

Helfand, Glen. "Stefan Kürten"
Artforum (January 2007)

ARTFORUM

SAN FRANCISCO

Stefan Kürten

HOSFELT GALLERY

Bryan Ferry's subdued 1973 paean to suburban ennui, "In Every Dream Home a Heartache," applies very neatly to the well-appointed but visibly aging midcentury dwellings that are the subjects of Stefan Kürten's richly patterned paintings. The fifteen works in Kürten's recent show invariably depict middle- and upper-middle-class abodes that exude stoic isolation beneath visually complex exteriors. The residences are shrouded in or embellished with kudzu-strength vines and trees planted when the developments were new. Intricate exterior patterning is the sole notable feature of this otherwise unremarkable architecture.

A number of works feature backgrounds of shimmering gold paint, a surface treatment that lends a glimmer of low-rent magic. And in a few interior views, chic art direction and modern designer furniture betray the wealth and taste of the residents; yet, as in the glossy pages of "shelter" magazines, no one ever seems to be home. The glass coffee tables glisten; the carpets are spotless but untouched.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere isn't completely sterile. Kürten's paintings are uneven accumulations of flat surfaces that add up to something deeper and heavier than the sum of their parts. Each edifice seems to be imbued with the weight of use—if those walls could talk, they might tell tales of dreams gone gloriously to seed (literally, as the foliage is often preternaturally, almost frighteningly lush). *Green Carpet* (all works 2006), the painting after which the show is titled, is a nocturnal view of the porch of a modest, cabinlike home. The site is overwhelmed by a forest of potted plants, their red and green leaves so full that they obscure the terra-cotta vessels they live in. A cheap plastic bench sits empty, its elongated shadow visible on the whitewashed clapboard wall behind it. Below it is a faded patterned rug that could, were it in better condition, have come straight from a Las Vegas casino.

Designers of gambling palaces know full well that a complicated design underfoot has the effect of seducing and disorienting, making willing victims feel as though they were walking on air as they hemorrhage their life savings. On more than one occasion, Kürten flips the equation, describing sky with repeating prefabricated patterns. *Warten* depicts a poolside scene outside a modernist glass-and-concrete house.

The deck is set with contemporary furniture and surrounded by tropical foliage, but the cantilevered overhang seems unstable, a vision enhanced by a sky seemingly composed of washed-out blue wallpaper squares.

In the large work *Clouds*, the show's most dazzling and effective painting, Kürten ups the intensity. This exterior scene shows three flat-fronted single-family dwellings, each boasting the same regimented architecture and patch of front yard.

The buildings are emphatic facades, walls with no backing or visible means of support; they are distinguished from each other only by their skins—one is a matrix of blue, ochre, and white bricks, another is of standard red brick, the third is simply painted white. The adjacent garage of one house, topped with angled solar panels, adds to the sense of imbalance. The sky is dramatically delineated with circles of brackish brown paint that form bubbles of unpainted canvas. What are essentially holes in the painting form a dense, atmospheric canopy that, like most of Kürten's work, is simultaneously suffocating, exalting, and otherworldly.

—Glen Helfand

