

REGEN PROJECTS

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MAP

SILKE OTTO-KNAPP

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Silke Otto-Knapp 'Figure (bending)', gouache on canvas

A quick flip through the catalogue for *Present time exercise*, Silke Otto-Knapp's first major solo exhibition in the UK, reveals just how resistant her elegant paintings are to reproduction. Her highly nuanced, ethereal surfaces painted with watercolour and gouache do not translate well to the printed page; half-toned lithographic reproductions, a few centimetres in size, cannot replicate the subtle shifts in tone and texture, nor the iridescent shimmer and gentle oscillations as you move to-and-fro in front of her multiple silver compositions.

Occupying Modern Art Oxford's Upper Gallery, this exquisitely hung, naturally lit exhibition comprises 13 paintings made over the last four years. Otto-Knapp's atypical approach to water-based paint has earned her widespread recognition in recent years. Painting onto modestly-sized canvases, often with a subdued palette, she builds up and breaks down the pictorial plane by layering gossamer-thin applications of watercolour, allowing them to drip, bleed and stain before painting over them with more diaphanous layers.

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Drawing on the history of modern dance and ballet, much of Otto-Knapp's recent work has found inspiration in the choreography of eminent practitioners such as Bronislava Nijinska, George Balanchine and Ninette de Valois. Taking photographic stills from some of their most celebrated productions, she crops, edits and often recomposes the images, which are then transferred freehand to canvas. Several paintings feature dancers posed in group tableaux, while others focus on single figures, which Otto-Knapp reduces to sharply delineated, statuesque outlines.

Among the earliest works in the show are 'Girls in grey (with window)' and 'Girls in grey (with moon)', both 2005, which draw on Nijinska's choreography for the ballet 'Les Biches', premiered by the Ballets Russes in 1924. In both paintings a grouping of identically dressed, languorous females stand or sit amid large, misty stage sets. Their unsettling, featureless faces seem to stare out from the nebulous scenes like unearthly spectres. Washes of delicate silver tones cover the canvas, mingling with tinctures of pale blue, amber and rose. There are obvious parallels here with Edgar Degas's ballet paintings, but rather than presenting candid backstage scenes, Otto-Knapp places viewers right in the thick of performance.

Hanging nearby is 'Figure (horizontal)', 2009, one of several graphic compositions rendered with a silver and grisaille palette, featuring lone dancers in various poses; this one, who also appears in other group tableaux, has fallen to the floor as if struck down by grief. Elsewhere, poses are more classical: in 'Figure (diagonal)', 2008, a ballerina is seen holding an impossible-looking arabesque, while in 'Figure (bending)', 2007, the performer's back is gracefully arched as she stretches over, touching her toes. These closely-cropped, contorted figures appear almost trapped inside their cell-like canvases; indeed, the twisting Matissean figure in 'Turning shadow (silver)', 2009, suggests a contortionist confined in a crate. For Otto-Knapp, choreographed dance is an abstract language, thus each of these images could perhaps be thought of as recondite letter forms or ideographic hieroglyphs.

Contrasting with these cleanly delineated figures is 'Garden (Sissinghurst)', 2007. Painted with a muted grey-green palette, this heavily worked, near abstract canvas is inspired by Vita Sackville-West's celebrated garden in the Weald of Kent. What looks like a stone archway and a weeping willow can just be made out amid the mottled maelstrom of spattered and dappled marks. But if it were not for the descriptive title, the painting's clammy subject matter would be virtually impossible to deduce. Neighbouring this, is the more recent 'White lilac', 2009. Derived from a 1920s photograph of the American socialite and artist Florine Stettheimer, a ghostly figure stands in another formal garden, surrounded by silvery green foliage. Harking back to Otto-Knapp's earlier, vegetation rich landscapes, these paintings seem so far removed from the current balletic works, one wonders why they have been included at all.

Ramping up the colour is 'Group (purple dress)', 2009, which punctuates the austere installation with a violent chromatic burst. Looking like an exhibit from a museum of costume, the painting features a tableau of faceless, mannequin-like figures dressed in colourful 1950s couture outfits. The painting is awash with mauve pigment, which has bled from one of the figures, forming an unsightly watery stain. Although the composition is itself well-balanced, its presence among the many quiescent works is somewhat distracting.

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One of the strongest paintings here, 'Present time exercise', 2007, is based on an image of Francis Picabia's landmark set design for the dadaist ballet Relache, 1924. Three hundred and seventy spotlights were placed behind the performers, simultaneously illuminating and blinding the audience. A cloud of silver discs representing Picabia's spotlights dominate Otto-Knapp's canvas, dwarfing the group of barely visible performers below, who are also painted with the same silvery grey paint. Unlike her other paintings, Otto-Knapp has allowed the metallic paint to congeal like melted solder on the work's surface, creating rough, textured areas around each disc. This uncharacteristic solidity contrasts further with the aqueous dancers, who, like so many of Otto-Knapp's paintings, appear as if they might evaporate at a moments notice.

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