

Like Water by Alexis Knowlton

Berlin is a city punctuated by small, scenic canals. An often overcast sky hangs low and monotonous there and the buildings feature the faux endlessness of Plattenbau architecture. The water of the canals can briefly interrupt a walk, a train of thought, or a conversation. In mid-gait, the liminal surface of the water is prone to attracting a transfixing sideways, downward glance. In the water: a hypnotic capacity, a rhythmic visualization of changing color, the mirroring and transparent revelatory structure of something like consciousness or ritual states. What also could be in the water: a material dignity, a plain sympathy for a natural substance, a longing, the political imperative for water's subsistence as a thing in itself.

An attentive gaze to Gwen Kerber's recent paintings of water, installed low on the wall, can also begin in a sideways, downward glance. A viewer may enter the liminal space of her paintings while sitting on a church pew or leaving the apartment in the morning.

Three of Kerber's elongated landscape format paintings were installed slightly above the floor in Santa Clara Church. Designed to fit to the base of the large, modern, inset columns on the east aisle. They are small islands of light and water framed by the raw pragmatic plaster texture of a 1960's- renovated church wall. Not immediately noticed, these images of a moving stream might be discovered by the downward glancing of an attendee at Mass; the paintings might then affect a state of mind, a level of attention, or a spiritual process.

Another pair of Kerber's paintings of water were temporarily installed on the lobby side of the large wooden doors of Kerber's apartment building in Berlin. In this case an everyday public threshold is emphasized by an anonymous artistic addition. For the viewer, a door to the outside world suddenly *becomes like water* and a simile lingers longer than the step outside. Kerber describes this moment as the creation of "something real inside the day".

Kerber's recent paintings of water utilize photographs as she researches the image. The photographs of water are blown-up, cut-up, printed, Xeroxed, gridded, traced and redrawn, but by no means mediated. It is important, says Kerber, "that it *looks like water*." The decision to use photographs arises from a frustration in abstract and improvisational methods of painting water in her Berlin studio. Their lack of being mediated comes from Kerber's experience as a landscape painter who has spent years of rigorous study in the sunlight. When she describes her decision to paint water, she presents first a photo of herself on a ladder with a large set of shears, pruning a billowing and unruly shrub on her three wild acres in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia. Living half the time in Berlin, Kerber is an example of a contemporary artist who lives between cities and must negotiate the languages and landscapes of them both.

The generosity of Kerber's installation paintings is that they offer the beholder a lingering experience through their skillful openness, thin plasticity and their humble contextual placement.

It is not the artist, but the beholder who chooses whether Kerber's paintings of water are a quiet warning of rising water due to global warming, an embodiment of the dual meaning of reflection, or even (this writer's choice) associated to the canals of Berlin. In such a way the temporary and enigmatic painting of water arises like a mirage from assumptions, associations and elemental needs.

Alexis Knowlton is an artist and art writer based in Berlin.