

ARTFORUM

Plested, Lee. "Lee Plested on Elizabeth McIntosh, Monique Mouton, Silke Otto-Knapp." *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 1 Sept. 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201707/elizabeth-mcintosh-monique-mouton-silke-otto-knapp-70699>.

Elizabeth McIntosh, Monique Mouton, Silke Otto-Knapp

As elsewhere, painting's status is still fractious in Vancouver's art scene, enough so that the press release for this recent group show at Catriona Jeffries—which featured an international, all-female lineup comprising Elizabeth McIntosh, Monique Mouton, and Silke Otto-Knapp—felt the need to reassure people that "painting is not a problem." Even if the medium has died a thousand deaths and undergone a thousand revivals, it seems destined to continually negotiate its associations with social complicity, bourgeois complacency, market contingency, etc.—and to confront new possibilities in structuring meaning. At Catriona Jeffries, the works collectively pushed expression, gesture, and figuration into explorations of illusionistic space—not only in the pictorial field but also in the realms of affect, memory, and history.

The first work the visitor encountered upon entering the space was Otto-Knapp's *Monotones* (Moonlit scene after Samuel Palmer), 2016, an expansive watercolor landscape of misty forms arrayed across a dark ground. In this homage to Palmer, who along with his nineteenth-century peers in the Ancients group was inspired by the poetry of William Blake, Otto-Knapp conveys the spirit of Romantic contemplation through monochromatic reduction, delicately layering soft billows of white over a gunmetal-stained canvas. Installed on an adjacent wall, Otto-Knapp's *Schatten Theatre*, 2017, finds the artist inverting the layering technique employed in *Monotones*. An ethereal layer of white pigment covers a dark ground, so that the silhouettes of anti-Vietnam War demonstrators are surrounded by a veiled glow. The negative figures dance their protest, arms akimbo, as they surface from a shadowed past into a numinous present—bringing historical politics into a contemporary field of possibility.

This play between figure and ground, mark and support, figured elsewhere in the show: A pair of oil paintings by McIntosh, *Green In* and *Out Hands Black*, both 2017, depicted arms entangled with rope set against monochrome grounds. Though each arm is nearly identical to the last, their varying configurations articulate contrasting moods of optimism and gloom. In *Green In*, the arms, each of which wears a pale-blue sleeve snug around its wrist, are aligned in two rows, their hands coming together at the center of the composition to guide a black rope across a lush, absinthe-green field. *Out Hands Black* is populated by eight prop-like arms similarly aligned in two rows—but this time, save for one outlier, they reach toward the top and bottom edges of the canvas. Segments of white rope lie on the thick, black background,



Elizabeth McIntosh, *Out Hands Black*, 2017, flashe and oil on canvas, 86 x 71 in. (217 x 181 cm)

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winding through and around the hands. The otherwise ominous atmosphere is disrupted by swaths of dull mustard that form the cartoonish arms and by the fleshy hands affixed to these props by the weight of the paint itself. As Otto-Knapp does with watercolor canvases, McIntosh experiments with formal and mnemonic layering, weaving rope in and around her strangely isolated arms to create spatial and temporal depth.

Mouton's contributions to the show—scraps of plywood cut into oblong shapes and enhanced with gently brushed undulations of oil and pastel—hung in conventional fashion on the walls but were also scattered across the gallery floor, rendering the architectural space itself a ground. Standing out in this gallery field were *Untitled, 2013*, a long, midnight-black rectangular panel that had been screwed to the wall, and *Untitled, 2012*, an ellipsoid shape painted purple on one side and left bare on the other. The latter work was installed in the center of the gallery, propped against a column, imposing a kind of brash vitality on the physical space. For *Untitled, 2017*, an oval-shaped painting treated with a white base, Mouton applied a thin sheen of black as a topcoat. The composition features, in the bottom-left foreground, an elongated L shape rendered in luminescent white pigment. This shape is echoed by a smaller L painted in black, which is positioned at the top-right section of the painting. The left edge of the oval is contoured by a cobalt line, sending a jolt of color through the work's largely black-and-white palette. Like Mouton's other plywood inventions, the understated piece demonstrates painting's compositional potential and echoes the medium's spill into sculpture, architecture, and world.