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In the galleries: The stars and planets align for 'hyder flares'

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Justine Otto. "Pink moon," oil on canvas, 90 x 110 cm, 2015, on view at Goethe-Institut.  
(Justine Otto/Courtesy Goethe-Institut)

There's a Victorian vibe to Justine Otto's art — and that's noticeable even before a visitor to her Goethe-Institut show encounters the wall of more than 30 mostly small paintings, arranged as if in some Bismarck-era burgher's formal parlor. Even the modernist white backdrop can't spoil the effect, although flocked wallpaper would be more felicitous.

The Poland-born German artist usually portrays girls and women, often in prim period costume and usually at night or in shadow. Clothing and hairstyles look a few generations out of date, and the occasional nude has a pre-modern feel, too. A picture of four young beauties dancing naked under a drippy midnight sky suggests the 19th-century vogue for playing at paganism. Invoking ancient traditions, the dancers wear floral wreaths in their hair.

The exhibition is titled “hyder flares,” after a solar phenomenon, and stars, moons and planets are integral to Otto’s repertoire of images. The artist also has a thing for eyes, sometimes depicted in an eerie manner that recalls Salvador Dali or EC Comics. In one painting, a woman holds a set of eyeballs in front of her own, intact orbs; in another, several white-clad men drag a massive eye as if it were a ship or a jetliner. The wall of paintings includes several close-ups of single eyes, both human and avian.

These slightly ominous motifs are depicted not with Dali-like rigor, but in a painterly expressionist mode. Otto, who won the Phillips Collection’s Emerging Artist Prize at last fall’s (e)merge art fair, often works from photographs, but doesn’t emulate their precision. Her loose brushwork blurs the boundaries between earth and sky, animal and human, everyday and uncanny. Despite their many traditional elements, most of Otto’s paintings are a little too strange for a proper parlor.

Justine Otto’s ‘hyder flares’ On view through Sept. 4 at the Goethe-Institut, 812 Seventh St. NW; 202-289-1200; [www.goethe.de/washington](http://www.goethe.de/washington).