

Maren Karlson,  
*Press*

# Bitter Reviews, 2024

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## **Maren Karlson, Staub (Störung), Soft Opening**

Staub (*Störung*) was conceivably the most accomplished painting I've seen in 2024. The only challenger that springs to mind was Doron Langberg's *Night* at Victoria Miro, but the painter's style and subject matter is so vastly different; comparisons are gratuitous. I've wanted to write a review ever since I first visited (I went back two more times) but haven't felt like I've had the time to sit and do the work justice. I'm still time poor but couldn't wait any longer, so here are some musings.

When Francis Fukuyama posited the *End of history* he claimed the final round of ideological clashes had ceased – namely, neoliberal markets, western democracy and the free market had won, the plague of Marxism had finally been defeated – our socio-cultural and political evolution had reached its final form. The rhetoric within political circles was one of unprecedented optimism. Intellectuals sought to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Fast forward 30 years and we've seen the free market crash (several times), the integrity of democracy questioned (perhaps breached) and the rich-poor divide grow at an epistemic rate, rendering social mobility a mere myth. Without unpacking all the ramifications of globalisation, I think it's feasible to posit that post-fordist economics have ultimately decimated industry across all of western Europe. This has left vast industrial wastelands that occupy cities up and down the UK and beyond. Karlson's series at *Soft Opening* not only addresses the visual narrative which is a by-product of this economic shift but also aptly shines a torch on the political climate that these socio-economic changes have advanced. Fittingly, the venue for this show was also a former industrial unit.

In the main space were a series of paintings in various dimensions; some merely lent against the walls resting on pieces of metal, others hung traditionally, and then a few occupied the industrial beams that occupy the centre of the gallery floor plan. I could've lived with any of the works so its difficult to pick out standalone pieces. The sense of motion that Karlson is able to capture is particularly attractive. The generous selection of brush strokes aid this awareness, but the palette also feels worthy of citing (hooray, a painter not using paint straight out the tube!). The thicker strokes often feature an almost translucent, reflective tone that captures the light penetration onto metal persuasively. Elsewhere the flecks of stray paint that have been left atop the canvas feel necessary and not design-y. They give the paintings a laborious sensation, the artist moving in tandem with the machinery they are mirroring. When I was initially in the main space on my first visit I noted that I could literally smell the industry that Karlson was visualising such was the conviction of these works. It's a sensory experience I've never encountered before and one I've continued to reflect on.

In the viewing room were a series of framed drawings that sat on top of photographs. I'm always sceptical of works in viewing rooms. They often feature tacky miniature scale, or vague representations of that which is found in the main gallery space. However, there was none of that here. The works in the viewing room not only accelerated the reading of the paintings, but in some instances, I believe they were even more successful.

The obvious choice of metal frames aided the continuation of the post-industrial aesthetic, but the drawings themselves – heavily worked in graphite – had a razor-like sharpness that counteracted the lucid painting style Karlson accomplished. The use of photography was acknowledged in the press release, but it felt appropriate that there was a photographic element visually present in the show. After all its photographys capability of capturing internalised moments of history that allow us a glimpse into the past.

In the Ruhr region of Germany an old steelworks has been converted into an open-air park called Duisburg-Nord. In the evenings the old chimneys light up casting shadows across the industrial landscape, by day you are free to wonder the complete site, a stark reminder of our not-so-distant past. Karlson's series similarly draw attention to a bygone era; haunting us like the spectres of Marx that Fukuyama declared dead, that which neo-liberalism is so keen to whitewash. This was an extremely important exhibition and I'm grateful I got to visit it multiple times.

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# émergent, 2024

Exhibitions, Conversations, Articles, Store, About



## STAUB (STÖRUNG)

Maren Karlson at Soft Opening

Words By: Lydia Eliza Trail June 21 - September 14, 2024

*Everywhere it is machines — real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections.*

—Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

On a visit to Soft Opening, Antonia Marsh shows me one of four images cited as reference for the show *Staub (Störung)* featuring new works by German artist Maren Karlson. One catches my eye: a document scan with a photograph and caption that reads "Staubbelastung im Erzgebirge" [dust pollution in the Erzgebirge]. In the photograph, the word "Staub" is written, unconjoined, into a substance coating a recent snowfall. "Staub," in German, means dust. "The uranium falls onto the snow," Antonia tells me, "and someone writes out the word." It's curiously literal, transcribing a noun into the matter it describes.



Abb. 2: Staubbelastung im Erzgebirge

Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London

# émergent, 2024

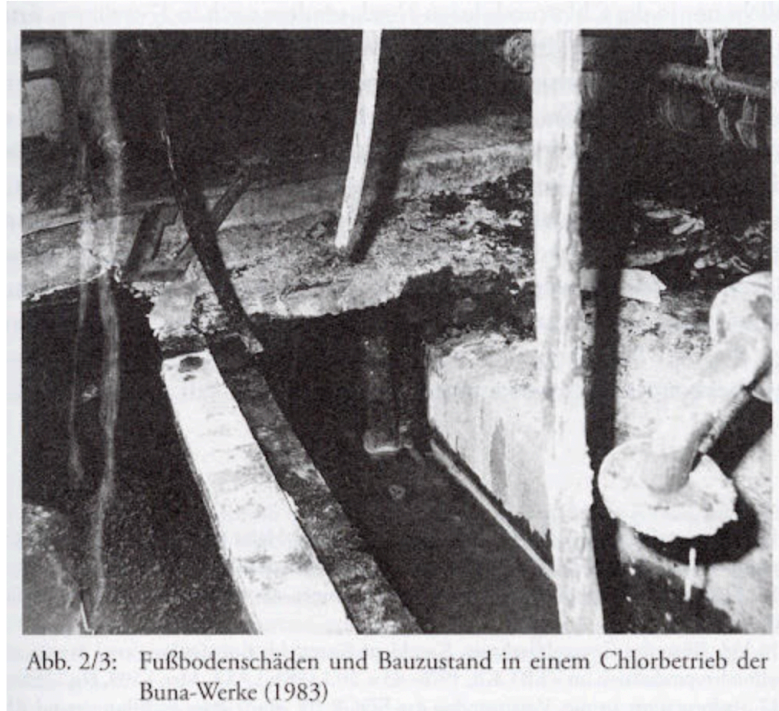


Abb. 2/3: Fußbodenschäden und Bauzustand in einem Chlorbetrieb der Buna-Werke (1983)

*Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London*

*Staub (Störung)* is the product of the artist's play and subsequent visual dissection of documentary photographs of Kombinat VEB chemische Werke Buna, a chemical factory in Schkopau, East Germany. These photographs are banal and obsolete, intended originally as documents of the factory's decay, and beautiful only to the subjective viewer (bringing to mind Andre Breton's found objects – picked up at the Puces de Saint Ouen flea market in Paris – which are equally banal and equally revered). The chemical plant, initially privately owned, transferred into a state-owned enterprise after the establishment of the GDR, falling into disrepair sometime in the 1980s. At *Soft Opening*, which, incidentally, was a factory before it was a white cube space, Karlson transforms these remnants of Soviet-backed industry into a series of nine canvas works and seven drawings. It's a world-building exercise akin to the surrealist tenet of recombining and presenting the facile in sublime ways.

Visually, Karlson's work merges traditional abstraction with science fiction realism. Lee Lozano's brash animism meets HR Giger's sensual perversion. One of the prime features of Karlson's method is taking the functional – knob, screw, hinge – and abstracting it to be just recognisable. She doesn't do away with the veristic. Mechanical digits are animated into fetus-like substances which gestate in a large fleshy expanse of beige, grey, and earth tones. Metal fragments appear like teratomas, immature human tissue, on Karlson's canvases. I find these moments in which the mechanic is anthropomorphised surprisingly touching.



Maren Karlson, 'Staub', 20 June - 3 August, 2024. Installation view at Soft Opening, London. Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photography Lewis Ronald

# émergent, 2024

*Staub (Störung)*'s press release paints the artist, quite obtusely, as a radical political agent. Karlson takes what Mark Fisher labels "the disintegration of existing socialities and territorialities" (ruined factories) and turns it into an alien future (post-industry and post-capital). As in the painted work, *Staub Störung 9*, Antonia directs me to the corner of the photograph the canvas depicts; it's nondescript, as expected – Karlson prioritises "background noise" – but one can make out two cylindrical shapes, motifs the artist has recycled in both the canvas and the drawn work *Staub 1 (s)*. On the picture plane, these industrial elements are placed in an ear-like shape. Here, Karlson enacts the biomechanical merging of flesh and machine (comparisons to the work of Tristan Hsu, who showed in *Hardcore* (2023) at Sadie Coles, feel apt. Hsu's silicone sculptures convey a sense of the human form gestating in an industrial, factory-made mould). Indeed, *Staub Störung 9* resembles an incubator from the Alien franchise as much as it does a hearing aid. As industry accelerates and old technology is left behind, the feeble human body meets the outdated machine.

The sketches at the back of the gallery demonstrate the skill, craft and engineering involved in Karlson's image manipulation and gestural science fiction. In *Staub 4*, Karlson takes an inkjet print – an enlarged section of one of the documents – and "affects structural logic" by connecting the worn-away segments with a foreign ectoplasm rendered in graphite. It's not a material native to the factory or even this world, but a third, more fictional substance that, I infer, is its own independent, organic lifeform.

Karlson doesn't appear as a satirical painter. Her works don't embody any kind of pop-referentiality, and her style does not seem to refute any mainstay trend. These works are a refreshingly complex form of abstraction that complicates and engages with the value of representation. A science-fictional method of formal dissection brings Maren Karlson's work into dialogue with ideas of the Anthropocene and the longing to integrate human and non-human matter. In the last drawing of the show, the word "Staub" (dust) is overlaid across a vast Piranesian chamber, an ominous prophecy of imminent (human) disintegration.



Maren Karlson, 'Staub', 20 June - 3 August, 2024. Installation view at Soft Opening, London. Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photography Lewis Ronald

# Metal, 2024

M A R E N K A R L S O N

F R A G M E N T E D F A C T O R Y

*Staub (Störung)* is German-born, LA-based painter Maren Karlson's second solo exhibition at Soft Opening. In it, she eschews the subjects and visual language of her past work, turning the futuristic machinery she once painted into a collection of ancient-looking relics, revealing the vulnerability of a perfect-looking system to disruptive forces.

The paintings in the front room of Soft Opening, London, don't look new. Some leaned against the wall, one hidden in the nook of a metal pillar, they might have been there, slowly oxidising, for years. Their surfaces are painted over and scratched into. A distorted network of metallic cogs, levers, pulleys, and wires slips in and out of view but they are mostly taken up by putrid beige emptiness. I imagine running my finger across the surface of one of these paintings and finding that it has deposited a dusty residue of the same colour.

The paintings that I know Maren Karlson for don't look like this. The work in her last solo exhibition at the gallery, almost exactly two years ago, looked fresh out of their packaging, symmetrical and coherent. Those paintings featured the same sort of hardware, but this time rendered in a single layer and arranged into systems that made some sense; there was no moment to wonder just what they — the nodes, the hubcaps, the sockets — were there for. They felt natural.

When things chug along smoothly, there's no moment to ask what they are or why they exist — it's as if they are invisible. It's when they grind to a halt, worn-out and rusty, that such questions start to occur. Unlike in Karlson's earlier work, the painted hardware displayed here makes itself painfully visible, like a body does when it's injured or unwell.

These paintings are based on closely-cropped fragments taken from photographs of an East German rubber and plastic factory from the 1970s and 80s. *Störung* is a German word that means something like disturbance or violation, which is just what the original images suffered at Karlson's hand. The machinery was still operational when the original photographs were taken, but abstracted here from a wider system, it seems ancient and unusable.

In the exhibition's text is another story of disturbance. This same German factory pumped water from a nearby river, later returning it warmer than before. Another nearby factory did the same thing. Together, they heated the water to the point where it was no longer useful to them — disturbing it until it disturbed them back. Karlson says that she understands the water's act of defiance as an insurgence.

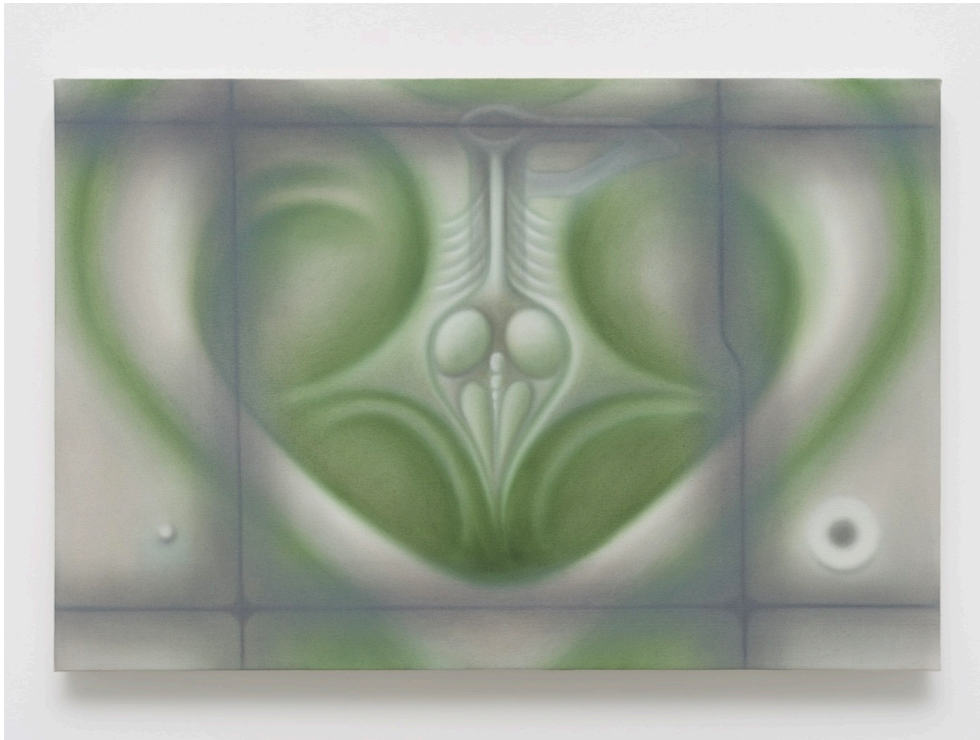
# Metal, 2024

Karlson shows us how fragile a system can be, how a single disturbance is enough to turn a functioning production line into a collection of heavy, corpselike objects.

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Kombinat VEB Chemische Werke Buna, the factory that we see glimpses of in this exhibition, is a low-stakes example; if its smooth running had any impact on our own lives, it is probably negligible or invisible. But many of the most important things to us — families, households, societies, bodies — are also systems of sorts, all subject to fatal interruptions. Pull out a screw or two, and you might find that the whole thing falls apart.

# Artforum, 2022



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

LONDON

## Maren Karlson

SOFT OPENING | MINERVA ST  
6 Minerva Street  
June 25–September 17, 2022

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 I*, 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.

— Camila McHugh



# Art in America, 2019

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## 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

# Art in America, 2019

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.

*This article appears under the title “Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson” in the October 2019 issue, pp. 93–94.*

# Art Forum, 2017



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

NEW YORK

## Maren Karlson

INTERSTATE PROJECTS

66 Knickerbocker Ave

May 19–June 18, 2017

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.

—Nicole Kaack

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