

LONDON

Vivienne Koorland

FREUD MUSEUM

House Sutra: From Cape Town to Kathmandu, 2006, presents a schematic image of a house, filled with white lines in a childlike scrawl. A repeated motif in Vivienne Koorland's paintings, the house floats against a tar-black background, suggesting spatial insecurity and disorientation. That fragmented effect is emphasized by the canvas's stitched-together surface, atop which are glued scintillating pieces of colored canvas, evenly distributed, evoking flowers or falling snowflakes. As a comforting image of a home built from ruins, it appears to salve an ache; but the reality of dislocation that informs Koorland's practice—she grew up in South Africa and now resides in New York—is never far away.

Her painting *Small Africa*, 2004–2006, contains a small map of Africa, above which is written a word that supplies the exhibition's title: "*Reisemalheurs*" (Travel Woes), a neologism of Sigmund Freud's, itself awkwardly but tellingly straddling German and French. Koorland discovered it (in a letter written by Freud) as she prepared for her show, which was beautifully organized by Tamar Garb. The term explains the affinity of these paintings for their setting, the last residence of the founder of psychoanalysis following his flight from Nazi Vienna in 1938. The paintings are hung among a temporary exhibition of Freud's letters, photographs, and mementos and offer insight into his own ambivalent relation to travel, which alternately inspired joy and distress. He famously collected antiquities during his journeys, filling his consultation room with figurines excavated from places both geographically and historically distant—an archaeological metaphor for his analytic practice.

Koorland's paintings also dig into the past. The austere and nearly monochromatic *Cape Town over Hungary*, 1995, displays military huts and handwritten names of South African locales inscribed over a barely legible, upside-down map of Hungary. This cartographic palimpsest is not geographic but mnemonic and is constructed via a hidden logic—for instance, DF MALAN, according to the catalogue, is the former name of Cape Town International Airport, commemorating one of the architects of apartheid. Similar references, unmoored from their past significance, float over the opaque field. There may be an attempt here to call up history, but these paintings' abbreviated reflections on memory acknowledge the impossibility of fully restoring prior experience.

Poem Painting III (Shadow Painting), 2006, reels off a list of assertions in a child's cursive: MY WILD STRAWBERRIE, MY SUGAR-LIZARD, MY COMFORT-BAG, MY SILK-SPINNER, and so on. The insistent use of the word *my* betrays an exaggerated possessiveness toward things, as if to fend off the ravages of dislocation's losses. The apparent authenticity of the childish script is, in fact, mimicry. Where these paintings expose their borrowed forms of expression—recycled canvas, simulated handwriting, and appropriated imagery (such as her frequent use of maps)—Koorland's *reisemalheurs* reveal their most deeply unsettling aspect: Not even our innermost thoughts are purely our own, as Freud understood; homelessness becomes existential.

But Koorland doesn't regard travel as solely traumatic; it also, she implies, has a transformative potential. *O Bear Me Away On Your Snowy Wings*, 2006, captures movement's wonder and turns the melancholy of displacement into the promise of discovery. With its smaller side canvases flanking the central large one like wings, their stitching pattern evoking feathers, the triptych suggests an imposing white bird. But because this resemblance is schematic, the painting flutters between representation and abstraction. The simplified surface, here cleared of the weight of historical consciousness, proposes a lightening of being—rendered also by the lowercase letters of the image's schoolgirl-like writing—eager for flight.

—T. J. Demos



Vivienne Koorland,
*O Bear Me Away On
Your Snowy Wings*,
2006, thread and
oil on linen, 36 x 80".