

# carla

Issue 18





Katja Seib, *he is the sweetest peach to fall  
but I don't like peaches at all* (detail) (2019).  
Oil on fabric, 96 × 63 inches (left), 96 × 48 inches  
(right). Image courtesy of the artist  
and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.  
Photo: Ed Mumford.

WATER YOU KNOW,” reads one wallpaper panel: the broken grammar feels like an I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER-style memeism, without the desired comic payoff. Only rarely could these lines be described as clever, with the notable exception of the exhibition’s title—another appropriation, this time of a vocal sample on Malcolm McLaren and the World’s Famous Supreme Team’s scratch-filled 1982 single “Buffalo Gals.”

This “close enough” approach to writing feels appropriate for an artist so radically committed to the decentralization of meaning-making. Holmqvist has expressed his fascination with the multiple meanings of language—“No fixed meaning was always very important to me,” he explained, describing a piece bearing the repeated phrase “GOING GOING GONE.” “And if you can handle all those levels of understanding or meaning at the same time,” he continues, “then maybe we’re going somewhere.”<sup>3</sup> This madcap semantic quixotism lends itself well to Holmqvist’s grab bag of cultural references and affinity for gibberish. The fabric panel adorning one end of *Untitled (Room Divider)* bears an endlessly repeating pattern of words: “SHE IS HERE HE IS HER SHE IS HERE HE IS HER.” Like a chanted incantation, this text burrows straight to that level of the brain’s language center where the zippered double helix of sense and syntax starts to unspool, fragmented messages assembling and disassembling fluidly.

It’s this multiplicity of interpretations—and its attendant ambiguity—that defines the outer limits of

Holmqvist’s project, for better or worse. Holmqvist clearly envisions a sort of ouroboros of cultural material, with the internet’s unceasing stream of references (both high and low) feeding the artworks which he then places back into the hands of the public for interpretation. Pop culture feeds fine art which Holmqvist admirably returns to the popular domain, refusing to draw a meaningful line between the two.

It’s worth noting that three of the show’s raw canvases bear no text at all, but rather patterned slits and markings. In context, these come across as far more expressive than their text-heavy neighbors, their brutal gestures suggesting a frustrated rejection of wordiness, while the expressive potential of Holmqvist’s recycled language scraps is quickly diluted in his repetitive word soup.

Indeed, taken to its logical conclusion, Holmqvist’s principle of multiplied meaning is complete randomness—nonsense, linguistically speaking. #ALLTHISSCRATCHIN-ISMAKINMEITCH... doesn’t push all the way to this extreme—its text forms legible phrases and sentences and its world is recognizably our own—but it certainly comes close. Perhaps such chaos is the truest manifestation of Holmqvist’s “democratic language,” but the results can feel like a whole lot of noise. As seductive and thoughtfully principled as this Scrabble board fantasia might be, Holmqvist’s breakneck pursuit of all possible meanings risks arriving at none at all.

2. Kayla Guthrie, “Words are People: Q+A with Karl Holmqvist,” *Art in America*, June 7, 2012, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/karl-holmqvist-alex-zachary-peter-currie-moma/>.

3. Karl Holmqvist, Lecture.

## Katja Seib at Château Shatto

September 21–  
November 9, 2019

In Katja Seib’s eight-foot-tall painting “*Die dunkelste Stunde ist kurz vor Tagesanbruch*” (*The darkest hour is just before dawn*) (all works 2019), a woman with her back to the viewer sits in front of a vanity adjusting her long, black braid. In the mirror’s reflection, she appears nose to nose with a smiling black snake. A trail of letters floats between their heads, spelling out the phrase “I fucked up.” Dense black paint provides the backdrop for the action at hand. There is no recessive space in this cryptic *mise-en-scène* and consequently it is impossible to locate the snake or the woman in a depicted space or time. Thematically and materially, they are both barely there. Most of the other works on view in *chasing rabbits* at Château Shatto, Seib’s first solo show in the U.S., also depict female characters who are merging with their environments or supports. In Seib’s enigmatic paintings, the dissolving boundaries of the figure successfully suggest the disintegrating boundaries of the self.

Like most of the paintings in the show, *Die dunkelste* conjures up a kind of dream space—its title invokes a nightmare just before waking. In her use of visually powerful, but inexplicable symbols, Seib calls to mind fellow German painter Rosa Loy’s scenes of women in strange, dreamlike environments. Like with Loy’s

Ashton Cooper

1. Karl Holmqvist, Lecture. Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, Berlin, July 17, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/304764930>.

works, trying to interpret Seib's symbology leads to the sense that it is ultimately unknowable. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, Freud predictably explained the snake's appearance in dreams to be a phallic symbol. Jung thought "snake-dreams" occurred "when the conscious mind is deviating from its instinctual basis." There's also, of course, the millenia-old link between snakes and fallen women. While she perhaps invokes all of this, Seib has a more open-ended, and tongue-in-cheek relationship to such symbols. Is the woman thinking "I fucked up" sense à la Eve? Or did she merely fuck up her hairdo?

In theorist Roger Caillois' 1935 essay, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," he compares schizophrenic psychosis to animal camouflage. He terms "legendary psychasthenia" as a condition in which a person can no longer distinguish between themselves and the environment around them. He writes: "To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them... It ends by replacing them... He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put."<sup>1</sup> Caillois' emphasis on "dark space" is an apt description for the black, indistinct backgrounds present in several works, including *Die dunkelste* and another titled *he is the sweetest peach to fall but I don't like peaches at all*. The latter is like a funhouse mirror of twinned forms in which figure and environment are blurred. Most tellingly, a sleeping woman's face is duplicated on the pillow on which she rests. Has she simply smudged off a perfect replica of a full

face of makeup or has she generated an ersatz Shroud of Turin? Seib uses similar imagery in *7 lives (I been different people many times)*, in which a bed is decorated with three pillows, each of which is also adorned with a woman's head. Repeatedly in Seib's works, exterior features of the self become components of domestic interiors. Likewise, the interior of the mind is externalized as a placeless site.

In *all my girls think that I am acting like a fool*, a vacant-looking, or maybe even hypnotized, female figure sports a thick, blond braid that wraps around her neck. Her visage is painted over a red and black gingham motif (like an enlarged version of one of the woman-pillows from *7 lives*) so that patches of the colored grid underneath are visible below her painted pink skin, ultimately forming the pattern of the frock she wears. In Seib's painted world, the self is dispersed; it leaks into the environment. Camouflage, dissolution, and unresolved symbols all ultimately speak to the unknowability and unrepresentability of the subject. As Caillois would put it: "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself."

## Jeanette Mundt at Overduin & Co.

September 8–  
October 26, 2019

Photographic images, especially those in news media, suggest a certain sense of objectivity, equating representation with honesty. Painter Jeanette Mundt challenges this assertion, with her paintings that take newspaper photos as their source material. She obscures or rearranges the images, foregrounding an often dark history belied by their polished surfaces.

Her solo exhibition at Overduin & Co., *If the Devil Could Kill You Now He Would*, features two main bodies of work, one depicting members of the 2016 U.S. Women's Olympic gymnastics team, and one based on an iconic paparazzi photo of Princess Diana sitting on the diving board of a yacht owned by her boyfriend's father. Taken a week before her premature death in a high-speed car crash, the photo of Diana depicts her as privileged but solitary. Sporting a bright, turquoise one-piece bathing suit, she sits perched on the edge of the diving board, her head turned to look back over her shoulder. A lone seagull is captured in the upper right of the image, hovering in mid-air.

Mundt uses this image as a starting point for several painterly explorations. In *I Am the Princess and I Am Worth Saving* (2019), Mundt depicts Diana on the diving board and the seagull above, but replaces the yacht and background with vigorous, abstract brushwork in clashing oranges, purples,

1. Roger Caillois and John Shepley, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October*, Vol. 31 (1984): 30.