

In June 2011, Silke Otto-Knapp took a trip up Mount Tamalpais to see the choreographer Anna Halprin's legendary dance deck. Otto-Knapp had painted two depictions of this deck prior to seeing it in person, relying on photographic documentation. The first of the *Stage* paintings (fig. 1), blanched with diffuse sunlight, incorporates the trace of a lone figure in a balletic bend in the middle ground, barely distinguishable from the sinewy outlines of the trees in the fore- and background. The second is saturated, dense, and devoid of human forms (fig. 2). It is not exactly moonlit, although a moon is strung up over the stage like a prop. Light emanates instead from the white surface of the canvas beneath, where pigment has been washed out or entirely removed. In front of Otto-Knapp's canvases, as at the physical site of Halprin's stage, spectators look out onto the deck across clusters of live oaks, redwoods, and madrones. The trees grow straight through the floorboards, creating the natural "walls" of this theatrical space and, in effect, floating the deck out in midair. In 1954, Arch Lauterer and Anna's husband, Lawrence Halprin, labored to design the deck for "a two-fold dance in which the potential of stage-space—its capacity to vibrate in a frame like a painter's pigments or a poet's rhetoric—could penetrate the dancer's invention and accompany its progressions" (Ben Belitt, "Poet in the Theater," *Impulse* (1959): 12). As a result, Anna Halprin concentrated her dance practice on the tensions among people, architecture, and nature, teaching her students (Simone Forti, Meredith Monk, and Yvonne Rainer among them) to harness the body's impulse to occupy space. Through another kind of inversion, Silke Otto-Knapp destabilizes imagery, removing information and mobilizing the viewer's relationship to pictorial space.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, watercolor was considered a sentimental medium, suitable only for preliminary sketches and feminized, fragile subjects. In many ways, this attitude persists today. By aligning herself with this sketchy, fugitive paint, and with subjects equally as mercurial, Otto-Knapp uses watercolor to describe light rapidly, to activate spatial environments with kinetic materials, and to challenge the immutability of painting. Transparency is a unique attribute of watercolor, and so her tonal values move from light to dark, the lightest surface created through the process of removal, revealing the whiteness of the canvas below. Viewers who are eager to define legitimacy in painting will find themselves at a crossroads before these images—do their almost monochromatic spaces purge content in an effort to regain abstract purity, or do their staged tableaux express desire for a spectacular wall ornament?

This dichotomy reveals more about the position of painting in modern life than it does about Otto-Knapp's work itself. Oscillating between the poles of materialism and nihilism, painting resonates as a source of artistic authority in Western culture, but it continually fails to achieve any kind of sublime authority over sensory experience in the face of mechanized reproduction. Otto-Knapp revels in this unresolved



1 Silke Otto-Knapp: *Stage*, 2009; 55 × 67 in.

2 Silke Otto-Knapp: *Stage (moonlit)*, 2011; 55 1/8 × 63 in. Photo: Marcus Leith.

condition, using watercolor to gradually unfix the image from her photographic source material and to disassemble its subject matter. In *Figure (half-bending)* (fig. 4), the source image (perhaps recognizable to some) is renegotiated on the canvas to maximize the frame, displacing the image from its empirical, photographically generated space. Here, the artist again intervenes with multiple layers of gouache that streak downwards, mimicking the direction of the body's limbs, which are then washed away, effacing the figure and conveying only the most essential elements of the movement. The figure inhabits and defines space in such a way as to reveal Otto-Knapp's intentionality: she alters the choreography to suit her painterly concerns and embeds in the paint her own gestural manipulations rather than the dancer's. *Figure (half-bending)* demonstrates an entirely different way to make movement visible in the phenomenological structure of the canvas, exploring the chance-operations of pigment alongside more strategized gestures.

So, covertly, Otto-Knapp creates another kind of performance. The artist's studio is a rehearsal space, filled with source photographs and sketches—approximations of the final staging that will be built up rhetorically only to be broken down piecemeal with water washes and left partially documented. Otto-Knapp, like many contemporary choreographers, resists photography and videography; the dominant records are the paintings themselves, aleatory compositions, certainly, but ingrained with a precise set of instructions. Likewise, the dancer motif that recurs in her imagery is primarily a device intended to assert this private labor as a decidedly choreographed production of pictorial space. The abstracted silhouette of a body in motion keeps the picture flat, formally considered, and flexible, ready for extemporal variations. These figurative elements reference not the dances that they source, but Otto-Knapp's own pictorial phrasing.

At the same time, her studio exercises are experiments in social design. The dancers appear alone, disappear altogether, or move in ensembles, duets, and trios. Consider the flat frontality of an image like *Two Figures (white)* (fig. 3)—no single shape is foregrounded, hierarchies are confounded by androgyny, and the dancers' backs are turned, preventing identification with anything but the most schematic treatment of space and image. In an exhibition layout, the formal fluctuations of these groupings and their positioning on the canvas read like a sequence of stage instructions. However, the group and individual dynamics are distinct. Constellations of performers propose a beautiful shared sense of gesture, and yet their social architecture remains foreboding. Singled out from this expansive stage, paintings of individual figures exist only within the space of the canvas, defining their own choreography. Their limbs reach out towards, or press up against, the edges of the frame, gaining dominance through confinement. Otto-Knapp thus articulates the situation of bodies in personal and collective space, distinguishing social from individual motion.

A light in the moon the only light is on Sunday. What was the sensible decision. The sensible decision was that notwithstanding many declarations and more music, not even withstanding the choice and a torch and a collection, notwithstanding the celebrating hat and a vacation and even more noise than cutting, notwithstanding Europe and Asia and being overbearing, not even notwithstanding an elephant and a strict occasion, not even withstanding more cultivation and some seasoning, not even with drowning and with the ocean being encircling, not even with more likeness and any cloud, not even with terrific sacrifice of pedestrianism and a special resolution, not even more likely to be pleasing. The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain. (Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 52.)



3 Silke Otto-Knapp: *Two Figures (white)*, 2006; 39 1/2 × 39 1/2 in.

Gertrude Stein had a way of defying syntax. She challenged the enclosures of a sentence by including the abstractions of the unconscious mind bridged with common rhetoric to create *affect*. Her structure isn't exact: "notwithstanding" and "the care with which" repeat without pattern, and the unpredictability of these rhythms permit her reader to enact perceptual shifts unconsciously. An asparagus is also a fountain. Otto-Knapp performs a similar kind of pictorial phrasing. Inverting the hackneyed meanings of culturally embedded tropes, she relies on the viewer to unconsciously recognize a medium's motivating action: watercolor paintings as dance, dance as a means of occupying pictorial space, and spatial occupation as interpersonal choreography. So, her title for this exhibition cites Stein's logic of affective phrasing, but *A light in the moon* also points towards Otto Knapp's own mischievous use of moons as props in paintings. They hang over images as moons would in a Romantic landscape painting, but they refuse to "illuminate" in the Romantic sense of the word, becoming instead an imagined source of light. This device mediates the object (the moon) with its active being-in-the-world (as a source of light in the evening); like Stein, Otto-Knapp points to both the absurdity and the unconscious potential of pictorial language.

Otto-Knapp's most recent painting, created for this exhibition, features a new view of Anna Halprin's dance deck. Here, a cluster of madrone trees grows out of the stage itself, dancers in their own right, with their limbs reaching up and out towards the upper corners of the canvas to frame the moon. Dismantling the theatrical elements of the stage, the identifying features of Halprin's deck, and even the natural realism of the landscape, Otto-Knapp proposes it solely as active space. On visiting Halprin's stage, Merce Cunningham noticed a particular way that it affected performance:

Ordinarily the dancer deals with a fixed space set by outside convention, the dimension of a box with a view from one side. But here on the dance deck there is a totally different situation. Aside from the obvious openness in the architectural arrangement there is another freedom for the dancer. There is no necessity to face front, to limit the focus to one side. (Merce Cunningham, quoted in Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 160)

Halprin called this openness an "active witnessing," making the audience complicit in the documentation and inferences of the dance by both physically moving around it and by remaining perceptually active. Standing in front of Otto-Knapp's paintings, viewers step forwards and backwards, shift from side to side, in an effort to mobilize pictorial space. While these paintings unfix photographic documentation of familiar choreography, they also unfix the sensory experience of the observer from expectations of a stable representation, collapsing the dichotomy between performance and life.

Dena Beard

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

Born in 1970 in Osnabrück, Germany, Silke Otto-Knapp has been based in London since 1995. She has had solo exhibitions at Sadler's Wells, London; Kunstverein Munich; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; Modern Art Oxford; Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna; and the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. She has recently participated in group exhibitions at the Tate Britain, London; Wiels, Brussels; The Artist's Institute, New York; Hessel Museum of Art, New York; Kunsthall, Oslo; Migros Museum, Zurich; and the Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven. She was also included in the *British Art Show 6* at the BALTIC Centre, Gateshead, and the Ninth International Istanbul Biennial, both in 2005. She holds a degree in cultural studies from the University of Hildesheim and a master of arts from Chelsea College of Art and Design, London.



4 Silke Otto-Knapp: *Figure (half-bending)*, 2008; 23⁵/₈ × 17³/₄ in.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

L@TE: MATRIX Live

Friday, September 30, 5:30 p.m.

MATRIX moves out of Gallery 1 with a L@TE program that celebrates the opening of Silke Otto-Knapp's exhibition. The evening commences with stage videos from the PFA collection, including *Dance Fractions from the West Coast* by Yvonne Rainer and Anna Halprin's *Parades and Changes*, followed by a Q & A with Otto-Knapp and Dena Beard. Linda K. Johnson performs three variations of Rainer's *Trio A*, emphasizing the stage dynamics and gestural discipline of this seminal dance. Choreographer Flora Wiegmann concludes the night with a site-specific dance that reinterprets still-frame photography.

Exhibition conceived by Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator Elizabeth Thomas. The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.

All works watercolor and gouache on canvas, courtesy of the artist; Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York; greengrassi, London; Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles; The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas; and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Silke Otto-Knapp
A light in the moon

BAM/PFA BAM/PFA GALLERIES 2626 BANCROFT WAY, BERKELEY CA
(510) 642-0808 | bampfa.berkeley.edu | facebook.com/bampfa