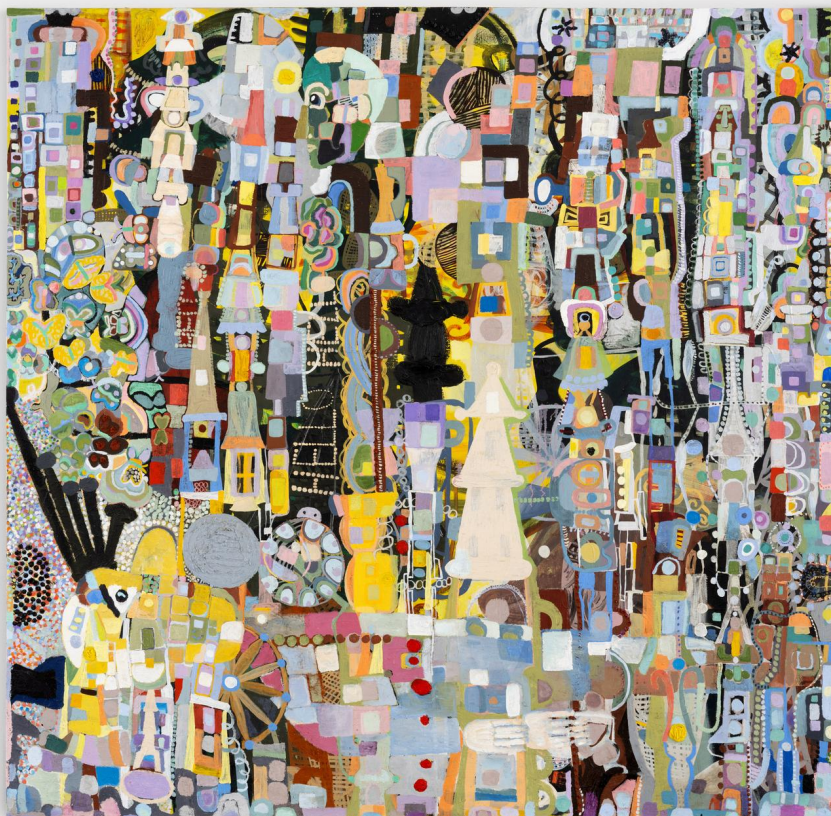


Karen Barbour: Brainwaves and Wavestorms

88 Walker St ▪ Sept 5 - Oct 2, 2025



Harkawik is delighted to announce *Brainwaves and Wavestorms*, our second exhibition with Bay Area painter Karen Barbour, and the first in New York. *Brainwaves* evidences a deep meditation into the delicate and subtle boundaries between the sensible world, and its teeming irrational beyond (the sort witnessed only by cats, mystics, and long-haul truck drivers). It is filled with forms that elicit childlike delight but also act as a vehicle for serious perceptual and philosophical investigations.

In *Repetition Wilderness and Blue Starling* and *Atomized Illumination* Barbour dares us to identify recognizable elements, pushing the bounds of what might be considered representational. These works are distant echoes of their beginnings.

They give the impression of a model who is also a dressmaker, a character who realizes while running to catch a bus that her gown is ill-suited for travel, and so must wear it and alter it all at once. Barbour recalls a time when *Repetition* was a representational painting of a saintly figure with arms outstretched, and describes the bird that emerged after a long period of loving jury-rigging as “naughty,” although in what sense (for eradicating the saint, or opportunistically encroaching on empty canvas?) it is impossible to know. Standing in the gallery, squinting at the press release, or darting the eyes back and forth around the room, as if trying to coax a fly lingering in the periphery out in front and within swatting distance, might make this figure reappear.

Blue Heart Flower is grounded by a thin strip of burgundy and lodged in a sherbet chamber that seems to thrust its towering central corolla at the viewer. Its volume and dissonant industrial quality result from a kind of circumnavigation, as though each frond is seen from a different angle, then overlaid to create a vertiginous efflorescent amalgamation. *Derangements* and *Daisy* both address the tendency for girls’ hair to become unruly, the former depicting a rough and callous grooming, and the latter suggesting an empathic caregiver whose comb is, at least sometimes, left in the box. Daisy’s arm converts her torso into a kind of ouroboros, and the sharp hatchmarks used to give it volume underscore an uphill battle against chaos and neglect. The exhibition’s lone humble artist’s frame hugs the canvas, as if this one work needs a little extra tenderness to land.

Secrets in the Flower Tower exists where a superabundance of decorative forms meet large swabs of pastel that we encounter as a kind of thoughtful absence—a looming, ramshackle, left-of center comportment. According to Barbour, this painting began as “scaffolding” for the various body parts needed to make a human, and while it still clearly contains limbs, whether or not they add up to a person is, thankfully, not a question the painter seems troubled to answer. It suggests a ragged theater troupe, or band of merry partygoers, overdressed and unaware, standing on shoulders, expectant and haplessly ignorant of the collective absurdity of their countenance. We see them illuminated by porchlight, and we’re really not sure whether or not they should be invited in. *Stray Voltage Leaping* is a work that offers helpful clues into the successive layers that lend these paintings their remarkable depth and material complexity; a chair is made from the chaos lurking beneath something that might be the spark of inspiration.

Two of Barbour’s early life memories might inform our understanding of works like *Electrically Charged Super Spaniel* and *Donald C. Barbour*. One is an exercise from kindergarten, in which her teacher would scribble on a sheet of paper and pass it to her students to flesh out, and the other is her late father’s obsession with maps of California. These paintings take divergent approaches to addressing a kind of infrastructure of the mind—solar flares of understanding, compassion, and memories we trust will be waiting faithfully whenever it is we choose to rummage for them. Time spent with *Barbour* is rewarded by discoveries; first of a figure lying in the soil, as we all will someday, and later, of text that seems to emerge from him like speech booming in from the afterlife, falling like wet leaves, or flickering on and off like a Hollywood marquee reflected in misty eyes. HELLO, HELLO, HELLO, HELLO, HELLO!