

Exene Karros: God strike me down or at least pay attention

30 Orchard St, Gallery 2 ▪ Sept 10 - Oct 12, 2022



The ubiquity and ambivalence of corporate iconography, the banality of violence and pleasure, the vacancy of identity articulated through narrow registers, and the thrill of transgressive appropriation linger in the compact, demonstrative, and unexpectedly lovely paintings of Exene Karros. Chief among her fixations is a quintessentially American urban experience, one suffused with late capitalist malaise, and remarkably circumspect in the cultivation of a semiotic toolkit.

Like a Virgin Mary winking from a piece of moldy Wonder Bread, the pictures in *God strike me down or at least pay attention* chart a strained but rigorous attempt to make meaning from the most vacant forms, identifying joy and pleasure in debasement. Karros' work confounds the current apparatus of representational painting by foregrounding its demonstrative form, and in this way, she channels the aims of the Pictures artists-chiefly, Salle and Rosenquist. Her paintings are tools.

Karros' primary compositional method is tied to a dated software program she runs on a beater iMac in the corner of her sparse Philadelphia studio. She's as unsentimental about this as she is about her process, her fixations, or the personal symbology that forms the basis for a series of cryptic flow charts on flat gray grounds of gunmetal, cement, putty, Coffee Mate-taupe. Her imagery is immediately iconic and mundane: Abraham Lincoln, Statue of Liberty, The Cross, Dove, Toy Soldiers, Livery Vehicles, Mr. Peanut. They resemble hieroglyphics, and it is tempting to read into their artifactual, sociological qualities. Yet the overarching effect is one of broad revelation rather than hermetic specificity, borne of a logic indifferent to painting's aesthetic properties or traditions.

Levity is crucial for Karros, both in terms of its spiritual implications and compositional avenues. Recalling the photographs of Sara Charlesworth, her people are suspended in something stuck uncomfortably between diagrammatic stasis and fluid motion aimed at eventual peril. The paintings ask for decoding, like writing on the wall of an old parking garage left by a kind malingerer to map the way out, one that instead leads to oblivion via maddening loops. They might be hobo signs, scatological ramblings or divine speech. Her symbols are rendered with a labored precision that is both humorous, melancholy, and inflected with a desire for a kind of divine encounter, looking to these things as idols, as tokens of some sign of a future. The biggest lurking in Karros' blunt and punchy paintings is ultimately, surprisingly, hope.