

(for view-inter-view)

2015 Jan-May

INTERVIEW/CORRESPONDENCE with SILKE OTTO-KNAPP



1: Silke Otto-Knapp *Portrait (E.B.)*, 2012. watercolor on linen. 80 x 60 cm

JANE In thinking about your show *Questions of Travel*<sup>1</sup>, I took my book of Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems* off the shelf. The first collection is *North & South* and the first poem *The Map*<sup>2</sup>. As I read, my mind began to process it: she, looking at a map, a flattened space with shorthand markings and colors to delineate land or water, edges, where the two meet, shallowness, depth, height; the barrier between this reference tool (the map) and the thing it references (land, landscape); the confusion over what might be a shadow or a shallow; the map a thing itself; her poem a third thing. It seems about observation and accuracy. I think your paintings are also about observation, and contemplation. I am curious to get at what is being observed.

SILKE I am writing from Toronto where I am installing an exhibition with the title *Land lies in water*<sup>3</sup> after the first line in *The Map*. The exhibition begins with a small room – a kind of antechamber – showing four small portraits: one of the painter and botanist Marianne North, one of the artist and writer Emily Carr, and two of Elizabeth Bishop. In a larger gallery, the three are joined by a portrait of the painter Florine Stettheimer standing in her garden under a lilac tree.

I think of these paintings as portraits although they are not based on observation or tell us much about the subject at all. They start with an interest in the work of each artist, which to me seems inseparable from their life. Each woman's life-story involves extensive travel, and a search both artistic and geographical. I

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<sup>1</sup> *Questions of Travel*, Fogo Island Arts, Fogo, Canada; Kunsthalle, Vienna. 2014. Titled after: Bishop, Elizabeth. "Questions of Travel." *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. 93. print.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Map." *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. 3. print.

<sup>3</sup> *Land lies in water*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto Ontario. 2015.

*am interested in the work of these artists; painting their portraits seems to be a way of asserting their presence in my life. The paintings say very little about their subjects – they don't show her face or depict a narrative scene. Instead, the figure is present in the pictorial space – sitting or standing, looking out and referring back to her specific work or life.*

JANE This morning, I opened Bishop's book of poems again; I had ear-marked pages (why these in particular?) and read them in succession: *Seascape*, *The Fish*, *A Summer's Dream*, and then, to my surprise, *Questions of Travel*, and settled on the second stanza:

Think of the long trip home.  
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?  
Where should we be today?  
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play  
in this strangest of theaters?  
...  
Oh, must we dream our dreams  
and have them too?  
And have we room  
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

These sections of the poem bring your paintings to mind, particularly how she is thinking of landscape (as we experience it as a traveler) becoming self-reflective theater. You mentioned you began painting the Newfoundland landscapes while re-discovering and reading Elizabeth Bishop's poems about Nova Scotia. How did these affect your thinking about the landscape as subject-matter for painting?

*SILKE I was invited to spend some time working on an island off the coast of Newfoundland in Canada. The studio is a short walk away from the street directly on the ocean, with a dramatic view over the North Atlantic. The island has barely any trees. It's like a rock out in the open ocean with fast and intense changes in weather and temperature. Around 3000 people live on the island divided in a handful of small communities. I was living in a traditional house in one of these communities. I spent time in the studio, and much time walking, talking to people, getting to know them and their lives. The landscape – the ocean – determines people's lives on the island as it provides work and a way of life that is passed on over generations. This experience of landscape is what I took away with me after my first visit.*

*I later discovered something comparable in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. Her first volume of poetry, North & South, describes the landscape of Nova Scotia, Canada, where she spent much of her childhood, in an unsentimental and direct way that addresses how people's lives are determined by their natural environment. Painting Bishop's portrait, resting in her chair with her cat on her lap, was a way for me to think about her approach of observation and description instead of interpretation or expression.*

*I had been making small studies of the view out of my studio window while on the island. Alongside the portrait of Bishop, I began working on landscape-paintings loosely referring to places on the island. The landscapes share certain characteristics: they depict coastlines where the land meets the water, or more recently islands in the water; they make no reference to human life; and they are rendered in monochrome black or grey pigment. I did not set out with a set of clear restrictions, but in thinking about Bishop's sparse and precise use of language, I was looking for a way to make a landscape painting that could be analytical and atmospheric at the same time. I like how you describe it as self-reflective theater. The pictorial space frames my perspective on the landscape, but the illusion of space this creates is contrasted by the flat surface of watercolor pigment without visible gesture or mark-making. Once it appears in the pictorial space, the drama of the actual landscape produced by constantly changing weather and light conditions transforms into a backdrop motif that appears specific and generic at the same time.*



2: Silke Otto-Knapp. *The Map*. 2015. watercolor on canvas. 140 x 160 cm.

JANE I've been reflecting on one of the paintings from this series that I saw in-progress in your studio.<sup>4</sup> It was a mid-size painting propped on pale-blue foam, leaning against the left wall. While looking at the painting and speaking with you, I found myself glancing at a black-and-white photograph on your shelf of a mountain in water. There weren't many photographs around. The referents on the walls informing the paintings were drawings, but the photograph as a starting-point was present: the plans for a painting of Virginia Woolf in her chair, Emily Carr, or a Natalia Goncharova stage-set, de-saturated. The Fogo Island painting stood apart from these. It has no single photographic referent. When we began speaking of Elizabeth Bishop I started to think of her as a referent. What do you recognize in Bishop's act of observation? Is *Questions of Travel* or *The Map* as much a referent as a photograph might be?

*SILKE I think I would call it description, not observation. Describing something – a landscape, a painting suggests both analytical observation of facts and the possibility of a specific perspective at the same time. Bishop's poems achieve depth and affect by way of specific descriptions. She observes closely and doesn't generalize – the poems have a weighted sense of place. When I think about a motif for a painting, all of those elements come together – Bishop's formal approach, the place she describes, what I know about her life story. They act as a way for me to think about the Newfoundland landscape. Having said that, the reference material I work with is an important starting point for a painting. Once the motif begins to exist in the pictorial space, this space determines how the painting develops. Most important for my working process is the painting I made before. I have images around for a long time until it seems possible to use them in a painting. Similarly, I often return to images repeatedly over a period of time.*

JANE I identify with the way you speak of Bishop's approach, and life, providing a way for you to understand the Newfoundland landscape; I feel I only understand what is around me through others, with a conduit of some kind. I am interested in the connection between the phrase "land lies in water," the first line in *The Map*, and your paintings of islands/rocks surrounded by water. What is the relationship between the foreground and background in your paintings? How do you paint the land, and how the water?

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<sup>4</sup> The painting has since been titled *The Map*; see figure 2.

*SILKE I like using descriptive, matter of fact titles for the paintings, but exhibition titles tend to be more opaque, often referring to a source without directly relating to the paintings. This must be the reason why I hadn't thought of 'Land lies in water' in such literal terms but I like the way you apply it to the space in the paintings, not the actual motifs. I look for a space where figure and ground remain in an unstable relationship. It allows me to work with an illusionistic space and refer back to the flat picture-plane at the same time. The proscenium stage in a theater is a good comparison: a shallow box with limited depth that the viewer encounters from a controlled frontal perspective. This ensures that the audience 'believes' the illusion produced by the set although it's construction remains completely transparent. I use the space of the stage as a framing device for my paintings. This way a landscape motif like a coastline separating the sea from the sky can refer to a traditional landscape painting, an actual place, and a theatrical backdrop at the same time. In a way, imagining the landscape motif as a backdrop makes it possible for me to make the painting.*

JANE How do you create dark and how light?

*SILKE The unstable space I am looking for appears in the painting process, which involves many layers of applying paint and removing it again. Light is created by removing pigment, and darkness by letting it settle in other parts of the painting. It is almost like sedimentation and occurs in many layers, slowly building up the surface. An important part of this process is the relationship between positive and negative marks and spaces. The painting constructs itself in reverse – when I add a mark or paint in an area, I am thinking of what it will look like after it is removed. I can partly control and determine this process based on experience, but am surprised at all stages of the painting process. The painting reveals itself over time and is finished when the motif seems both present and removed.*

JANE The drawings in your studio contain direct marks; while you used to work directly from photographs, the drawings now act as intermediaries between the photographs and the paintings.

*SILKE Yes, in the last few years I have been making drawings using watercolor on a thinly coated paper to plan the paintings. The wall of photocopies in my studio has been replaced by lots of drawings, often repeating versions of the same motif, leading to other motifs and ideas. I make the drawings pretty quickly, moving on to the next one to correct something instead of going back to it later. The drawings allow me to decide on the format and size of a painting and plan more than one painting at the same time. Once I start the painting, I use the direct marks and immediacy of the drawing as my starting-point. Details get eliminated quickly and I am interested in copying a spontaneous mark. I come back to these direct marks over and over again in the process of making the painting. They get washed away and I paint them back in, reacting to what happens in the drying process. This way, the actual mark becomes almost automatic and the fact that it will be removed also removes its authority in some way. Marks exist in the painting in their negative form.*

JANE I'm interested in your removal of visible gesture and mark-making. What lead to the negative as opposed to the positive mark? Is this a refusal of the authority of the mark (as seen in AbEx or Neo-Expressionist painting)?

*SILKE I think this way of working is connected to the specific images I use as starting points for the paintings. The indirect somewhat detached mark-making process we have been talking about allows me to rethink the motif I begin with and locate it in a different space. I begin with something very specific and subject this to a continuous process of adding and removing marks and washes. The process enables me to make the painting.*

*Refusing the authority of the expressive mark played a very self-conscious part when I started studying art – especially in the context of German post-war painting, which felt very dominant at the time. I really wanted to work in a different way, and was interested in many different forms of art: dance, stage design,*

*garden design, or poetry; these informed my work as much as looking at paintings. I became interested in artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Marie Laurencin, Florine Stettheimer, Sophie Tauber-Arp and Sonia Delaunay. They became positive role models for me, opening up possibilities of how to work so I wasn't only reacting against conventions.*

JANE Prior to using black and gray, you used silver almost exclusively; can you speak of the transition?

*SILKE Self-imposed restrictions are an important part of my approach to painting. They occur in the process, I don't establish them as rules before I begin a body of work. I started using metallic paints and eventually only silver when I became interested in stage sets and dancers as reference points for the paintings. The reflective quality of the silver pigment introduces a flatness and kinetic sense of movement to the paintings that shifts the emphasis away from the body of the dancer to a figure making a shape. The choreographed shape would describe the pictorial space and turn it into a stage.<sup>5</sup>*

*After visiting Newfoundland for the first time, I returned with the idea of landscape in my mind. I started to look at early Samuel Palmer watercolors in sepia and black-and-white and eventually began painting landscapes. Thinking of these landscapes as backdrops to other events, I used the idea of moonlight to introduce atmosphere. While working with imagery of moonlit landscapes, seascapes, sailboats etc., I needed the restriction of black or grey pigment in order to make the painting.*

JANE What are the particular qualities of the black and gray you use?

*SILKE I found one specific gray and one black that I like and use it directly out of the tube. The black pigment I use is a blue-black close in appearance to the deep black of sumi ink. I think of it as an abstract black that can't be interpreted as a color that might appear in an actual landscape, but is able to produce a nocturnal atmosphere. The cold grey, in contrast, produces an ethereal light that seems to be neither night nor day, but a different space that always refers back to the surface of the pictorial space. A space that moves between the illusionistic space of the landscape and the flat surface of the pigment on canvas is crucial to the paintings. The black and grey pigment both locate this space and defuse the affect of the images I am working with.*

JANE When do you use color?

*SILKE I always think about using color, it's always a possibility. The paintings develop in groups over long periods of time. Each group addresses questions such as figure/ground; landscape/backdrop; pictorial space vs. illusionistic space in different ways. The shift from color to silver happened gradually, as did the shift from silver to gray-scale and black-&-white. As new motifs begin to interest me, I work on drawings and try to find their relationship to what I have already done. I would describe this as a circular movement between the motif and what came before it – the experience of the previous painting influences the next and makes it possible, while also pushing against it. I use color when the motif and process lead me there.*

JANE I used the terms "observe" and "observation" in relation to your work, and Bishop's, and you changed this to "describe" and "description"; how do you distinguish between the two? Does describing start with observing? And how do you distinguish between "observation" and "interpretation"?

*SILKE It seems to me that observation is the less active process – it implies looking at something without necessarily relating it to oneself. Describing seems to imply the act of writing. The described event or object is translated actively into another form. It's meaning is not interpreted or changed but held within the description that exists as a new form. Maybe we can go back to Elizabeth Bishop's The Map as an example: she looks at a printed map and describes it to the reader in detail. Her description seems based*

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<sup>5</sup> See figure 3.

*on her observation of the map, but as the poem takes shape, the abstract map seems to describe the actual landscape. In the first verse, she writes:*

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.  
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges  
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges  
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.  
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,  
drawing it unperturbed around itself?  
Along the fine tan sandy shelf  
is the land tugging at the sea from under?<sup>6</sup>

*Interpretation is a way of narrowing down how something can be seen or read. I would understand it in relationship to description as both are active processes. I think a description gives more agency to the 'reader' to develop an understanding and a simultaneous awareness of this process. Interpretation suggest more direction from the 'writer' and less agency for the 'reader.' The way Bishop describes the map in her poem, she seems to me to be both reader and writer.*

JANE I think you're right - description isn't interpretative. Although within description is an attempt on the part of the describer to open something up into a space of understanding - to break it down into constituent parts - even if this very act of break-down transforms it into something new.



3: Silke Otto-Knapp. *Figure (half-bending)*, 2008. 59.7 x 44.5 cm.

I recently ran into you at a Charles Atlas screening<sup>7</sup> at 356 Mission Road; I had a premonition I might see you at there, given Atlas' involvement with Merce Cunningham, which affected the way I watched his films. I kept, in my mind, breaking them up into stills as potential referents for paintings, although I know this is not something you do. While watching "Channels/Inserts,"<sup>8</sup> I was aware of the camera observing the dance. This becomes an easy way to distinguish between "observing" and "describing": the camera

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Map." *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. 3. Print.

<sup>7</sup> *Charles Atlas: Early Collaborations*, 356 Mission Road, Los Angeles, CA, 13 March 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Cunningham, Merce and Charles Atlas. *Channels/Inserts*. 1982. 32:11 min, color, sound, 16mm film on HD video.

“observes.” I also wondered about gender – which is something I think about with your paintings as well. In the film, I was aware of the relationship between male and female dancers. In your paintings, there are two things at play for me: first, your sources are almost consistently female writers/artists who have had an impact on you that the paintings acknowledge, and, second, you have a very particular manner of depicting the human form within your work. This spins back to the “observation/description” conversation: your figures – and the spatial relationships in your paintings – have little to do with life as it is observed before our eyes.

*SILKE I think the distinction you make between the portraits of women artists and the appearance of figures in the paintings is important. A portrait can be based on a space, a landscape, a painting or book of poems that ties back to an artist. For instance a painting of the white garden at Sissinghurst can be a portrait of Vita Sackville-West<sup>9</sup>. If the portrait shows a figure, I pay attention to her dress, her pose, her accessories and the space she occupies but leave out the face. Instead of focusing on the psychology of a facial expression I am looking for a different space – one that points towards her life and work. The figure is generalized but specifically present in the pictorial space.*

*The figures I use to depict choreographed movement operate in a different way. Most of the paintings with dancers are made in monochrome silver. The silver watercolor reflects the light and forces the viewer to move around in front of the painting in order to be able to distinguish figure and ground. The paintings often show one figure or a duet in a position that describes the pictorial space by leaning, bending, lying or standing in relationship to its edges. The figure itself is graphically simplified to appear emblematic – it’s both flat outline and indicates a dimensional body. The schematic figures emphasize the choreographed position they are in.<sup>10</sup>*

*I am interested in the expressive charge of a human figure, the fact that it is read in an emotional or narrative way. Classical ballet works with exactly this contradiction: an abstract language that requires skill and discipline to learn is used to interpret narrative scenarios and highly dramatic plots. In the 60s, choreographers like Yvonne Rainer questioned the spectacle and virtuosity associated with classical ballet and developed a different approach, introducing everyday movements and a conscious ‘no’ to dramatic plots, music or staging. Looking at Yvonne Rainer’s Trio A<sup>11</sup> performed live I am always struck by how formal and precise the choreography is – consciously using each part of the body, each side and position in relationship to the viewer without ever looking directly at her. Each movement has the same calm, even tempo and is executed consciously without any display of virtuosity but always with an awareness of the expressive nature of the human body that is never neutral or just emblematic. In my paintings the figure inhabits the pose, which in turn inhabits the space of the painting – flat and reflective. But the painting is activated by the potentiality of gender, affect and narrative.*

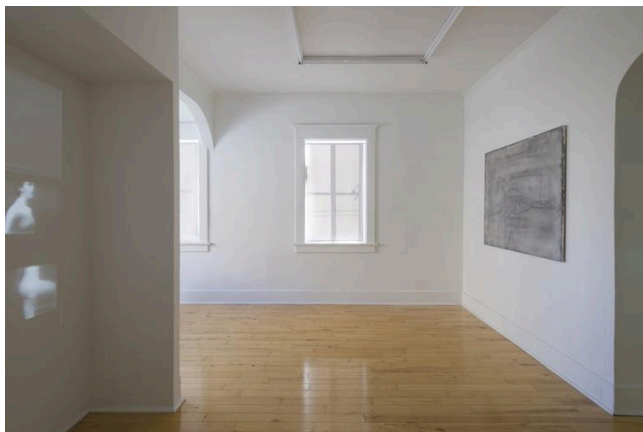
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<sup>9</sup> Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) was an English writer and garden-designer. Sissinghurst is the name of her country estate in south-west England where she spent years designing a garden independent of the constraints of the classic English garden designs. The house and gardens at Sissinghurst are a popular destination for visitors to this day.

<sup>10</sup> See figures 3, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1), Yvonne Rainer, 1966  
Performed by Yvonne Rainer in 1978





4: Installation View: 'A New Rhythm' Park View, Los Angeles.  
 L: Charles Atlas. *Fractions 1*. 1978. 32:59 min, color and b&w, sound.  
 R: Silke Otto-Knapp. *Seascape (third movement)*. 2013. 129 x 130 cm.



5: Silke Otto-Knapp. *Seascape (third movement)*, 2013. 129 x 130cm

JANE Following the screening, I found out about the four-person show both you and Atlas were in at *Park View*<sup>12</sup> and went to see it. I haven't often seen your paintings installed; it's been abstract for me to think about your show in Toronto, and all else that has occurred outside Los Angeles (your travel to Tokyo, London, Germany) over the course of our correspondence. Your paintings don't photograph easily; they are too subtle and affected by their surroundings, changes in light etc. The space was incredibly bright, even late in the afternoon; *Park View*, although it doubles as a living-space, is first a gallery: what remains of the feeling of habitation is the architecture, the moldings, the interior of the closet, all bathed in white, the compact kitchen. The Charles Atlas piece wasn't projecting (the projector was on loan), although I got to see your painting. It was on the wall diagonally opposite from where the projection would have been, next to the window. The light from the windows reflected off the painting. I was disappointed the Atlas wasn't up as I'd wished to see them together/ in relation to one another: especially how a projection would look/seem in relationship to a painting. I think I'm trying to make the point that I'm made continually aware that your paintings correspond with works in other mediums; a conversation (or response) with another work or another artist is very rarely lacking. Would you agree with this?

SILKE Yes, making paintings is a kind of conversation for me – although I am working alone in the studio I think of the paintings in relationship to one another – they are contingent on one another – and in relationship to the world mostly via the work of other artists. Other media especially time-based ones such as performance and film are important reference points to test what a painting can be. I use the exhibition situation as a place to articulate these relationships and contingencies. A painting might be finished but appear differently in a given context. This context takes into consideration the country, city, architecture of the gallery space and the people that work there. All of these factors influence the work I am making or selecting for an exhibition. The paintings are put under a certain amount of pressure.

<sup>12</sup> *A New Rhythm*, Park View, Los Angeles, CA, 1 March – 5 April 2015.