

Midway Contemporary Art

Bühnenbilder

Silke Otto-Knapp

November 17, 2017 – January 20, 2018

Silke Otto-Knapp brings together a new series of paintings and collages in her exhibition *Bühnenbilder*. The title references scenery, stage sets and set decoration, elements of which are central to the exhibition. While Otto-Knapp has often drawn on influences from predecessors such as Florine Stettheimer, Georgia O'Keefe, and Anna Halprin, this new work is connected more specifically to performance and theatre. The imagery and repeating motifs originate from source materials including Kurt Schwitters' photographs, sketches, and models for his *Normalbühne Merz* (a conceptual stage design that left theatrical machinery visible), as well as documentation of performances and projects by Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris. While Otto-Knapp's collages may seem like story boards or sketches for a performance, they never solidify into anything quite so specific. As in her earlier work, the paintings shown here lack any precise narrative, instead existing in a slightly out-of-focus space, the images almost receding into memory.

Otto-Knapp has previously displayed *Stage (after Kurt Schwitters)* and *Schattentheater (Chalk Circles)*, the two largest works in the exhibition, as five individual freestanding panels. At Midway, she has assembled them in a more conventional, wall-bound arrangement, reminiscent of an audience's first view of a *mise-en-scène* seen through the haze of a scrim. Their weight and density, however, as well as their placement low on the wall, connects them to the body, engaging the space like an architectural frieze. In the middle of the gallery, a series of provisional wooden panels constructed and weighted like theatre flats both display collages and serve as screens, physically breaking up the space and blocking views of the paintings. Visitors are positioned simultaneously as audience and as actors, never able to see the production in its entirety.

The work has an atmospheric quality, a result of Otto-Knapp's subtle monochromatic use of black watercolor on canvas. Building each piece up layer by layer, she applies, moves and washes off pigment. This repeated process of re-distribution leaves no visible accumulation of paint, only subtle tonal shifts and soft forms. Working with watercolor at this large scale highlights and accentuates the surface, giving the canvases an impressive weight. The result is a pictorial space that subtly optically expands the perceived space of the gallery, while asserting its own physical presence.

Silke Otto-Knapp (b. 1970, Germany) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. She received a degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Hildesheim and a MA in Fine Arts from the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London. In 2014 Otto-Knapp relocated to Los Angeles where she is an Associate Professor for Painting and Drawing at UCLA. Selected solo exhibitions include *Land Lies in Water*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; *Monday or Tuesday*, Camden Arts Centre, London; *Questions of Travel*, Kunsthalle Vienna; Fogo Island Arts, Canada; *Geography and Plays*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; and *Many many women*, Kunstverein München, Munich. Her work has been shown at Tate Britain, the Hammer Museum, Berkeley Art Museum, Migros Museum, and Van Abbemuseum.