

MAREN KARLSON

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Camila McHugh, Critic's picks London
Artforum, June 2022

CRITICS' PICKS LONDON

Maren Karlson

Soft Opening | Minerva St
6 Minerva Street

June 25, 2022 - September 17, 2022

By Camila McHugh



Maren Karlson, *Sigil I*, 2022, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 × 35 1/2".

Maren Karlson uses Simone Weil's concept of the void as a guiding principle for her exhibition "Cyphers" at Soft Opening, particularly the late French philosopher's suggestion that "Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void." Tracing rounded orifices in shades of blue, green, and bone-gray oil on canvas, Karlson probes the potency of emptiness. Her visual language initially evokes something extraterrestrial, as constellations of oblong shapes reveal a strange affinity between automobile parts—such as a car dashboard or engine—and abstracted

human anatomy. The imperfect symmetry and narrow landscape format of the two-panel painting *Vagus (the wheels my masters)* (all works 2022), resembles both futuristic machinery and an ancient sarcophagus. Its gradated teal-to-white palette accentuates the shallowness of some divots and the darker depths of other ovoid, seemingly viscous openings.

Though riddled with concave forms, Karlson's paintings are resoundingly flat, as she softens the slickness of precise outlines with thin layers of oil that lend the works a muted haziness. The tempered blur of Karlson's line-driven compositions aligns closely with her drawing practice, as evidenced by *Sigil 1*, which resembles a work in colored pencil. Developed in her sketchbook, Karlson's paintings maintain the open-ended, contingent qualities of drawing. She proffers these works as attempts, rather than declarations—taking the void as germinal shape and loose subject matter demands inconclusivity.

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Juliana Halpert, Girlish Whimsy and a Heavy Dose of Nostalgia:

Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson's Fantasy World

ARTnews, September 2019

Girlish Whimsy and a Heavy Dose of Nostalgia: Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson's Fantasy World

By Juliana Halpert

September 26, 2019 5:45pm



Like many a female friendship, Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson's "Finders' Lodge" was a playful, tender, and occasionally messy thing. Shrugging off the prospect of a traditional

two-person show, the artists assembled an installation that interwove their works. Hsu and Karlson met in Los Angeles several years ago, when Karlson began using the garden shed next to Hsu's apartment as a studio. The new neighbors grew close over the meals they shared before Hsu moved to New York and Karlson returned to her native Berlin. They formulated the exhibition as a tribute to their time spent together on the West Coast, and the friendship they now tend from afar.

The artists seemed to rejoice at an opportunity to break free from the heavier stakes of their burgeoning, more formal art careers—to pursue something more lighthearted.

“Finders’ Lodge” embraced a slapped-together spirit, and in its most charming moments, operated like a series of notes passed between friends, dense as it was with a private language. Two wall-mounted paintings served as a nod to a more conventional gallery presentation, and carried out a clever tête-à-tête: in one, a small canvas that Hsu adorned with grassy-green ink nested inside a larger one that Karlson painted in her signature psychedelic flora; the other reversed the configuration. Together, the works formed a pair of unusually wondrous exquisite corpses.

The gallery floor was strewn with hay, with a few bales stacked in a corner for seating. On one of the gallery walls, Hsu wrote, in spiraling letters, the lyrics to “Initiation Song from the Finders’ Lodge,” a folkish ballad sung by a nomadic tribe in science-fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1985 novel *Always Coming Home*. (When Hsu and Karlson met, they bonded over their love of the author.) “Please bring strange things / Please come bringing new things,” the ballad begins, and Hsu and Karlson abided. They brought dozens of peculiar paintings, drawings, and ceramic sculptures to LA for the show, and arranged most of them haphazardly on a long table in the gallery. It was a feast of objects, a messy monument to the artists’ shared meals.

The show’s patent unseriousness often manifested as girlish whimsy. The artists seemed to fixate on the greener pastures of childhood, a period in which playfulness is permitted and fantasies can run free. Karlson, in particular, proved to be a master of make-believe. In her colored-pencil drawings, molten, cartoonish characters frolicking through verdant forest scenes in platform shoes and jewel-toned eyeshadow suggest fairy-tale figures from the Y2K era. Her ceramic works, which included a heart and a star made out of ropes of clay and embellished with flora and smiling faces, could decorate a child’s bedroom. Hsu’s drawings, meanwhile, were fanciful doodles and dashings-off of words and phrases in the aforementioned green ink: food, love, baby, her own name. On one wall, she reproduced a text she had written as a child, in which she listed the animal sounds she loved hearing on her family’s farm. Hovering above the hay, the text piece spoke to a pastoral, prelapsarian idyll, an innocent girlhood now gone. Whether the world Hsu and Karlson put forth in “Finders’ Lodge” exists in the past, the future, or only in their imaginations, they are clearly escaping to it together.

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MAREN KARLSON
Nicole Kaack, Interstate Projects
Artforum, June 2017

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Maren Karlson

Interstate Projects

Interstate Projects

May 19, 2017 - June 18, 2017

By Nicole Kaack



Maren Karlson, *No Longer a Friend, Master, Slave*, 2017, colored pencil on paper, 16 1/2 x 12".

Slitted eyes and jagged flames gleam in lurid magentas and chilly violets, lighting a path both sensual and sinister in Maren Karlson's crepuscular compositions. Mixing exacting geometries with cartoonish illustration, these drawings, paintings, and ceramic works often follow a bald figure draped in silken robes through swoony, dreamlike landscapes. Charmed with the mysticism of an invented iconography, Karlson's images suggest occult ritual. In *No Longer a Friend, Master, Slave* (all works cited, 2017), the central character reenacts what seem to be ancient origin stories—she makes herself over in sweat and moist clay. *Open* depicts what might be a kneeling kouros, offering himself upon a triangular altar alongside a rose-tipped pyramid and a lily. In a fluid exchange between body, sacrament, and environment, Karlson unravels our sense of material stability.

We see the central character's features iterated across myriad surfaces—eyes patterned onto the tongue of a rolled carpet in *Her Vault*, or glinting across the nail of an outstretched hand in *My Realm*. Drawn demons walk as earth, fire, and air through the heart of a pulsating, animate landscape, flexing and formatting their skins to new shapes. Summoned to life by these drawings and their three-dimensional kin, the gallery is activated by surreal possibility; the delicate web that is drawn across the center of *Trick* reappears, in the flesh, stretched across the southeast corner of the room (*Untitled*), while the stepped architecture of *Solitude and Freedom Are the Same* shows up as the terraced pedestal upon which Karlson arranges three ceramic figurines. Karlson's works weigh the parity of promise and foreboding in a nightmarish fluidity.