



THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

KAREN CARSON'S INFLAMMATORY PACES
BY DOUG HARVEY

One artist who manages a remarkable tight-rope balance with many levels of negativity — while always managing to surprise — is painter Karen Carson, whose work has ranged from minimalist geometric fabric “paintings” (with zippers allowing reconfiguration) to baroque, mirror-studded, cobbled-together architectural abstract explosions; shaped-canvas cubist bouquets of decorative-clock flowers or stealth-bomber/vulture hybrids; vinyl banners combining Las Vegas gaming design with stripped-down Buddhist aphorisms; and backlit bar-style light boxes depicting raging forest fires. Her latest body of work continues her recent exploration of strategies like rectangular surfaces covered entirely with paint, constituting an image of a landscape. For Carson, that’s pretty far out.

“Let’s Face the Music and Dance” consists of more than a dozen rectangles of paint-encrusted linen and paper: panoramic vistas of sunsets, gathering storms, explosions and other pathetic fallacies, acting as backdrops for a bewildering array of dancing silhouettes — swing couples, Martha Graham types, chorus lines and tap. Smaller vistas are framed with weirdly exaggerated decorative frames, hand-painted with monochromatic wood-grain patterns. Like much of the best art, Carson’s work operates in the negative space of good taste, and though her current parameters may seem like those of conventional painting, she repeatedly and provocatively flouts upscale international-style decorator etiquette. And it ain’t just them frames.

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Carson’s handling of paint is masterful but dredges up a moment in proletarian decorative arts when the gestural flourishes — the drips and spatters of abstract expressionism — were put in the service of a jazzily stylized pictorialism. At the opening, I observed several artists visibly discomfited by this work, literally unable to look at something so fundamentally wrong according to the tenets of contemporary art history. It is these concealed, visually encoded, cultural reflex buttons for which Carson consistently probes. Similarly, the emotional exaggeration and overt sentimentality of the imagery and palette are on the one hand exquisitely inflammatory, on the other profound and heartfelt. Balancing a hyperdecorative visual vocabulary laced with high-art no-no’s, badass formalist chops (including a formidable command of illusionistic space), and ominous — though joyous and funny — ruminations on death, disaster and human frailty, Carson manages to make the end of the world look like the dawn of a brand-new day. And if that’s not negative, I don’t know what is. ■

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