

# Art in America

November 2002

## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### Susanne Kühn at Bill Maynes

In her 1999 U.S. debut, Leipzig-born Susanne Kühn filled Bill Maynes gallery with slyly rhapsodic paintings of dense Teutonic forests, misty cascades, surging streams and radiant peaks. In this new series rendered in icy blues and mossy greens, the weather is wintry, the mood nocturnal; full moons punctuate the skies and treacherous journeys are everywhere implied.

Two wanderers stand to one side in *Am Morgen vor dem Aufbruch* (Morning of the Departure), mere specks in this cartoonish vista of a primeval forest. A stream floods, oak trees shatter and moonlight refracts through waterfall mists.

Romantic painters often used a device where they positioned small figures within vast landscape panoramas to instill awe at the vastness of nature. Kühn's seven large acrylics (all 2001) follow this format, while her nature worship is channeled through early 20th-century German Expressionism. Primordial woods are rendered with the crude lines of woodcuts; snowy peaks and branches thrust upward with Die Brücke's angular force. Her compositions teem with cacophony and dark, unearthly hues.

Kühn's paintings have a strong graphic presence. Infused with northern European art, craft and legend, many of their folkloric references are undoubtedly lost on viewers here. These works appear conservative on the surface, but underneath there lurks a sincere wonderment about life's passage. Each painting seems to be a metaphor for Kühn's own journey—a perilous one, apparently, though rendered with understated wit. In *Fall*, a curlicue looping from an ominous central mountain is finally deciphered as a climber's fatal plunge; his rucksack-toting silhouette can be identified farther down against the sloping lines of a waterfall. In *View*, echoing Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*,

a tall female silhouette stands with her back to the viewer, facing a desolate, snowy alpine scene. (In Friedrich's version, a hiker in a similar pose contemplates peaks rising from dramatic mists.) The image is overlaid with a motif that might be raindrops from the puffy clouds overhead, or perhaps tears.

In Kühn's stew of landscape styles, there is a smidgen of Disney, too, a cheerful schematicism reminiscent of children's cartoons. In *The Attempt*, above a gloomy valley, two tiny mountaineers ascend magically across a full moon. *Soft Path*, the most recent work, is devoid of wanderers and appears to point in a new direction. The misty heart of this fantastic

mountain chasm is surrounded by free-floating boulders and gravity-defying pine trees, and depicts an adventuresome chaos that edges toward abstraction. Perhaps plunging toward that luminous, empty center, Kühn will find a new way.

—Carey Lovelace



Susanne Kühn: *The Attempt*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 64 by 58 inches; at Bill Maynes.