



Susanne Kühn, *Spring*, 1999,
acrylic on canvas, 66 x 84".

SUSANNE KÜHN

BILL MAYNES GALLERY

Habituated to variously ironic, goofy, or studiously slipshod painting, I wasn't sure what to make of Susanne Kühn's suite of ten acrylic-on-canvas landscapes with their careful draftsmanship and restricted palette of black, white, and somber greens. At a glance her works resemble children's-book versions of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich—or what the Douanier Rousseau might have come up with after a visit to the Black Forest. And these first impressions are actually not far off. Kühn, a native of Leipzig, turns out to be for the most part about as unironic a nature painter as one is likely to encounter at the end of the millennium. The paintings themselves are rife with allusions to the Northern Romantic tradition, and yet they don't seem to be overly preoccupied with their allusiveness. Instead they gesture earnestly, if loopily, toward the original Romantic connotations. In the same spirit, Kühn lards the price list and press release with quotes in German from Goethe's rhapsodic nature poetry.

The towering cypress trees, pines, and willows in *Woods* (all works 1999) seem to

want to be about what they were about in the nineteenth century: the grandeur of the forest, its ancient wisdom and fecundity. Leaves fall and are sent wheeling around by the wind. A waterfall pours through a crevasse. All is melancholy and majesty. The only signs of a postmodern sensibility are the six coinlike circles bearing oak leaves distributed in a rough arc from the bottom left to the middle right of the canvas. They add to the peculiar quality of compositional movement, of animation, which is probably the signature characteristic of Kühn's work. And while they mark the picture plane, these oak-leaf icons also fuse a heraldic fleur-de-lis aspect with that of a sci-fi alien-spore invasion, altering the Romantic atmosphere of the landscape with a vaguely ominous contemporary insinuation.

In *Zweistromland*, a landscape flooded by a moonlit river coursing into the foreground, this same flattening and contemporizing function is performed by an icon of a rucksack-wearing hiker striding between two pine trees, evoking the kind of sign one sees marking trails in the Alps. Kühn places one in each corner of the painting, and with their blend of Parks Department kitsch and reflexive semiotics, these icons are as near to irony as she comes.

All this Teutonic grandeur inevitably raises the question, How German is it? Then one notices *Spring*, a cartoony painting of a waterfall sluicing past lush grass, which leaves the Northern Romantic tradition behind in favor of a Disney-like version of the cool palette and stylized flourishes of Hokusai's sculptural seascapes. As the

chute splashes upward in ornate spikes and crests, the water seems to leap away from the logic of gravity (history) and into some autonomous, supernatural realm of play for play's sake—or reproduction for reproduction's sake. What *Spring* makes clear is that it is this realm of fantastic and magical nature, without regard to any particular tradition per se, that Kühn means to make available in her lyrical and allusive paintings. She succeeds wonderfully.

—Thad Ziolkowski