

# REGEN PROJECTS

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**ARTFORUM**



This page, Silke Otto-Knapp, *Swimmers*, 2006, watercolor and gouache on canvas, 51 1/4 x 60".  
Opposite page, Silke Otto-Knapp, *Wishire (Sunset)*, 2001, watercolor on canvas, 20 x 30".



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## Figurative Language

TOM HOLERT ON THE ART OF SILKE OTTO-KNAPP



ANY ENCOUNTER WITH SILKE OTTO-KNAPP'S NEW PAINTINGS inevitably becomes a kinetic affair. The ordinary small movements that occur when one stands in front of a painting—shifting one's weight from one foot to the other, inadvertently changing perspective—reveal that what seems a silver monochrome from one point of view is immediately discernible as a figurative painting from another. One finds oneself stepping from side to side in order to better consider the puzzling sensation accompanying these appearances and disappearances, leaning forward and back, tilting one's head this way and that.

One effect of this optical mutability is that the works are particularly resistant to photographic reproduction, since the camera effectively isolates Otto-Knapp's figuration by fixing the perspective and eliminating the possibility of viewing her painting in time. For instance, a reproduction of *Swimmers*, 2006, has the straightforward allure of a representational drawing whose figures are easily recognizable: Twenty-four schematically rendered dancers—some balancing on one leg, others standing firmly on both feet, and all sporting old-fashioned bathing suits—are distributed over a cloudlike, vaporous terrain, the lineaments of their bodies attached to the stagescape of the work's surface with an odd tenuosity, so that they seem almost to float above it. Facing the actual, material object, however, one begins an altogether trickier engagement, similar to that of, say, trying to apprehend one of Ad Reinhardt's black-on-black abstractions. Depending on lighting conditions and the spectator's vantage point, the work's densely layered silver watercolor and gouache are as likely to

hide the subject matter as to convey it. The figures vanish from sight, only to resurface after a slight alteration of a viewer's position. Their balletic movements obliquely correspond with the movements made by the spectator, continuously inviting an almost mimetic correlation between the dancers on the canvas and the viewers in front of it.

The German-born, London-based artist did not start out with the intention of sending audiences on such a playful yet ardent quest for subject matter and gestalt in thickets of layered paint. Rather, this territory opened as part of a broader shift within her practice in recent years. Roughly between 2000 and 2003, Otto-Knapp gained widespread recognition for her photo-based watercolors, some from pictures she'd taken herself, executed on canvas—an unusual support for water-based pigments—and characterized by a misty plain air colorism. In these works, watercolor was effectively converted from a "light" technique to a "heavy" one, involving patient, insistent labor: The artist would layer and often drip and spray her medium to depict Los Angeles cityscapes, densely overgrown gardens, and scenes of the California desert. In subsequent pieces, however, Otto-Knapp began to confine her palette to a range of gray, silver, and occasionally golden hues—a decision that significantly changed the overall character of the work, even while she used the same signature support and medium (with gouache coming into play for more opaque passages). Her lush dissolves of color and form gave way to increasingly tectonic and sculptural handling, in spite of the fact that watercolor is notoriously difficult to

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control since it is both highly fluid and quick-drying. This handling, in turn, intersected with the materiality and semiotics of metallic paint, associated as it is with Jackson Pollock's silver drips and Andy Warhol's silver silk screens, as well as with shiny consumer baubles, the industrial gleam of aluminum, or even those mute and paralyzed silver pantomime performers one sees along the tourist trails of cities like London or Paris.

Bearing this history in mind, one also sees that Otto-Knapp's paintings, although clearly derived from representational photographs, have never adhered to a traditional realist agenda (if such a thing has ever existed). Indeed, what might be called watercolor's inherent automatism—its tendency to create aleatory, amorphous, antfigurative blots—operates against any fixing of the referenced image. More important, Otto-Knapp recomposes her source material to interweave the spatiality of photography with that of painting: She selects, edits, and strips away the shadows and highlights that give the photographic image dimensionality, investigating figure/ground relations in nonpainterly representation and introducing them into the sublimating actions of a painterly practice. *Swimmers* is paradigmatic of this complex construction of space in and through painting, which is defined in her newest series (begun in 2005) by the increasing imbrication of representational elements in monochromatic, reflective paint, whence they emerge via deliberate acts of perception on the part of the viewer. Particularly at issue in *Swimmers* is the intersection of two types of space—pictorial and theatrical—that have been conflated to varying degrees since the early Renaissance.

While Otto-Knapp, in creating this purposely unresolved visual situation, evokes the disciplines of perspectival geometry and abstract painting in addition to that of classical dance, it is the iconography of the latter that primarily informs her new body of work. This subject matter is hardly arbitrary and in fact was anticipated in another series from 2004. Paintings like *Showgirls* (*Blue*), *Star*, and *Fans* depict Vegas stage performers lined up in Busby Berkeley-esque cadres, with the painter paying close attention to the gaudy, sumptuous set designs, the decorative patterning of architectural elements, the artificial lighting, and the choreographed collective body of the performers as depicted in her source images. In the works that followed, we see these interests increasingly giving way to an emphasis on the movements and performers themselves. For example, *The Bride's Chamber Scene*, 2005—one of several works based on photo-documentation of the austere, Stravinsky-scored ballet *Les noces* (*The Wedding*)—emphasizes the graphic, abstract quality of Bronislava Nijinska's choreography. The almost comically contorted dancers are arranged in a Rorschach-like symmetrical pattern, while each figure seems to be wired to the rest of the group by a white tube—a stylization of the braided rope of hair that is the ballet's major motif.

As Otto-Knapp put it in a recent e-mail, her new work testifies to a shift “away from decorative compositions in which the dancers' bodies are used as raw material on the same level with costumes and props, toward single figures in space, toward choreography as a highly specialized, abstract language.” To return to *Swimmers*: The image of the twenty-four dancers is based on a photo

of a performance of the Ballets Russes work *Le Train bleu*, which was a huge success and society event when it debuted in 1924 with choreography by Nijinska (Vaslav Nijinsky's sister), libretto by Jean Cocteau, costumes by Coco Chanel, and a curtain by Pablo Picasso. But the painting, which is stylistically situated somewhere between naive artwork and *danse d'école* diagram, aims less for the grandiosity and glamour of ballet than for knowledge about the complex relationships of two-dimensional ornament and three-dimensional spatiality, of figure and ground. And when *mise-en-scène* does come into play, it tends to work in the service of the artist's conception of dance as an “abstract language.”

For instance, the geometric striped patterns of the dance floor in *By the Way I'm Going for Cigarettes*, 2005, and in *A Girl Almost Like You*, 2006, are based on the stage design for vanguard dancer and choreographer Michael Clark's 2005 piece *O*. This floor is given a graphic, diagrammatic quality, as are the bicolor bodysuits worn by the nearly Suprematist figures depicted in the paintings. In both paintings the space is almost as flat as in an early Frank Stella; the dancers are like trespassers making their way through the mazes of modernism.

In Otto-Knapp's studio in north London, one of the walls is cluttered with photocopies from books and magazines on classic, modern, and postmodern dance—focusing in particular



on Nijinsky (especially his revolutionary *L'après-midi d'un faune* [*The Afternoon of a Faun*], 1912, and *Le Sacre du Printemps* [*Rite of Spring*], 1913); Yvonne Rainer's Minimalist work of the 1960s; and Clark's postpunk choreographies. These images are interspersed with pictures of fashion models and rock stars, from the Ramones to P. J. Harvey, as well as drawings, sketches, and preliminary paintings. This assortment of ephemera provides an insight into the way Otto-Knapp develops both her subjects and her formal vocabulary, while also comprising a pictorial archive, or *Bilderatlas*, of various strata of culture and history. Such wall-based archives are, of course, a traditional tool of *inventio*—you can see Édouard Manet's, for example, in his portrait of Émile Zola. They attest to the fact that the practice of visual art has always been closely connected with the practice of collecting, with the amassing of examples and models. It seems likely that it was in conscious reference to this history that Otto-Knapp used a photograph of her studio wall for the invitation card for her solo show “50ft Queenie” (titled after the P. J. Harvey song) at Tate

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Britain last winter—thus encouraging comparisons of her paintings with the inspirational smorgasbord in her studio. Otto-Knapp is, of course, not the first artist to put a picture of her studio wall on an exhibition invitation card, but in her case the gesture feels particularly telling. The consideration of source images and the transformations they undergo in the aesthetic process is crucial to arriving at an understanding of the semantic and interpretive value of Otto-Knapp's dance references, and of the discourse that shapes these paintings (and is shaped by them).

The more she became fascinated with the history of dance, the more Otto-Knapp found herself looking for key moments in this history, moments when conventions and canons were overthrown: the astonishing performances of the Ballets Russes, under the direction of Serge Diaghilev, who took his troupe and



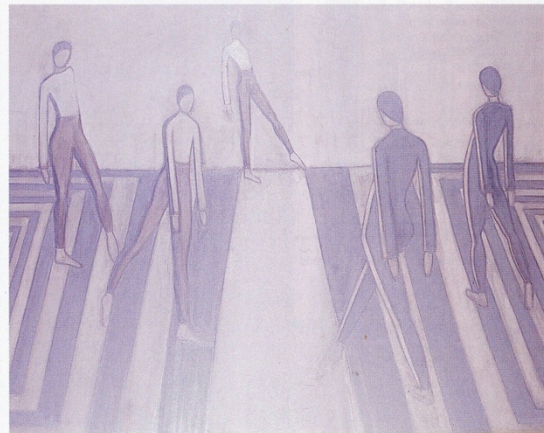
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its modernism to Paris in 1909; the disruptions and decenterings of the body in George Balanchine's choreography of the 1940s; the introduction of the everyday and of the dancer as a speaking subject by Rainer in the 1960s; and so on. Inevitably, though, in seeking out these instances when traditions break down or are radically altered, Otto-Knapp becomes part of a tradition herself—namely, the tradition of reciprocities and collaborations between the protagonists of dance and of the visual arts, which stretches from the minuets painted by Gian Domenico Tiepolo, to Nijinsky's cult following among artists like Auguste Rodin and Marc Chagall, to the set and costume designs of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Later, of course, there were the sets and costumes created by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns for Merce Cunningham, the Minimalist collaborations at the Judson Dance Theater, and the many cooperations of contemporary dancers and artists exemplified by, say, the joint projects of Clark and Cerith Wyn Evans. Edgar Degas is an obvious and even originary reference here, one that seems particularly apropos to a discussion of Otto-Knapp's practice due to his own well-documented interest in photography—especially in the movement photographs of his fellow early modernist Eadweard Muybridge. In Degas's efforts to capture and render visible “the exterior of the *bête humaine*” in order to “demonstrate the mechanism of its passions” (as Edmond de Goncourt put it after an 1874 visit to Degas's studio), the artist treated the phenomenology of dance and dancers with an eye informed by photographic principles of framing and composition; in so doing, he tended toward a peculiar monumentality, a centering on single dancers, while producing completely new pictorial spaces of and for movement.

One might say that Otto-Knapp is editing the image-history of dance—from anonymous photo-documentation and instructional schematics to the iconic representations by artists like Degas—by processing it through the set of technical and epistemological operations she has developed for her painterly practice. Importantly, she does so in a way that accommodates the complexities and contradictions inherent in the tradition outlined above. It's true that dance cannot avoid being representational, since bodies are its medium, and that painted representations of dance always have a performative dimension, since they call upon the mimetic faculties of the viewer. Yet any simple analogy between the two disciplines is limited and probably limiting, fostering a false reciprocity based on superficial illustration or on platitudinous notions of interdisciplinarity. Otto-Knapp avoids the pitfalls of such reductive analogizing through subtle displacements. Evoking dance scenes and figures but radically altering them and destabilizing them through her monochrome watercolor technique, she extends the ongoing, unresolved relationship of dance and the visual arts.

The central mechanism of this operation might be understood by considering a quotation from Rainer, who herself has consistently refused a merely illustrational approach in her explorations of the dance-visual art nexus. In her 1966 text “Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*,” Rainer writes: “The movements are not mimetic . . . but I like to think that in their manner of execution they have the factual quality of such actions” (meaning everyday actions like getting out of a chair, reaching for a high shelf, walking down stairs, etc.). In Otto-Knapp's case, the painting itself becomes a nonmimetic, parallel action that, when successful, has the “factual quality” of the dance imagery from which she departs, without merely illustrating or pantomiming it. Like the figures in *A Girl Almost Like You*, Otto-Knapp moves through a maze, searching for a means of repositioning the project of painting in the aftermath of modernism. In this sense, her practice becomes its own kind of factual action, carried out before an audience that is consistently encouraged to actively engage and to seek ways to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable perspectives. □

TOM HOLERT IS A BERLIN-BASED CRITIC.



Opposite page: View of the artist's studio, London, 2006. This page, from top: Silke Otto-Knapp, *Single Figure (Yvonne Rainer)*, 2006, watercolor and gouache on canvas, 29 1/2 x 19 1/4". Silke Otto-Knapp, *A Girl Almost Like You*, 2006, watercolor and gouache on canvas, 47 1/2 x 60". Silke Otto-Knapp, *The Bride's Chamber Scene*, 2005, watercolor and gouache on canvas, 39 3/4 x 39 3/4".

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