the equally brutal reign of the pandemic, the Los Angeles-based, German-born artist Silke Otto-Knapp had spent 18 months working on a solo exhibition for Galerie Buchholz in New York, which opened a mere 19 days after her passing. Entitled *Versammlung*, a German word that translates to assembly or gathering, the site-specific exhibition featured three large, gray-scale triptychs rendered solely in black watercolor—a medium usually reserved for paper but uniquely adapted by the artist as a pigment for canvas.¹ These freestanding hinged paintings adopted a sculptural footprint, occupying the small gallery like loosely folded accordions—a gathering of sorts that positioned the work in dynamic physical proximity to the viewer, collapsing the distinction between painting, sculpture, and stage set. Often directly referencing photographs of early- to mid-twentieth-century experimental dance and theater practices (such as Bauhaus choreography and the work of Bertolt Brecht), the compositions depict the bodies of performers as faceless silhouettes slipping across thresholds and bleeding into other discrete forms.² In *Untitled (Versammlung) III* (2022), for example, a monochromatic mirror image of embracing or perhaps merging bodies—one black and one white, suggesting a photographic negative and positive—bookends a dim, lunar sphere; in another, the figure of a ribbon dancer melts into a serpentine coil.

Jessica Simmons-Reid

Although painted near the end of her life, the evocative (*Untitled*) *Versammlung* paintings allude to a pictorial in-betweenness, marked by blurred thresholds and a series of elusive forms, that had been a consistent source of inquiry within Otto-Knapp's oeuvre. This summer, Regen Projects presented a posthumous solo exhibition of works predominantly made in the last five years of the artist's life, further illuminating the repertoire of ineffable motifs that dwell within her paintings. Curated by Kitty Scott, the meditative presentation of watercolor paintings and works on paper neither included works from the (*Untitled*) *Versammlung* series nor any other freestanding paintings—a curious omission. Nonetheless, the selected works spoke to the depth and complexity of the gestural language that Otto-Knapp had been meticulously forging across her lifetime, despite working in a medium often deemed too illustrative for painting's more sophisticated pursuits.³

Much like the paintings in *Versammlung*, the late works on view at Regen Projects reveal Otto-Knapp's penchant for delving into liminal (and subliminal) motifs—from clouds to silhouettes to negative space itself—and ability to milk conceptual complexity from even seemingly simplistic forms. While her earlier works often incorporated hazy sheens of color, here, her singular focus on black-and-white imagery positions her paintings as fruitful vehicles for allegorical interpretation, with the dichotomy of these two tones suggesting either the rigidity of binary absolutes (*either* black *or* white) or, more intriguingly, the fluidity between opposing yet intrinsically interconnected forms (light and dark, day and night, positive and negative). Crucial to any reading of Otto-Knapp's work, however, is the spectrum of gray space that exists in between. While we can refer to these "gray areas" as spaces of liminality—a catchall term for the fuzzy indeterminacy of transitional states—in the case of Otto-Knapp's paintings, these mutable spaces act as connective thresholds between discrete

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forms, ideas, or things—a notion that the artist herself summarized as “negative and positive space meeting.”⁴ Here, “meeting” is the operative word: Pointing to moments of touch or convergence, Otto-Knapp’s vocabulary of in-betweenness shuns passivity and instead functions as a haptic and dynamic mode of gestural expression, anchoring her conceptual and material investigations. Ultimately, rather than inhabiting a world of absolutes, her paintings posit that the latent space between things can be as ripe and fertile as the individual things themselves.

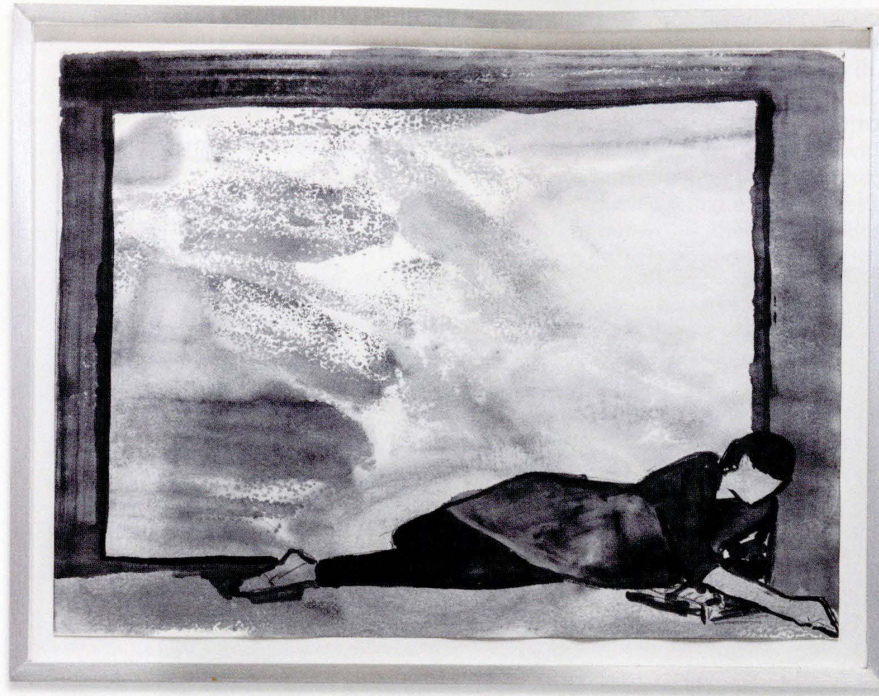
Etymologically, the term “liminal” stems from the Latin word “*limen*,” meaning threshold or doorway; the word “*limen*” is also used to refer to the physiological threshold at which a sensation, such as pain or consciousness, becomes detectable. Anatomically, a *limen* also denotes the opening of a bodily orifice—the threshold between our interior and exterior worlds. If conceptually, liminality describes an overall condition of suspension, physically, a *limen* is a more acute (yet still elusive) transition point between discrete forms or states of being. Otto-Knapp’s work engages with the intricacies of both meanings of the word. Although she does not portray thresholds in the form of bodily cavities, she does depict a variety of other physical and metaphysical *limens* in her illumination of transitional spaces, such as the seams where conjoined canvases or compositions meet, the indistinct expanse between figuration and abstraction, or the airy chasm between earth and sky.

Otto-Knapp’s material process similarly harnessed elements of transition. To create her paintings, she meticulously layered her canvases with vivid, jet-black watercolor pigment, wiping and washing it away to reveal a mist of gray tones—a gestural choreography that revels in the latent space between mark-making and erasure. She then physically manipulated the canvas to propel the floating pigment across the surface of the work, attempting to control how it puddled and soaked

into the skin of the canvas. While the act of painting inherently engages the body, the relationship between an artist’s body and their canvas—steeped in the physics and contingencies of close, careful touch—is uniquely intimate. Otto-Knapp’s process involved harnessing the fugitive pliability of her medium, conducting the movement of the pigment as it quickly shifted from liquid to dry matter and thereby elevating the importance of transitional material states. Her resulting surfaces bear the translucent gestures of watercolor yet simultaneously mimic the mottled, earthy textures of charcoal or graphite, a visual sleight of hand that positions the work between the margins of various media. Here, she acted as an alchemist, ferrying her paint from one state into another and reveling in the anticipatory space that exists at the thresholds of the transformation.

The subjects of Otto-Knapp’s compositions—spectral bodies and hazy silhouettes that ambulate against washy voids—often infiltrate the physical boundaries of the works themselves. In two small monochromatic works on paper with nearly identical compositions (installed beside one other at Regen Projects), a faceless figure lies on its side, perched on its elbow as if leisurely reading a book. In each work, a loosely painted frame encloses the figure, whose arm reaches toward the lower right corner of the paper, perhaps grasping for something unseen. In the first, larger work (*Untitled*, c. 2021), the figure’s outstretched arm touches the painted frame, as if acknowledging its containment. In the second (also *Untitled*, c. 2021), the figure’s hand grazes the edge of the paper itself, as if attempting to perceive the world beyond it. While humble compared to the larger, more complex paintings in the exhibition—I nearly brushed by these works on my first viewing of the show—their quiet interrelationship hints at the nuances inherent to Otto-Knapp’s defined interest in thresholds. The figure’s subtle shift from one work to the next suggests an unseen transformation, resulting in the quiet

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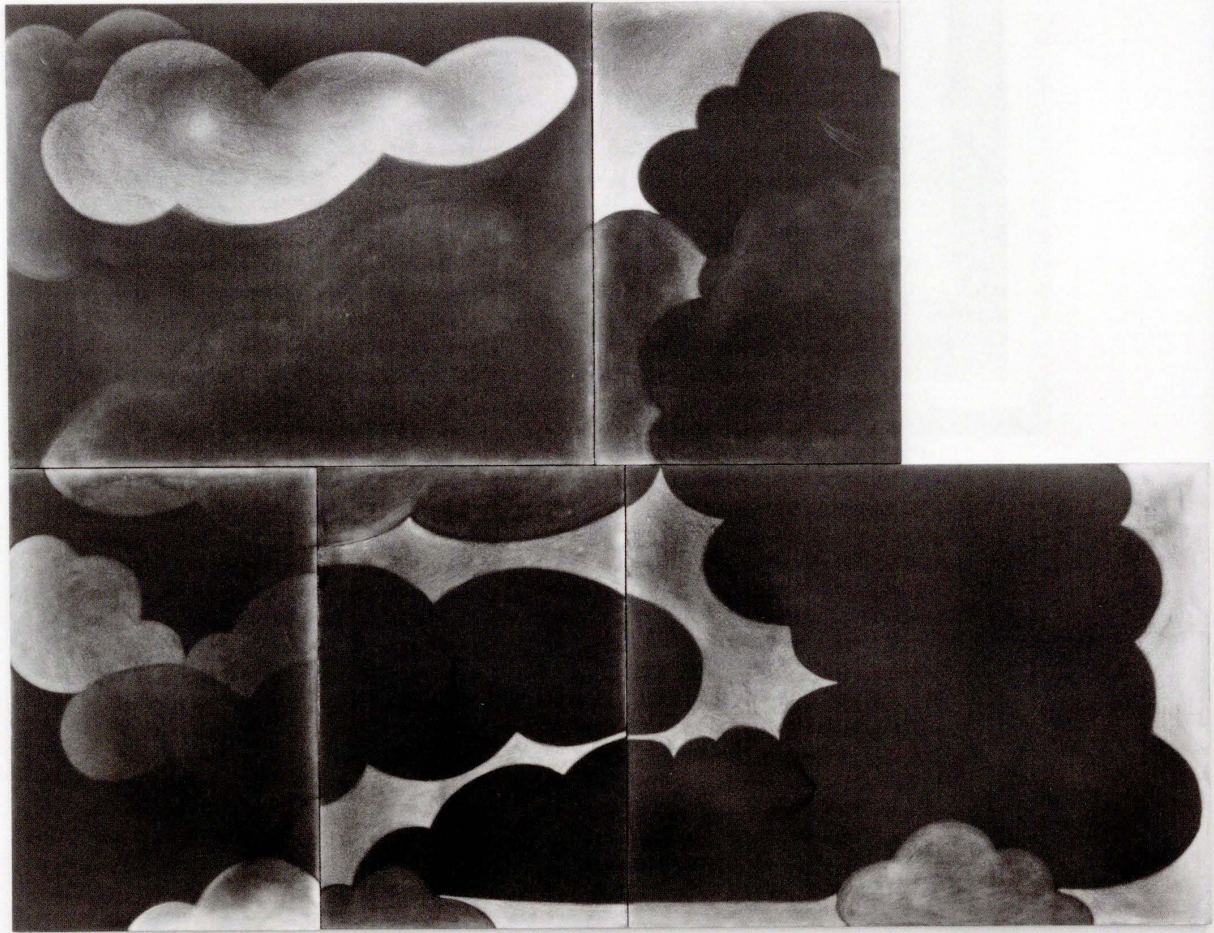


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Silke Otto-Knapp, *Untitled* (c. 2021).
Watercolor on paper, 9.5 x 12 inches (top),
11.5 x 15.5 inches (bottom).
© Silke Otto-Knapp. Images courtesy
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Silke Otto-Knapp, *Clouds* (installation view) (2021).
Watercolor on canvas, 118 × 153.5 × 0.75 inches.
Regen Projects, Los Angeles, 2023. © Silke Otto-Knapp.
Image courtesy of Regen Projects.
Photo: Evan Bedford.

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breaching of a boundary. The spatial and temporal pause *between* these two compositions functions as a moment of inferred action, much like the brief interlude that occurs when a dancer transitions between movements. The pairing of these two works activates the blank, marginal space between them, pointing to the frame as an imperfect system of containment, and suggesting that even firmly defined boundaries are more porous than we think.

In addition to her figurative works, Otto-Knapp frequently invoked the visual poeticism of the natural world, innately rife with slippery thresholds. A cloud, for example, is a perfect liminal form: A nebulous buoy between earth and sky, it inhabits a realm of perpetual suspension, as in Otto-Knapp's large-scale painting *Clouds* (2021), which occupied Regen Projects' central wall. A response to Georgia O'Keefe's *Sky Above Clouds IV* (1965), which depicts a tableau of abstracted, cell-like clouds as seen from an airplane window, Otto-Knapp's painting adopts a similarly vaulted perspective, as if both artist and viewer were dangling in the sky. Composed of five canvases fused to form an irregular polygon, the gray-scale watercolor composition depicts pillowy clouds rendered in ash, bone, and charcoal tones. These clean, puffy shapes threaten to breach the edges of the painting, once again suggesting the canvas' fallibility as a concrete margin.

While O'Keefe's painting connotes the spiritual tranquility of calm horizons, Otto-Knapp's work appears dark and dynamic, as if on the cusp of thunder. Its presence is seductive and formidable: When I encountered it for the first time, I registered a strange *mélange* of awe, pleasure, reverence, and curiosity, much like awaiting the ferocity of a looming storm (and this was before learning that *Clouds* was among the final works created before her death). While imposing a biographical reading on a work can muddy its viewing, it's difficult not to view this painting through a lens of mourning.

A billowy sky on the brink of a squall can denote the emotional heft of grief or melancholy; it can perhaps also be read as a metaphor for the tumult that accompanies the process of creation. And, although Otto-Knapp's conceptual engagement with forms of liminality far preceded her diagnosis (which by no means defines the context of her work), there is nonetheless a certain poetic solemnity to the notion that she labored over this shifting skyscape while herself approaching an existential threshold.

Decidedly evocative of the in-between, Otto-Knapp's faceless bodies, merging silhouettes, and ominous clouds can ultimately be interpreted as sentinels from the artist's subconscious: an assembly of gestures that reside at the meeting point—a particularly palpable, fertile, and active threshold—between subliminal ideation and artistic creation. Whether physically, through process and form, or conceptually, her work establishes liminal thresholds not only as spaces to navigate through, but also as palpable gatherings rife with material tension.

Jessica Simmons-Reid (MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; BA, Brown University) is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles and Joshua Tree. She has contributed essays and reviews to *Carla and Artforum*, and currently serves as a board member at the Feminist Center for Creative Work. Previously, she held positions in the curatorial departments at both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

1. "Silke Otto-Knapp: *Versammlung*," press release, Galerie Buchholz, 2022, <https://www.galeriebuchholz.de/exhibitions/silke-otto-knapp-galerie-buchholz-new-york-2022>.

2. Lauren O'Neill-Butler, "Silke Otto-Knapp," *Artforum* 61, no. 5 (January 2023), <https://www.artforum.com/events/silke-otto-knapp-6-250761/>.

3. On this note, it's worth pointing out that, as an associate professor of painting and drawing at UCLA since 2015, Otto-Knapp would have been acutely attuned to this discourse.

4. "Silke Otto-Knapp in Conversation with Solveig Øvstebø," MAK Center for Art and Architecture, February 15, 2022, video, 14:20, <https://www.regenprojects.com/artists/silke-otto-knapp/videos?view=slider>.