

# REGEN PROJECTS

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## tema celeste

### beyond landscape

barry schwabsky

The English traveler of the eighteenth or nineteenth century would not willingly have done without a box of watercolors to record the sights of the Grand Tour. And while we now tend to associate the medium with a typically British amateurism, watercolor also became an expressive medium of the highest ambition in the work of artists like Thomas Girtin and Richard Parkes Bonington, not to mention J.M.W. Turner. For such painters, the luminous and fluid medium enabled a freshness and immediacy of response to landscape that turned out to be perfectly suited to the Romantic era.

German by birth and education, the London-based artist Silke Otto-Knapp has nonetheless made herself, *mutatis mutandis*, into a modern-day equivalent to her English precursors of two centuries ago. Like theirs, her paintings are a product of her travels, as suggested by the titles like *Mandalay Bay (Night)*, *Echo Park (Night)*, *Grey Garden*, or *Desert* (all from 2003) of works appearing in her most recent exhibition at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne, and like them she has taken watercolor as her medium.

But in the twenty-first century we are no longer so persuaded by the idea of immediate perception. Instead, everything seems to be mediated: every image coming from other images rather than from nature, and even nature itself often being a product of human interventions, meant to reconstruct it according to already-existing images. So we try to draw closer and closer to the mechanisms of these mediations, indeed to make the process of mediation as much the focus of our attention as the mediated images themselves, in order to find what beauty we can there while, at the same time, schooling ourselves to avoid being deceived by the false realities that they represent. Thus, as one would imagine, Otto-Knapp's paintings of places like Los Angeles and Las Vegas—capitals of illusion—are never painted directly from the motif, but always from photographs, either her own or found ones. And while executed in watercolor, they are not on paper—with all that would imply of spontaneity and immediacy—but rather on canvas, which, as the artist said recently in a conversation with Anette Freudenberger, "enables

me to rework the picture in order to connect the drawn and painted elements, and to develop a complex space." The resulting paintings are highly constructed and richly layered—products of a delicious artifice that nonetheless contains the tantalizing memory of something more direct and impulsive, something that in these paintings we experience as lost but not forgotten.

Otto-Knapp's paintings, therefore, undoubtedly express a sense of nostalgia. But this nostalgia is of a disillusioned sort: there is no promise of a return to Paradise. Her paintings do have a sort of deep space, but not the sort that leads you to believe that you could enter it. What places does Otto-Knapp paint anyway? Not, one is tempted to say, real places. But neither are they imaginary places. The paintings are, as the artist explained to me, "attached to a specific location, but without telling you anything about it." In other words, the relation between the image and its referent is as fascinatingly uncertain in these paintings, as is the relation between the image and its elusive material substrate. For it's all done without the "flesh" of oil paint; uncannily, these pictures possess depth without thickness—unlike, of course, the stain paintings of '50s modernists like Morris Louis or Helen Frankenthaler who as Clement Greenberg once put it "adapt[ed] watercolor technique to oil," and for whom the suggestion of deep space was a thing to avoid. In fact, despite certain superficial resemblances, Otto-Knapp's technique is quite distant from theirs. Far from using thinned paint to permeate the canvas as they did, among the reasons Otto-Knapp uses canvas rather than paper for her watercolors is precisely that "the paint does not sink into the canvas like it does on paper," and this "makes the picture appear as if floating on the surface of the canvas." Hers is not the materialism or literalness of an art in which "the threadiness and wovenness" of the canvas itself "are in the color," as Greenberg said of Louis. Otto-Knapp's color, when it is bright and spare as in many of her Las Vegas paintings like *Corner Tropicana AvenuelParadiso Road*, *Desert Sands*, or the aptly titled *Mirage*, (all from 2001), seems to lift off the canvas to float like a phantasm in the space between it and the viewer; in the denser, more shadowed paintings she has been concentrating on recently, like *Palmhouse (tropical)* and *Temperate House (ornamentals)*, (both from 2003), the image seems to sink back behind the canvas, as if the latter were a sort of scrim. But in either case, the phenomenological location of the image and its literal place on the canvas are not made to coincide. Where Romantic art sought to catch the spirit of the depicted place, and Modernism to reflect the literal presence of the viewer in relation to the work, Otto-Knapp's contemporary reconstruction of landscape painting offers the seductive pleasure of never quite knowing where you stand.

Silke Otto-Knapp was born in 1970 in Osnabrück, Germany. She lives and works in London. Photo Credit: Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.