

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Silke Otto Knapp's *Golden Garden* *Series, 2005*

Emily Pethick

First published in *Thinking of the Outside: New Art and the
City of Bristol, 2005*



SITUATIONS

Silke Otto-Knapp
Golden Garden Series, 2005
21 May - 3 July 2005
Custom House, Bristol, UK

The jewel-like quality of Silke Otto-Knapp's watercolour paintings appeared in distinct contrast to the faded grandeur of Custom House. The artist's research began with the work of landscape gardener Humphry Repton (1752 - 1818), who worked extensively in Bristol and the surrounding region. Repton's concept of the garden was an idealised version of 'natural landscape' through which one might 'shut out the city'. Repton suggested. *"The perfection of landscape gardening consists in displaying the natural beauties and hiding the defects of every situation of giving the appearance of extent and freedom by carefully disguising of hiding the boundary"*

Otto-Knapp's work were not representative views of Bristol, but rather interpretations and responses to the landscape. Their ephemeral quality suggested that the scenes depicted may not be entirely as they seem.

"The perfection of landscape gardening consists in the four following requisites. First, it must display the natural beauties and hide the defects of every situation. Secondly, it should give the appearance of extent and freedom by carefully disguising or hiding the boundary. Thirdly, it must studiously conceal every interference of art. However expansive by which the natural scenery is improved; making the whole appear the production of nature only; and fourthly, all objects of mere convenience or comfort, if incapable of being made ornamental, or of becoming proper parts of the general scenery, must be removed or concealed."

Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 1803

At the turn of the 19th century, landscape gardener Humphry Repton worked extensively in the Bristol region designing gardens. His creations were undisturbed, idyllic places which sought to omit all distractions and to block out the signs of the city, forming constructed artificial spaces where natural beauty was enhanced by art. The designers of the 18th century garden had found their inspiration in literature, painting and theatre design, using architecture and perspective as frameworks for dramatic constructed vistas in which visitors were required to become both actors and spectators within the scenery.

By contrast, Repton strived to make his gardens appear natural. He saw himself as an 'improver of landscape' and invented the term 'landscape gardening' to express his theory that art requires, "the united powers of the landscape painter and the practical gardener". Repton notoriously kept 'red books' that contained notes, drawings, maps and plans of his work, and created garden sketches using a technique of plates that would slide over one another, with before-and-after impressions of proposed designs for his clients, revealing the subtle manipulations of the natural landscape. Where 18th century garden designers employed the language of painting to construct three-dimensional spaces, in her series of *Golden Gardens*, Silke Otto-Knapp has appropriated landscaped gardens back into painting working in layers of thin washes of gold and silver gouache.

SITUATIONS

Beginning her research with Repton's gardening techniques, the paintings are based on multiple image sources that include photographs and found topographical imagery of landscaped gardens and botanical gardens, such as Huntingdon Gardens in Los Angeles, where plants from entirely different origins grow side-by-side as highly orchestrated impressions of the natural. The hybrid nature of these gardens is reflected quite literally in the process of the making of the paintings, some of which are based on collaged images of different gardens that seamlessly merge and transplant mismatched plant life together, with flora and fauna from all climes finding common ground, evading geographical distinctions. This subtle sense of dislocation in *Golden Gardens* not only comes from the sources of imagery, but from the fact that most of the works were painted in Istanbul during the artist's residency. Thus the notion of site in these works is fully displaced, a faint sense of the orient creeps into their decorative, shimmering surfaces.

Exhibited across one wall of the disused building of a former 18th century customs and excise office, the faded grandeur and former function of the site serve as an apt reminder of the imported origins of the paintings. At first glance *Golden Garden (Apple Tree)* appears as an entirely naturalised established garden, but on closer inspection one finds the incongruous coexistence of a silvery bare apple tree and a wealth of luscious golden cactuses and palm trees. Through the layers of translucent silver and gold gouache, a clash of seasons and plant life form an image of species that would not naturally coexist in one ecosystem, although probably entirely feasible in a controlled climate, or in the constructed environment of a botanical garden. Drained of colour, the softness of the glistening metallic paint creates an ambient twilight. Adjacent, *Golden Garden (Conifers)* shows a more conventional picturesque landscape, taken from the viewpoint of an arabesque balcony that directs our vision over a hazy view of a sculpted pond surrounded by delicate ornamental trees. Here the less manipulated image appears equally artificial, our gaze held at a distance from nature as a tool for contemplation. Shifting further into the realm of artifice, *Golden Garden (Vista)*, is a more graphic representation of a French baroque formal garden with heavy gold curling

baroque formal garden with heavy gold curling balustrades, sharp perspective and clipped hedges that create an illusionary space where nature is repressed to mere surface decoration.

The constructed vistas of the more European gardens are contrasted with wilder, more untamed tropical landscapes. *Golden Garden (Perennials)* depicts a tangle of vegetation that covers the surface of the painting without any defined notion of space, bringing to mind Repton's use of nature to cover borders. Looser in style, the plant-life blend and merge in dappled sunlight with diffused watery paint dripping down the canvas, yet still retains an underlying sense of composition and cultivated order. In *Golden Garden (Lake)* a jungle of luscious palm trees and bamboo skirts the edges of a large lake, which resembles a slightly uncomfortable meeting of a landscaped garden and a tropical wilderness. *Golden Garden (Tropical)* is a similarly dense tropical forest but has a pathway carved into the undergrowth that brings it back into the genre of the picturesque.

Otto-Knapp has consistently used constructed landscapes and artificial representations of nature as a basis for her paintings, most notably Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and a series of works based on the tropical interiors of the palm houses at London's Kew Gardens. In her paintings of Los Angeles, the landscape is demarcated by hazes of orange streetlights and artificial vegetation, with impenetrable jungle-like shrubbery and avenues of palm trees flourishing in an entirely cultivated arcadia fed on borrowed water and sprinkler systems. Both idealised and verging on the apocalyptic, the watery, misty effects used in the paintings could be interpreted as the effects of a heat haze, smog or a rare bout of stormy weather, tapping into age-old notions of sunshine and noir. The embedded plant-life in these paintings seem to creep over the city, enveloping it to the point of ruination, the sprawling centreless city becoming buried in the undergrowth. While vegetation permeates and hides the structure of the city, the diffused transparency of the highly diluted watercolour she uses often deconstructs the images to the point of obliteration as the whiteness of the canvas glows through the translucent paint with its drips and mottled, sprayed effects. In contrast to the overgrown Los Angeles vistas, the sense of

SITUATIONS

wildness becomes contained in the *Golden Gardens* and the paintings of the palm houses in Kew Gardens, with altogether more genteel, refined spaces, where the gardens become almost like stage sets. In these paintings, Otto-Knapp creates a dissolution of the image less in the application of the paint, but rather through their reflective surfaces that change depending on the angle from which they are viewed and the direction of light. At points they throw back so much sunlight that the image becomes entirely invisible. The lavish surfaces and staged quality of the paintings also relate to a series of paintings of Las Vegas Showgirls, where the ornamental feathers and festoons of fans and exotic outfits replace the palm fronds and ferns of the earlier landscapes to form an altogether different kind of constructed landscape. In choreographed formations, the gaudy-looking girls float on the surfaces of the paintings and dissolve into pools of spotlights and glitter.

While often abstracted to the point of non-recognition, all of the Los Angeles cityscapes are named after their precise street names and not only are they inextricably tied to their specific locations, but they play on the familiarised, in most cases mediated, identifications with these sites and their resonance in our collective imaginary. In contrast, the Golden Gardens evade any specific notion of place, joining together multiple locations and types of landscapes and vegetation, to create archetypal landscapes that retain a similar sense of familiarity, reflecting a way of looking at landscape that has been channeled through the conventions of painting, photography, theatre and landscape gardening into the depths of our subconscious.

In both series of paintings there is a sense of distance that not only comes from a disjointed notion of site, but from the use of photographic imagery and its translation into paint, where the image retains a loose association to its origin, losing its sense of place and becoming dislocated from the real. As Humphry Repton's employment of nature as a tool to block out the present, hide defects and to disguise boundaries, created an abstracted notion of 'place' by covering over any signs of the outside, Otto-Knapp's palm trees, ferns, showgirls and the hazy glimmer of her *Golden Gardens* play on the exoticisation of the real, creating a destabilised, but wonderfully idealised notion of site.

Biography

Emily Pethick is director of Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, in Utrecht, The Netherlands. From 2003-2004 she was curator at Cubitt, London. She has contributed to numerous catalogues and magazines, including *Frieze*, *dot dot dot*, *GAS*, *texte zur kunst*, *Artforum* and *Untitled*, edited books, such as *Casco Issues X: The Great Method*, with Peio Aguirre, and *Casco Issues XI* with Marina Vishmidt and Tanja Widmann.

© Emily Pethick and Situations. Published by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 2011.

The person using Situations Papers online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title, Situations Papers Online, and the URL <http://www.situations.org.uk>. The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.