Karen Knorr : Transmigrations
India Song et Villa Savoye

Exhibition from October 13th to November 19th 2011
Opening Saturday 15th of October 2011 – 3.00 to 8.00 PM

The gallery is happy to present you the last series of Karen Knorr, India Song, which was shot over these last two years in India and for which the artist has been awarded this spring the prestigious Prize of Photography Pilar Citoler. This ensemble ensues from the long range work she has devoted to French residences from 2003 to 2008 which has resulted in the extraordinary corpus Fables produced in collaboration with the Musée Carnavalet, the University of the Creative Arts of Farnham (Surrey) where Karen Knorr teaches photography, and thanks to the substantial commission of the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Many of us might have recently admired those works in France, in Paris as well as in the provinces, in Europe and in India.

If professionals give so much attention and support to Karen Knorr’s work, it is certainly because of its absolute singularity, not to say the uniqueness in its field. Leading photographer of her generation, she was one of the very first to standardize the so called “set-up” photography in the early 80’s. After a societal work – let us here recall the impact of her famous black and white series, Belgravia (1979-1980) or Gentlemen (1981-1983) about the “so British Society” – her reflection then distanced itself from our contemporaries while taking a modernist stance, and refocused on architectural scenographies combining analytical, historical and literary approaches as allies of a poetic and fictional freedom with a surprising symbolism.

Indeed, since the series Connoisseurs (1986-1988) and Academies (1994-2001), then with Fables (2003-2008) and India Song (2009-2011), the fictional spaces of Karen Knorr shape themselves inside beautiful residences which are now museums, holy places devoted to high culture and representing History, even beyond their architectural value or the size of their collections. Thus, those spaces are as many potential prisms revealing both private and public stories, reflections of our society the artist has brought to light. The photographer chooses them for their luxurious settings – their fictional potential is a key element from which she designs a contemporary perspective, as well as for the formalism of the museum scenography which she endeavours to deconstruct in a mise en abîme between reality and fiction.

But if these places are idealized by the splendid technique of Karen Knorr, it is by inserting animal models in those interiors that she manages to reveal the fiction and to bring a symbolic strength to her photography. When others settle for the place’s energy, for her it is of course the substrate of History but also the base of the story or of the philosophy essay. Most of the time, animals invading those pictures embody – by virtue of their characteristics – this or that human aspect. Those animals thus overturn the sociopolitical space in favour of a game – a kind of societal analogy replaying the relations between culture and nature by re-organizing the data of the real world in favour of a fantasy, of an intellectual “Madness”.

And what is richer in decorum and stories than the interior of Indian palaces and sanctuaries which the artist – an adopted British – had the honour to get in? What could be more favourable for the world of Karen Knorr than this awaken dream sphere where every architectural detail unfolds grace and myth? With India Song the artist has succeeded in praising the sumptuous visual legacy of a culture abounding in stories and legends she replays by bringing to light the contemporary Indian
society and its caste hierarchy. In this series, animal symbolism is all the more important that it
directly refers to religion which is a basis of this society and covertly questions the inflexibility of its
social code and in particular what concerns woman condition. Zebus, elephants, tigers, peacocks...
mutate and become characterizations of this turbulent divine and social story by removing frontiers
between reality and illusion. Karen Knorr reinvents here a mythology which we could describe as
postmodern – at least as far as today's India is concerned. The artist managed to get a real insight
into the Indian aesthetic – she did not exaggerate any of its aspects but took up the formal and
symbolic code to bring it back to life through a very modern approach. She then has been acclaimed
during her Indian tour last year.

Despite the series' grandness which is sufficient unto itself, we did not wish to restrict the view of
Karen Knorr's work to those spaces which tend to strengthen the baroque aesthetic of her pictures
through the magnificent excesses of their content. It seemed important to us to underline the artist's
expressive freedom compared with the stories she creates. Karen Knorr offers the world thought and
reflection, and – just like any great artist, her mind can bloom in different philosophical spaces.

It is thus in a kind of contrapposto – facing the extraordinary series of India Song, that we propose to
the visitor to wander in the elegant architecture of the Villa Savoye of Le Corbusier, final chapter of
the series Fables which is still little known by the general public apart from the in-situ presentation of
this summer. The spectator will – beyond the perspective given to Karen Knorr's work, most
certainly enjoy following with their eyes the mischievous flights of birds with which Karen Knorr
heckles in a totally magician way this hotspot for modernism – from now on fixed in its museum
function, and brings it back to life by instilling an atmosphere suffused with freedom and fantasy.

Christine Ollier
The Joy Of Ahimsa, Tarkat Vilas, Jodhpur, Série India Song, 2011
The Queen’s Room, Zanana, Udaipur City Palace, Série India Song, 2010
A Place like Amravati, Udaipur City Palace, Série India Song, 2011
Light of the World, Zanana Room, Nawalgarh, Série India Song, 2010
The Ramp 2, Série Fables, Villa Savoye, 2006-2007
© F.L.C./ Adagp, Paris 2008
The Rooftop, Série Fables, Villa Savoye, 2006-2007
© F.L.C./ Adagp, Paris 2008
THE PERCHED HOUSE: an installation of photographs at the Villa Savoye by Karen Knorr
Text by Marion Duquerroy

[...] With the Connoisseurs series (1986-88), the London-based American artist had already translated her taste for both culture and art history by inserting her discourse in old residences and ancient castles. Yet the images created in the Villa Savoye seem to break away from the former by the very choice of the building itself. Commissioned by the Savoye couple to Charles-Édouard Jeanneret – better known as Le Corbusier – the villa exemplifies the precepts of modern architecture, based, according to the creator, on five founding elements: the pilotis, the roof garden, the free plan, the horizontal strip windows and the free facade. The work of Karen Knorr has often been compared in its aesthetics to the roccoco of the monuments she chooses to stage it in. Used to combining the luscious, glistening plumage and fur of animals with opulent interiors rich with tapestry, mouldings, furniture, panelling and embellished facades, the artist takes a radical departure by setting her menagerie in a private space that extols the virtues of bareness, practicality and pure lines. However, Karen Knorr’s animals, as usual, invest the spaces freely. Once the artist has granted them this freedom it becomes difficult for us not to expect their presence at every new corner of this architectural stroll. The birds are there – real – and they haunt the corridors as much as they haunt our minds. We find ourselves looking out for a colourful flight feather that could comfort us in the existence of those winged creatures. Once inserted in the spaces we will have to cohabit with them, which is what the artist, with the help of her architectural accomplice, mischievously forces us to do in this series.

“Le Corbusier with his double name of bird, half buzzard half crow, stubborn, dark, sharp, severe, with angles and wide wing movements, Le Corbusier was perched on the studio’s mezzanine, and he was listening to us, head down, shaking himself from time to time.”

Volatile Signatures

Himself a hybrid of bird names, the architect commands a view, with his sharp gaze, of a grey parrot, a red-billed blue magpie or a robin. Whereas Karen Knorr had accustomed us to a mix of species, sometimes summoning in a single room a fox, a turtle and a heron, she only calls upon birds for her Fables in the Villa Savoye. The photographer’s large feathers confront Le Corbusier’s and we are reminded how the latter used to sign his name with the symbol of a crow. In a wedding anniversary letter to his wife, “his dear Von”, “his love”¹, Le Corbusier draws a majestic blue crow circled with a full sun above “his tenderness resting on 31 years of perfect happiness”². Karen Knorr plays with the very image of this bird, frightening at first, stern and rather unpleasant. While Le Corbusier can appear a strong character, unchallenged in his theories, the erudite photographer goes beyond the initial appearance. By opening the door of the villa to birds, Karen Knorr sets in motion an architecture so strong in its precepts and, in doing so, she affectionately reveals another facet of the architect, other possible interpretations.

One does need a good deal of defiance, and esteem, to challenge the vision of the man who thought that curved lines were for donkeys when only straight lines were worthy of human beings³; the one who only sought one thing through all his writings and theories, to distance oneself from animality to reach, through the prism of intellectual ideas, humanity. [...]. In The Stairs (2006-7), echoing the two-colour process and intense verticality of the space, she places a demoiselle crane. Perched on its long

¹ Darrieussecq (Marie), Ghostcape, s.l., Éditions MONUM/ENSBA, 2004, p.17.
² Lettre de Le Corbusier à sa femme Yvonne, archives FLC, R1-12-105-001.
³ ibid
legs, it brings out the aerial quality of the staircase, just as the delicate black underlining running from its head to the last feathers of its tail seems to be the animal inspiration for the metallic rail. The Forecourt (2006-7) shows a similar approach. The space below the house, cleared at ground level to facilitate the circulation of cars, is invested by a white stork. Perched on stilts, the animal stands for the primitive source of the pilotis, which give the villa its aspect of a floating cube. And with these animals, with the roundness of their species, with all their delicate lines, we are reminded that although Le Corbusier worshipped straight lines, he also introduced the serpentine line in his architectural journey. This is again the breach in which the photographer steps, the breach which underlines Le Corbusier’s forgotten volatile signature. “The curved street is the result of pleasure, of nonchalance, of laxity, of relaxation, of animality”, he claims. The Villa Savoye would then be the example of a gentle hybridisation of intellectual rigour and bestial pleasure as highlighted by the ingenious, as much as aesthetic, work of Karen Knorr.

Let there be nature!

But the animals also mess about, interact and make fun of us. They are not simply there to sublime the architecture, they occupy the space fully and make the villa their new territory. In addition to the heron and stork, lively and colourful small birds appear. Two hummingbirds loop the loop above the solarium, head down and wings spread out; a woodpecker hangs on to the pilotis as if it were a tree trunk while another confronts a stork. We are left to imagine the racket made by this menagerie in this sacred place of modern architecture, now listed as historical monument. Chirpings, songs and singing exercises resonate through the building. Tail spreads, colourful costumes and defensive stances add dynamism to the architectural lines. The ransacking, the droppings, the lost feathers, the sound of wings flapping, the smell: it is all waiting to unfold after the photograph is taken. The photographer essentially introduces life in a place usually devoid of it. Freedom follows from life. Here it is a very animal freedom, not constrained to any intellectual stranglehold, and of which the bird is the perfect metaphor.

Karen Knorr once again questions the relationship between nature and culture, and obsessively, through the photographic series, offers another reality, designs a new theatre where hybridity expands fully to almost become strangeness. Strangeness of the subjects in relation to the place, of the staging of stuffed animals in the photograph or of adding live animals to the image in post-production. It is also the strangeness of a reconstituted nature because all these birds are not supposed to cohabit in the same ecosystem. In doing so, the photographer clearly positions herself within postmodern interrogations on the idea of nature, joining a plethora of artists working to offer a new definition for it. To do this she looks back onto the history of arts to compose her cabinet of curiosities. For what is a cabinet of curiosities? If its goal is to impress through showing unknown or marvellous species, another of its aims is also to arrange nature, to classify it, to put it in order and maybe then to offer an interpretation. But once again, Karen Knorr resorts to hybridity and makes the exercise more difficult. In France, Jean-Hubert Martin was one of the main initiators of the return to the cabinet of curiosities as he aimed to associate contemporary artworks with historical places. This return was also motivated by a certain weariness felt towards the 20th century museums with their white walls: the White Cube. The villa is admittedly not so neutral but it is nevertheless a box in the air, a box with spotless and smooth white where it is difficult to fit art pieces. The art is the architecture itself, which combines the interiors with the landscape by way of strolling. Then Karen Knorr calls upon science: photography and taxidermy. In doing so she puts a new life into the animals which once placed in these luxurious surroundings enact modern fables. [...]
ABOUT KAREN KNORR

An American born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, Karen Knorr was raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico in the 1960s and educated in Paris and London. At the University of Westminster, Knorr studied alongside Olivier Richon, Mitra Tabrizian and Mark Lewis, addressing the critical debates concerning the "politics of representation" that emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Knorr has taught and lectured internationally at institutions that include The University of Westminster, Goldsmiths College, Harvard University and The Art Institute of Chicago.

Karen Knorr’s work has developed a critical and playful dialogue with photography, using different visual and textual strategies to explore her subject matter, focusing upon themes that range from the family and lifestyle to the animal and its representation in the museum context. Knorr uses photography to explore western cultural traditions, from the gentlemen’s clubs of Saint James to elegant Palladian country houses, presenting and commenting upon British society. Her work constantly maintains a critical dialogue with conceptual art, visual culture, feminism and animal studies.

Between 1979 and 1981 Knorr produced Belgravia, a groundbreaking series of black and white photographs accompanied by ironic and humorous texts. Highlighting the aspirations and lifestyle of the period, Knorr interrogates the British class system under the neo liberalist Thatcher era. Her subsequent series Gentlemen (1981-1983) continued to investigate contemporary conservative values, photographing the gentlemen’s members clubs in Saint James, central London, and juxtaposing the image with text constructed out of parliamentary speeches and news reports. Knorr uses the space between the image and the text to consider the patriarchal values of the English upper middle classes, investigating the values that ally these classes to conservative aristocratic values where primogeniture is still prevalent.

In 1986 the series Connoisseurs used colour to explore the connoisseurship that surrounds discourses of heritage and art in England. Here Knorr introduced staged events and foreign elements into the architectural interiors of Chiswick House, Osterley Park House and the Dulwich Picture Gallery. The use of text and captioning are also deployed as a device to slow down the viewer’s consumption of the image and to comment on the received ideas of fine art in museum culture; a strategy that still appears in her work today. Since 1994, Karen has been photographing fine art academies throughout Europe. Grouped under the title Academies, the work reflects upon the relationship between the production of western art in the academy and the transmission and consumption of such ideas through the museum. The series explores the foundation myths of European fine art culture and the link to national identity and patrimony.

In her recent series Fables (2004-2008), Knorr’s photographs mix analogue and digital photography to playfully reconfigure classical tales (Ovid, Aesop La Fontaine) alongside popular culture (Disney and Attenborough) in museums and heritage sites which include Carnavalet Museum, the Museum of Hunt and Nature in Paris, Chambord Castle and the Conde Museum in Chantilly Castle. The visuality of these photographs is rich with reference to the baroque. More recently Knorr has been exploring modernism, reintroducing life into the modernist aesthetic of Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in Poissy, a building which has become a shrine to high modernism. Knorr is currently developing a new project in India considering the country’s cultural heritage and animal world through a focus on Mughal and palace architecture, temples, and mosques.
Karen Knorr exhibits her work internationally and her work features in many public and private collections worldwide. Her retrospective exhibition Fables was recently shown in Brussels and is currently travelling across France. Karen Knorr will be showing works from Gentlemen and Connoisseurs in Elles@centrepompidou, Centre Pompidou Museum until May 2010; the series Belgravia featured in the exhibition “1970s Photography and the Everyday,” curated by Paul Wombell at Photo Espana, Madrid held between June and July 2009. A retrospective of her work is currently travelling throughout Europe now showing at he Museum of Fine Arts, Toulon, France. India Song new work photographed in India and Fables was exhibited at Tasveer in Bangalore from Oct 8- Nov 30 2010. A catalogue titled Transmigrations was published by Tasveer to mark Knorr’s first solo exhibition in India in October 2010.

Karen Knorr won the Pilar Citoler International Photography Prize on December 15 2010. Karen Knorr will be having a survey show and 280 page catalogue at Cordoba University next February when she will also be one of the judges of the Pilar Citober International Photography Prize.

Karen Knorr continues develop her series India Song and will be opening a solo at the new Hermes Gallery in Mumbai this September 6, 2011. This will be followed by solos At Filles Du Calvaire Gallery, Paris and James Danziger, New York. “Voyage a Nantes” has awarded Knorr a commission to photograph the city of Nantes in 2011.

A detailed biography is available on our website:
www.fillesducalvaire.com
Rubrique : Artiste > Karen Knorr > Biographie

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Mardi-Samedi / 11h-18h30
Tuesday-Saturday / 11am-6:30pm