

Exene Karros: Spirit

88 Walker St ▪ Jan 3, 2025 - Jan 29, 2025



Harkawik is pleased to present *Spirit*, our second solo exhibition with Philadelphia-based painter Exene Karros. *Spirit* charts a course between faith and bankruptcy, offering us momentary glimpses of a world outside her gray expanse, even as she ratchets up the complexity and madcap brilliance that defines it. Here, balloons float a coffin toward the heavens--and it might make it, were it not for Jesus Christ himself, casually gripping a giant pushpin. Here, bulging, showy airplanes are body shamed, Calvin and Hobbes and Calvinist doctrine mingle freely, airline logos teach us color theory, the FBI wiretaps the clergy, marriage is proposed and sucked away in one swift maneuver of aerial advertising, and the excesses and absurdities of modern life are given free reign in a kind of branded animism. Karros creates mimetic systems of omnipresent yet isolated realities, scattering icons across the picture plane like a divine editor. Her

players' motivations and investments collide in the mind of the viewer, who must consider their missions all at once: the goose and the jet engine, The Bible and The Little Free Library, God and the police. To observe the couplings plotted by Karros is to be on the inside of a great American joke being played on us all.

In *Takes a Village*, John Hancock signs the cast of a small child, the neoliberal hubris of the New York Times confronts a hurtling asteroid, and a Boston Dynamics robot achieves sentience, expressed as the desire to relieve itself on a fire hydrant. It is hard to build character and judge character at the same time, and even harder to process grief when everyone is laughing at you. Karros creates a visual poetry out of personal symbology that is nevertheless composed of highly recognizable, commodified forms. Her backgrounds suggest a hypothetical space, yet the earnestness and vulnerability of her characters reminds us to consider not only the literal interpretation of these interactions, but more broadly, what she chooses to let in to her visual universe, and what is omitted. In *Truth and Love*, the names of airlines come together like a phantasmagoric Jenny Holzer that reminds the buyer that they must confirm their faith and patriotism (is there a difference between the two, here?) in order to fly. We must consume, and in doing so, we are forced to use the language of the most serious subject matter on God's gray Earth.

In works like *Romans 8:13* and *Revelation 21:1*, Karros creates cryptic flowcharts that recall the methods of the Pictures artists, the proposals of post-studio practice, or even the paranoia of Mark Lombardi. Here, we are driven so deeply toward earnest sincerity, that we hardly notice when we touch down on slut shaming. It becomes impossible to distinguish ascent from descent, and to find the line between Mardi Gras beads and rosary beads, to render culpable an innocent airplane who knew not what it did, crucified for all our sins. Do we fault the founder? In *After the Storm*, Karros's characters seem to be covered by darkness. We can see them, but they can't see anything. They are looking for something they're swimming in. They want to know whether humanity can rise above 5G, they want to find a trace of the surveillance networks, to know whether it's a merger or an acquisition, what happens if the fighter jets hear the song St. Francis sings to the birds. Shouldn't the police focus more on keeping those geese out of jet engines if we're ever going to feel safe in this country?