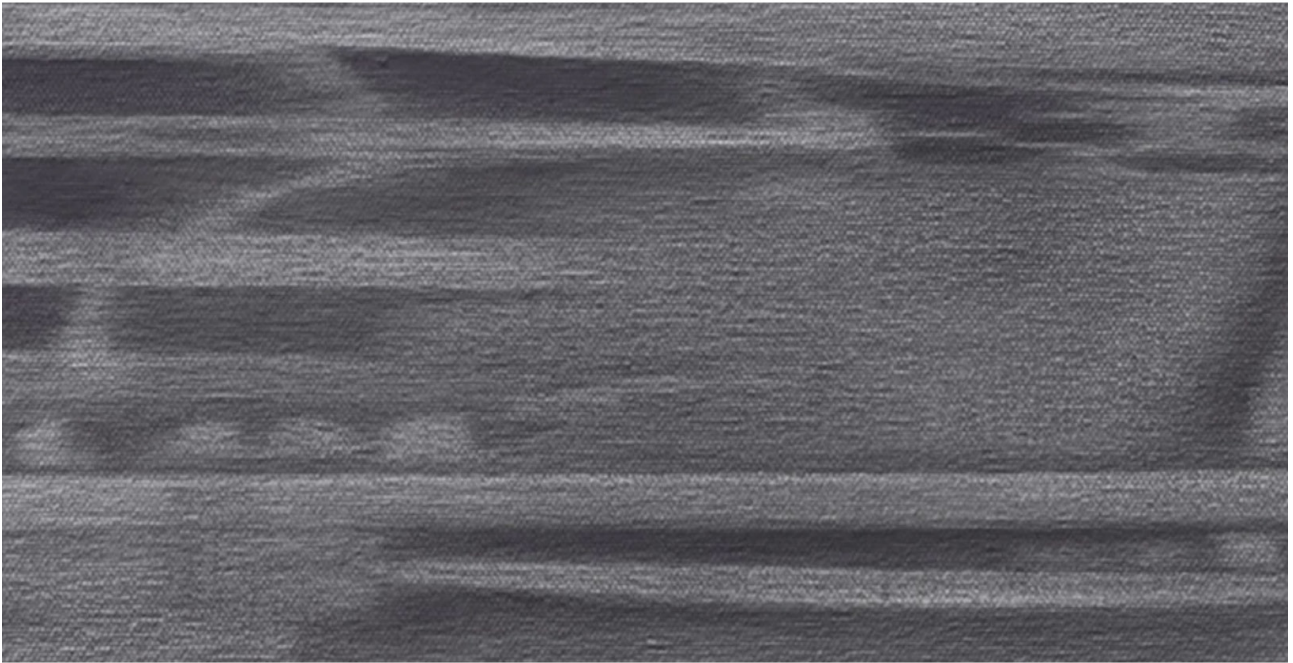


Maren Karlson,  
*Press*

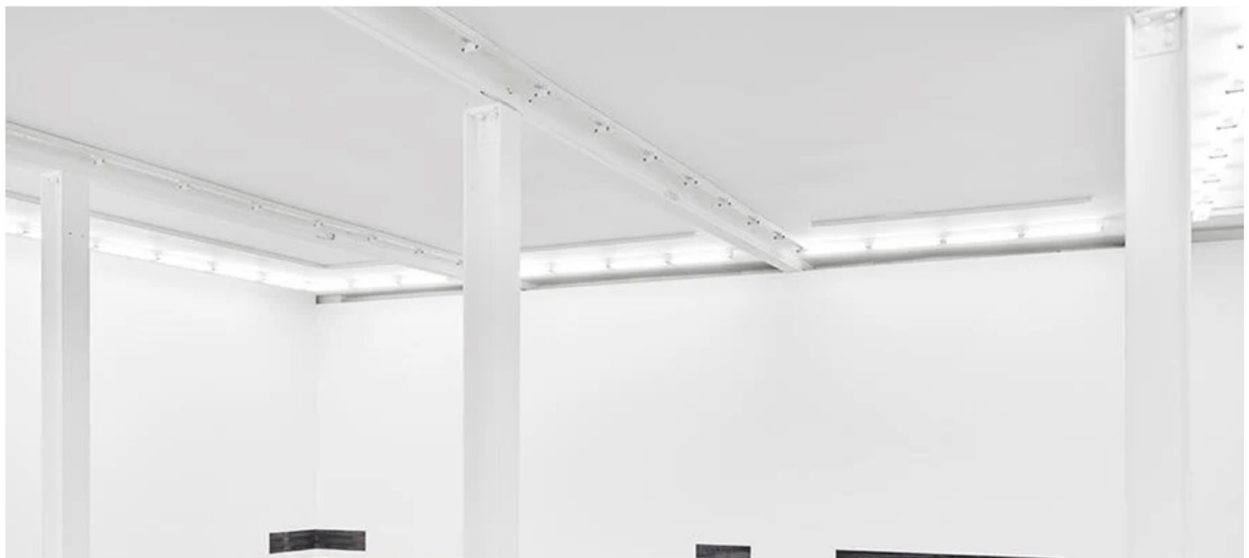
## Maren Karlson Paints the Shadows of Germany's Radical Past

At Soft Opening, London, the artist's works explore the ambiguities of political violence, revisiting narratives associated with the Baader-Meinhof group

BY JULIET JACQUES | 18 SEP 26



At first glance, Maren Karlson's paintings at Soft Opening appear almost abstract, hung low on the gallery walls as though trying to hide. The exhibition, 'LAG', consists of six greyscale oil-and-graphite works from the title series across 15 canvases (all works 2026), showing a rush of lines enshrouded in darkness: only occasionally can the semblance of a road or a row of office windows be identified. Providing an indication of what these works depict are two small arrangements of photographs (*LAG* #7 and *LAG* #8), showing a vehicle on fire beside Axel Springer Verlag, a publishing house in Berlin, with 'LAG' at the top. These are displayed on the walls beside the canvases, alongside brief excerpts from essays by Sanja Grozdanić and Steph Holl-Trieu, commissioned for the accompanying publication.



# Frieze, 2026



Maren Karlson, 'LAG', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London; photograph: Eva Herzog

In 'Never Closing the Gap', Holl-Trieu describes the 'spectral lines' seen through a viewfinder that will 'only at certain moments ... arrest a person or an object and figure it as a representation'. Karlson's paintings strive to capture such instances where an image has not yet crystallized into view. Grozdanić's 'Extreme Realism', meanwhile, clarifies that Karlson's images relate to Ulrike Meinhof, a co-founder of the left-wing militant group Baader-Meinhof, which came to be known as the Red Army Faction (RAF). The essay refers to the pages of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Grammar* (1933) that Meinhof read while in Stammheim Prison. Wittgenstein, Grozdanić writes, 'struggles to formulate the relationship between language and action', seeking a 'theoretical, mathematical understanding of why we follow rules'. No longer willing to follow the law, Meinhof helped RAF leader Andreas Baader escape from custody in 1970, wrote manifestos that introduced the RAF name and participated in bank robberies and bombings before being arrested in 1972. She died in prison four years later while on trial for murder and attempted murder.

Karlson responds to paintings from Gerhard Richter's 1988 series '18. Oktober 1977', of Baader, Meinhof and fellow RAF members Gudrun Ensslin and Holger Meins: *Festnahme 1* (Arrest 1), *Jugendbildnis* (Youth Portrait), *Gegenüberstellung 1-3* (Confrontation 1-3) and *Erschossener 1* (Man Shot Down 1) respectively. Karlson follows Richter in number and style – he also painted 15 greyscale works – but shifts the focus away from portraits to the architecture the group targeted in their May Offensive across West Germany in 1972. Closer inspection of Karlson's works reveals destroyed buildings, distorted from press photographs, sometimes evoking the appearance of silent film stock spoiled by decay or burns, other times like molten steel. The exhibition opened on the 25th anniversary of the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center in New York – an event also painted by Richter (*September, 2005*) – and Karlson's metallic imagery invokes the world's most famous terrorist act as much as the numerous, smaller RAF bombings.



# Frieze, 2026

Maren Karlson, *LAG #6*, 2026, oil and graphite on canvas, 23 × 57 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London; photograph: Eva Herzog

Karlson's works remind us of how much fear the RAF struck into West German society, and how their activities fascinated the country's art and film scenes, comprised of people who, like Baader and Meinhof, were children of National Socialist Party members and German soldiers, appalled at their parents' actions and by how little the society had denazified. More than five decades after the main RAF members' brutal acts and deaths, the questions they raised about the elite classes' inclination towards fascism and use of media in propagating their continued social dominance remain pertinent. The group's use of violence proved a dead end, from the broadcast of Meinhof's film *Bambule* (1970), cancelled after Baader's jailbreak, until the group's demise. But until democratic methods offer a way out of immiseration and oppression, artists will continue to explore the ambiguities of political violence, as Karlson sensitively does here.

*Maren Karlson's 'LAG' is at Soft Opening, London, until 17 October*

*Main image: Maren Karlson, *LAG #3* (detail), 2026, oil and graphite on canvas, 23 × 102 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London; photograph: Eva Herzog*

## Flash Art

REVIEWS

29 September 2026, 10:39 am CET

### Maren Karlson “LAG” *Soft Opening / London* by [Amie Corry](#)

For “LAG” (2026), Maren Karlson has inset fifteen slender paintings into the walls of Soft Opening in London. Positioned horizontally and close to the floor like air vents, the near-monochromatic canvases offer smooth, graphite-and-oil-washed surfaces. Stretched shapes suggest accelerating mechanical action, grilles, and the corporate lattice of windows. The sole other inclusion in the exhibition is a pair of semi-obfuscated photographs of a tower, just identifiable as the historic West German headquarters of Axel Springer Verlag: a conservative publishing corporation that held a spectacularly monopolistic influence on the Federal Republic’s news, accounting for approximately 70% of West Berlin’s print media. Today Axel Springer SE remains the EU’s largest news publisher.



“LAG.” Installation view at Soft Opening, London, 2026. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

With this new body of work, the German-born artist foregrounds a disconcerting push-and-pull between affect and historical memory. The photographs point to Karlson’s hyper-specific source imagery: press photos of damage caused by the militant left-wing Red Army Faction (RAF, also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group) to the Springer Building and other sites in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Karlson views images of blown-out cars, newspaper vans, and police stations through cuts and holes in newspapers, then compresses them to fit dimensions determined by the cavities in the gallery’s three supporting I-beams.



LAG #4, 2026. Oil and graphite on canvas. 23 x 144 cm. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.



“LAG.” Installation view at Soft Opening, London, 2026. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

# Flash Art, 2026

There is an intoxicating ease to the paintings — all 2026 and titled *LAG #1*, *LAG #2* and so on, alluding to the final syllable of Verlag, as well as gaps or delays. One might easily succumb to their discrete withdrawal, taking pleasure in the formal arrangement and architectural cheek. Slyly folding into the environment, their abstraction plays with notions of automation and invisible labor. But the exhibition had the opposite effect on me. I was left with an inexorable desire to dig back into the contested history of image-making, propaganda, and refusal encapsulated by the suppression of student protests in West Germany in the late '60s, the Red Army Faction's violent actions, and the bleak fate of its core members in Stammheim prison -- the death of Holger Meins by hunger strike in 1974 preceding the deaths of Ulrike Meinhof (May 9, 1976) and three other RAF leaders on October 18, 1977. The latter four deaths were ruled suicides, a fact that remains disputed by those convinced the group were murdered in police custody. It's a story entangled with the present moment. Given the RAF media sensation, Stammheim holds a formative place in postwar German consciousness. The decision to hold the current, highly public trial of the Ulm 5, pro-Palestinian activists accused of damaging Elbit Systems property, feels symbolic. All of this is to say: the more Karlson withheld, the more space her abstracted imagery left, the further detail I sought.



*LAG #6*, 2026. Oil and graphite on canvas. 23 x 57 cm. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

The painting cycle's obvious forebear (or counterpoint) is Gerhard Richter's *18 October 1977* (1988). Like Karlson, Richter's monochrome "October" cycle undermines the media's pretensions to documentary truth; RAF corpses and empty Stammheim cells hover inconclusively between photograph and painting, blurred with the artist's signature squeegee. While this technique refuses tabloid-worthy prurient detail, the cycle's relationship to its source imagery is ambiguous, playing unavoidably on the lurid fascination the deaths held. Karlson's refusal is more absolute, viewing imagery through a literal newspaper filter, a tongue-in-cheek statement on the subjective abstraction media images undergo before they're viewed.



"LAG" Installation view at Soft Opening, London, 2026. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.



*LAG #3*, 2026. Oil and graphite on canvas. 23 x 102 cm. Photography by Eva Herzog. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

Perhaps surprisingly given Richter's easily identifiable subjects, *18 October 1977* feels the more ahistorical project of the two. Richter completed his cycle shortly before the Berlin Wall fell, when Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the "end of history": humankind's ideological evolution concluding with the triumph of Western liberalism. It was a flagrantly naive, though very popular, opinion. Richter later noted that he was less interested in reflecting the RAF's story than in that great universal subject: death. He also described ideologically motivated opinions as "false, a hindrance, a menace, or a crime."<sup>1</sup>

In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida countered the notion of the "end of history," arguing instead for a contemporary haunting, a spectrality or non-presence, that nevertheless has a living legacy: "a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."<sup>2</sup> Derrida's "hauntology" is a useful framework for what I perceive to be Karlson's deeply political paintings. With "LAG," Karlson engages with events that played out through gaps in walls and the fog of tear gas via occlusions, whispers, and invisible agendas. Rather than drawing blunt analogies between the conditions that prompted the RAF's emergence and our contemporary moment, although they're undeniably there, Karlson invokes an enduring sense of haunting, an eerie, if forceful, specter of things concealed or contorted, often in plain sight.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Richter, *Writings, 1961–2007* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), 227, 203.

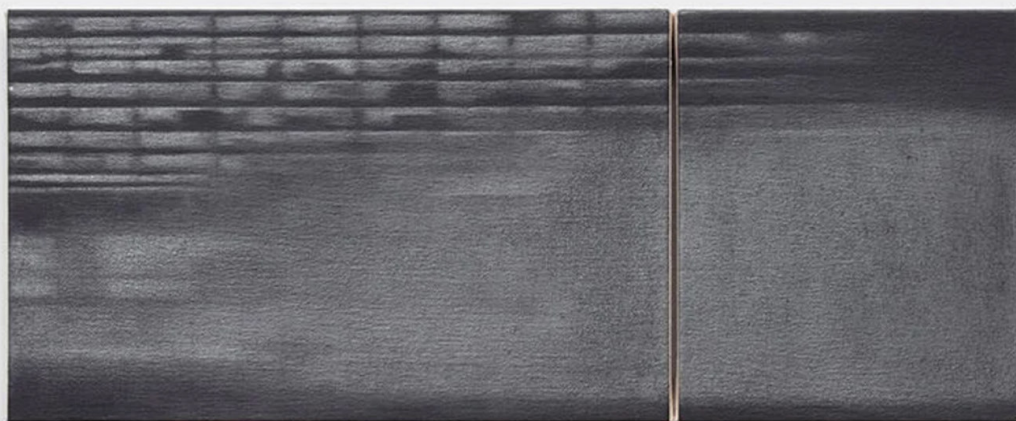
<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xviii.

REVIEWS

## The Best Shows to See in the UK This Autumn

From Louis Fratino's intimate brushstrokes in London to Jonathan Baldock's folkloric encounters in Bristol

BY FRIEZE | 25 SEP 26

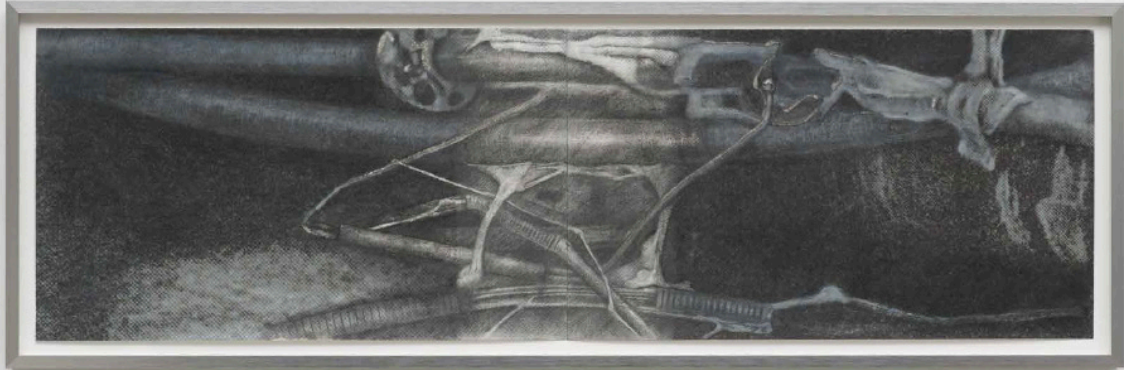


Maren Karlson, *LAG #6*, 2026, oil and graphite on canvas, 23 × 57 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London; photograph: Eva Herzog

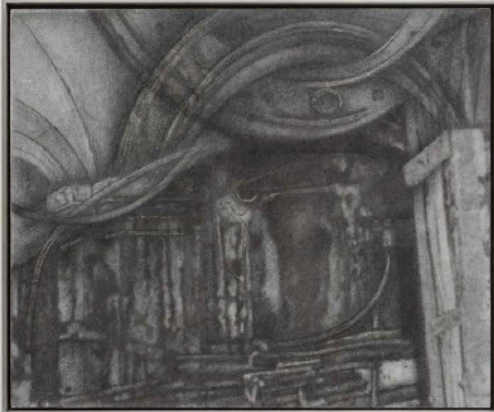
At first glance, Maren Karlson's paintings at Soft Opening appear almost abstract, hung low on the gallery walls as though trying to hide. The exhibition, 'LAG', consists of six greyscale oil-and-graphite works from the title series across 15 canvases (all works 2026), showing a rush of lines enshrouded in darkness: only occasionally can the semblance of a road or a row of office windows be identified. Providing an indication of what these works depict are two small arrangements of photographs (*LAG #7* and *LAG #8*), showing a vehicle on fire beside Axel Springer Verlag, a publishing house in Berlin, with 'LAG' at the top. These are displayed on the walls beside the canvases, alongside brief excerpts from essays by Sanja Grozdanić and Steph Holl-Trieu, commissioned for the accompanying publication. – *Juliet Jacques*

# Flash Art, 2024

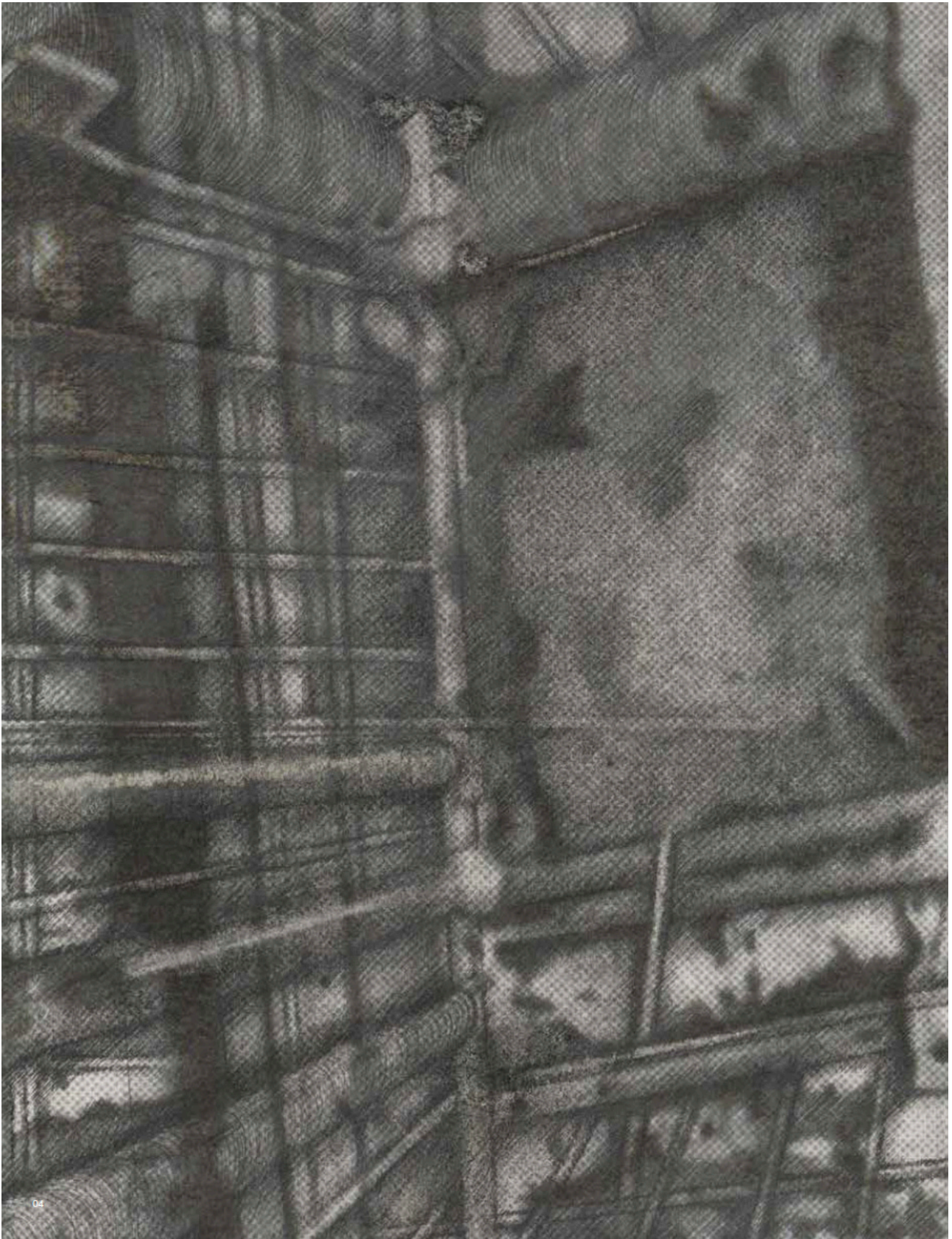
## System Failure



MAREN KARLSON  
WORDS BY  
MARIE CATALANO



# Flash Art, 2024



# Flash Art, 2024

Maren Karlson by Marie Catalano

It's easy to forget that painting itself is a technology, but before the arrival of photography, painting possessed the unique capacity to conjure that which is beyond physical reach. In Maren Karlson's paintings, the sleek components of mechanical parts convincingly suggest the sophisticated inner workings of a world that lies just beyond our own. Bodily and machinic structures seamlessly twine: soft folds rendered in muted, monochromatic palettes siphon off into shadowy channels and sinewy networks that run the length of narrow canvases, scaffolded by glinting frameworks. Whether filled with pliable tissues or vaporous, whirling components elongated in defiance of physical law, her paintings often retain the composure of an ultramodern product whose skin is as permeable as ours. Scale is elusive, and time is too: we might be looking at architectural renderings, topographical landscapes, or devices implanted into bodily cavities. They might exist in both the distant past and future. Familiar but unnamable, Karlson's biomorphic abstractions subvert our understanding of systemic structures and pull back the curtain on constructs of bodily purity and natural order.

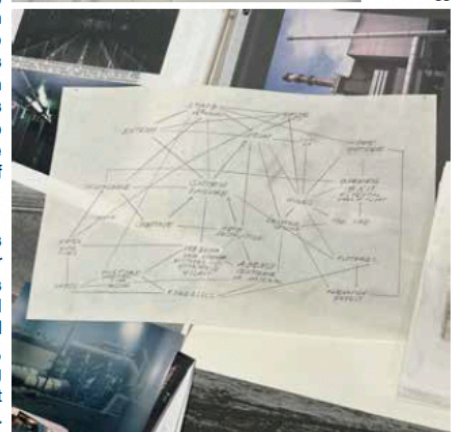
Karlson's distinctive visual language echoes both the fantasies and anxieties of frictionless capitalist production touted by the particularly spectral brand of American dream on offer in Los Angeles, where the artist lives and works. Its promises of smooth, ageless bodies and subtle technologies that obscure visible labor and mortality might reflect what post-capitalist philosopher Mark Fisher called the Gothic Flatline, a conceptual terrain "where it is no longer possible to differentiate the animate from the inanimate and where to have agency is not necessarily to be alive." In Fisher's suspended realm of smoothly operating automatism, barely perceptible capitalist structures keep us passively inert. Karlson's paintings allow us to consider the conditions of permeability, decay, and dust that might unsettle this illusion of natural order. In her recent exhibition "Staub (Störung)" (Dust [disturbance], 2024) at Soft Opening in London, dust looms like an agent of chaos over vertiginous paintings of fleshy surfaces fitted with machine parts, propped against the walls or inset into the recesses of a gallery column. In *Staub (Störung) 7* (2024), a constellation of gears and fittings nestle neatly into sunken orifices. Rendered in a jaundiced palette, soft and modeled comes up against rigid metallics before disappearing into a shadow or fissure, as in *Staub (Störung) 1* (2024). By probing these seams, Karlson provides glimpses into the disorderly potential of errant forces that underlie fragile, skin-deep veneers and all closed systems of control. Dust — that pervasive substance we endeavor to expunge from our aesthetic lives — might be the byproduct of their industrial production as much as a destructive force that could undo it.

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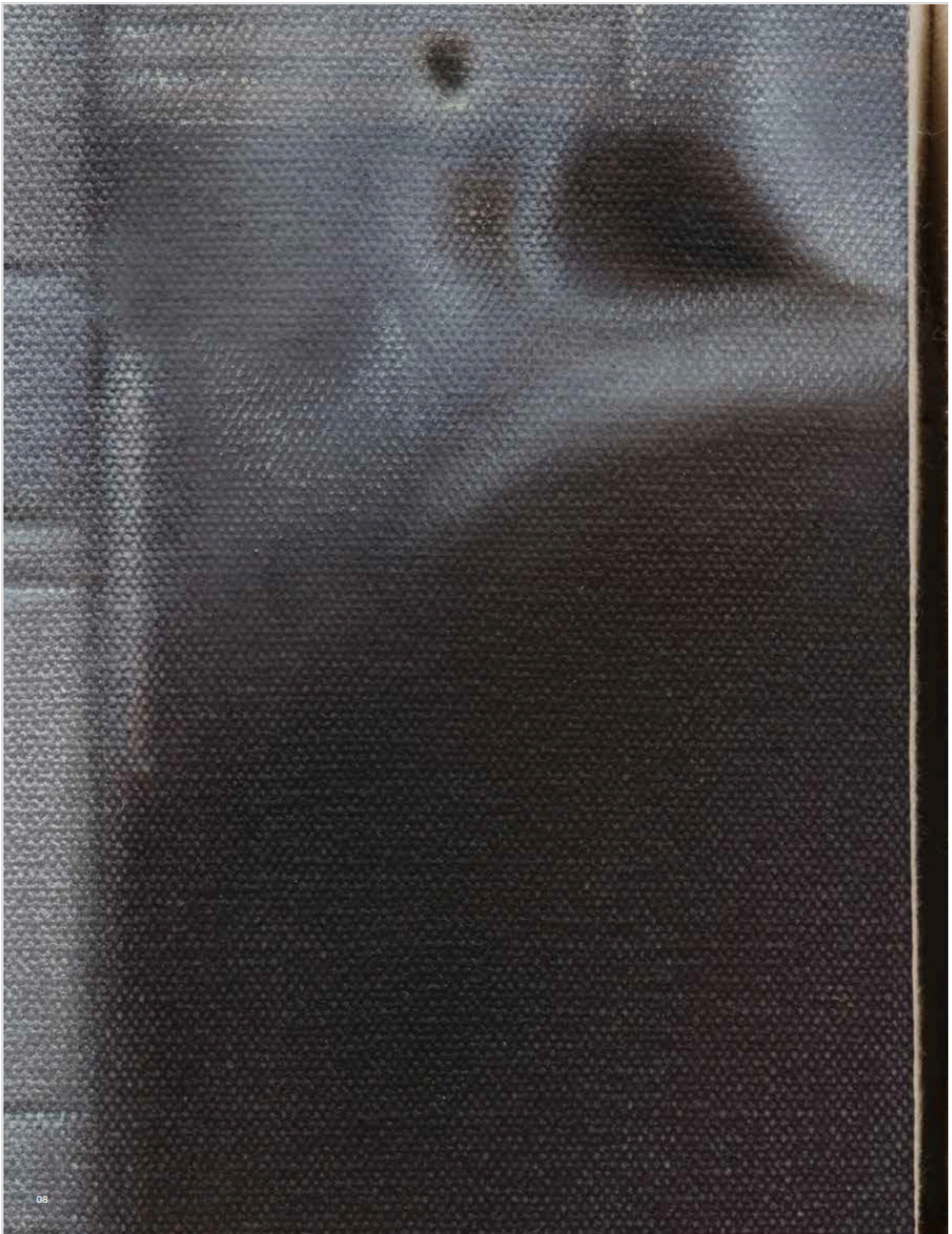
Contrary to twentieth-century ideas that abstract painting arises spontaneously from the interior world of the artist, Karlson derives her abstractions from an archive of found objects and photographic documents that reveal faltering systems on both micro and macro scales: X-rays and endoscopic footage of her own bodily organs during illness, declassified government documentation of dangerously unstable factory conditions, industrial and technological detritus, or photos of escape tunnels dug through prison walls and bank vaults. "I'm interested in these holes that open up in moments of system failure, for better or for worse," she explains. The dissolving mechanisms that appear across "Staub (Störung)" can be traced back to photographic evidence detailing structural failures at the Kombinat VEB Chemische Werke Buna, the main factory in Karlson's hometown of Halle, while it was under Soviet occupation. The photographs were classified by the Stasi until Germany's reunification in 1990, two years after she was born. Honing in on specific elements like valves, connectors, and wiring, Karlson reworks their visible decay and background noise into form, drawing ghostly apparitions and connective tissue from the debris and photochemical artifacts.

The exhibition's title comes from another declassified photograph of the word "STAUB!" traced into a layer of blackened particulate across a bank of snow in front of a house in East Germany, captured near a uranium mine. The image shows radioactive pollution encroaching on residential life, a scene that recalls the vehicle and industrial emissions that hang in the air over present-day Los Angeles. For Karlson, the impending threat of environmental catastrophe and anxieties of bodily preservation haunting LA's pristine surfaces bear uncanny parallels to the overtly threatening environmental conditions of her upbringing in the Central German Chemical Triangle, a post-Soviet region dominated by chemical plants and coal mining. Pollution in the LA river, concrete channels built to

1 Mark Fisher, *Flatline*  
*Constructs: Gothic Materialism*  
*and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*,  
1999, University of Warwick, 2.



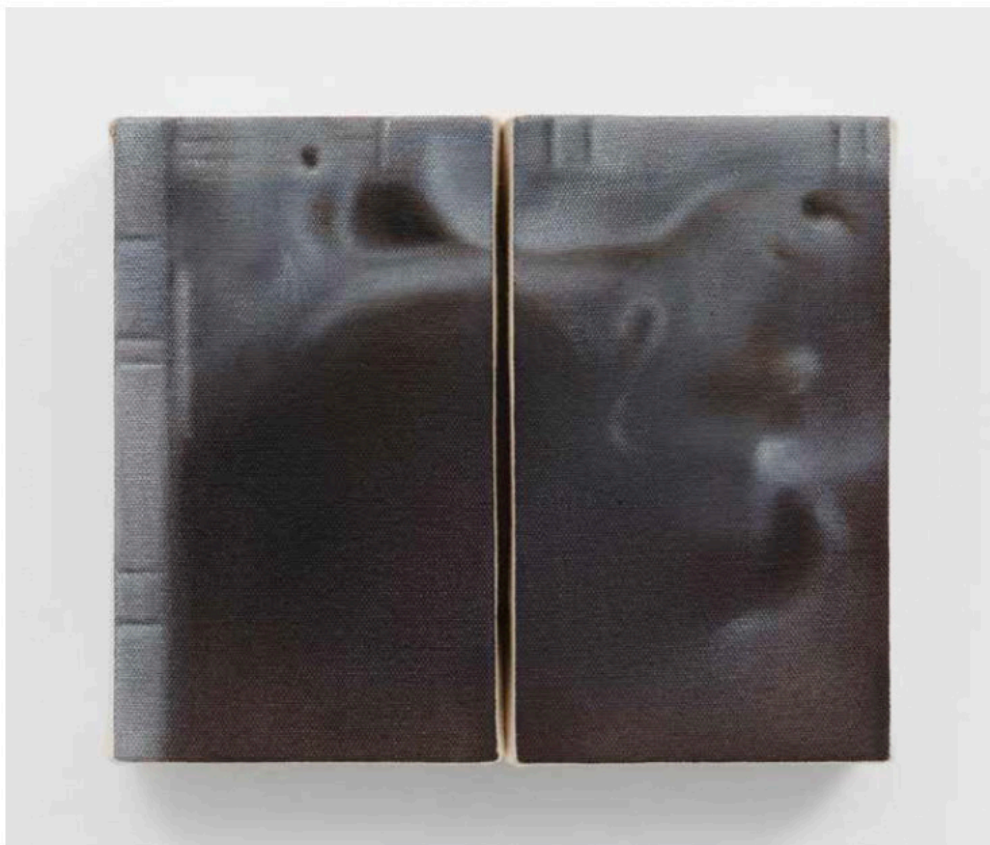
# Flash Art, 2024



# Flash Art, 2024

Maren Karlson by Marie Catalano

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# Flash Art, 2024



# Flash Art, 2024

Maren Karlson by Marie Catalano

funnel groundwater and freeway traffic, pervasive smog, and a relentless pursuit of health and wellness, correspond imperfectly to the Saale River in her hometown of Halle, its brutalist architecture, factory pollution, and public health issues. Attuned to these strange transcontinental echoes, Karlson distills photographic elements into abstractions that mimic reality while presenting it wholly defamiliarized, as she found the conditions of her material past reflected to her in Los Angeles. While the use of distortion as a strategy for defamiliarization remains consistent throughout Karlson's practice, her recent work evidences a shift towards an unsettling anatomic and scientific verism in which the subjects have all but completely dispersed.

For Karlson, holes are a generative force for new pathways, and a recurrent motif across her recent paintings and drawings as voids, passages, egresses and ingresses. Holes are also a bodily reality that trouble ideations of security and render us vulnerable to our surroundings. For her latest exhibition "Staub (Holes)" at Hannah Hoffman in Los Angeles, the artist collected documentation from undisclosed nuclear accidents between the Santa Susana field lab, a power station thirty miles from Karlson's studio and the site of the US's largest nuclear accident during the Cold War, and the Greifswald-Lubmin Nuclear Power Station located just over an hour east of her birthplace, which she visited on a tour last summer. While there, Karlson documented rooms lined with pipes and valves, dizzying scaffolded stairwells, hallways disappearing into darkness, and a control room that looked like something from a 1970s sci-fi movie. The photographic evidence of the accidents contains unidentifiable disorder, which serves as source material across her new body of work. In these images, nuclear power, leveraged as propaganda to bolster a sense of national security across geographies, succumbs to the natural processes of entropy: a dissolving infrastructure evidenced by corroded pipes, sagging wooden frameworks, and crumbling concrete foundations.

It's not incidental that photography plays a central role in Karlson's process. Since its inception, photography has been a fundamental tool for policing and forensics, and as such has been instrumental to systems of social control. In her drawings, Karlson distorts cropped inkjet reproductions of the photographs themselves, destabilizing their spatial logic while maintaining certain details. In *Staub 4* (2024), for instance, she zooms in on a photo of deteriorating tubing and a rotted floor, reimagining a visual interruption in broken pipes as a site of reconfiguration. It looks like intelligent life or human intervention exploiting a faltering system. There's no clear indication of up or down, and recognizable details are fleeting. Karlson's drawings complicate our relationship to photographic technology, undermining its status as a "truth-telling" medium.

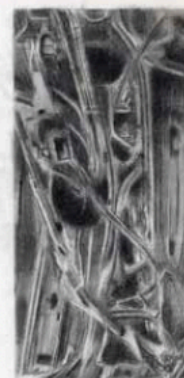
Karlson's recurrent invocation of dust situates her in a historical dialogue with Georges Bataille and his circle of Surrealist painters. While the Precisionists and machine aestheticists of the 1920s fetishized machinery and glamorized factory production, Bataille critiqued it by centering the inevitable byproduct of natural decay and industrial production — dust and disorder. These elements became a model for Surrealist abstraction and its painterly decomposition that resisted the clean lines, sealed boundaries, and hierarchical order of capitalist production. In contrast to LA's glossy veneer, Karlson drains her paintings of vibrant color and sometimes mixes her pigments with ash and particulate she collects around her studio, or scrapes the surfaces of her work with texturized patterns she observed in factory floors and the sidewalks outside. Oftentimes they are executed across two canvases, interrupting the illusory continuity of the image. Like Bataille's Surrealists, Karlson's paintings host disruptive noise in places where we might feel more comfortable with gleaming surfaces. These aren't the sealed environments we've been promised in our technologically advanced cyborg fantasies.

They also don't align with what we typically expect from a painting. Karlson bases her elongated canvas ratios on architectural features like fuse boxes in her studio or pipes in a gallery space. Sometimes she props them on the floor or integrates them into the wall, as is the case with *Staub (Holes) 1* (2024), a long, thin painting that might be mistaken for the view into a boiler room. These gestures present paintings as both objects and windows into her worlds. "Painting is a pretty closed system," she says in reference to her installations. "I'm trying to make room for randomness or openings, to make an artwork that is not as sealed as we would like to think. It's like the attachment we have to stable ground." Karlson refers here to the



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# Flash Art, 2024



Maren Karlson by Marie Catalano

stable ground of the horizon line and linear perspective, optical constructs that create an illusory view of the central self and distant other. German and American Romantic landscape painting serve as particularly salient examples, with their sublime fantasies of natural purity untouched by foreign influence that became a visual and ideological resource for the German Nationalist agenda and manifest destiny of westward expansion. Karlson seeks to liberate the chaos and instability such worldviews endeavor to control.

To this end, Karlson embraces what Hito Steyerl calls “the perspective of free fall,” where our position is not defined by any one horizon line, but by relationships to the constellation of other bodies around us. “As you are falling,” Steyerl writes, “the horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries.”<sup>2</sup> If it weren’t split across two canvases, we might imagine tipping over into the amorphous void in Karlson’s painting *The Open* (2024). Voids like these also appeared across Karlson’s 2022 show “Cypher,” where vacuous cavities based on x-rays of the artist’s body erode composite forms, recalling bone tissue or the interior contours of car doors in works like *Vagus* (2022). In yet another body of work, circular forms gape like eyes, mouths, or drains in *Passage II* and *IV* (both 2022). Karlson’s mechanomorphic visual vocabulary and affinity for voids put her in lineage with the artist Lee Bontecou, who created faceted sculptures and soot drawings against the backdrop of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War. “The natural world and its visual wonders and horrors — man-made devices with their mind-boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations, elusive human nature and its multiple ramifications from the sublime to unbelievable abhorrences — to me are all one,” Bontecou once wrote in an artist statement. Karlson’s work similarly untethers binaries of nature and machine, subject and object, living and dead.

The dislocation of agency and control runs central to Karlson’s project. One particularly generative referent the artist continues to return to is a 1988 documentary titled *Bitteres aus Bitterfeld* (Bitterness from Bitterfeld) shot illegally by environmental activists to expose dangerous levels of chemical pollution in its titular East German city. The guerilla video is as intoxicating as it is damning: long, slow pans of barren fields decimated from coal extraction appear extraterrestrial. Ochre froth collecting in public waterways dances to an avant-garde jazz score. The gaping black mouth of an open pipe leeches toxic sludge into a puddle near food processing facilities. The bad YouTube translation of the German narration casts the poisonous ooze as strangely animate: “Remains run out of the canisters and form sparkling puddles... the pipes often freeze, burst, and the broth runs uncontrollably.” What might have provoked nightmares for Caspar David Friedrich or Albert Bierstadt is no latent, discarded waste, but rather an active, bubbling agent of chaos wreaking visible havoc all over town.

Karlson’s practice urges us to confront discomfiting elisions between body and machine, human and nonhuman, objective truth and subjective interpretation. In her practice, this also manifests in frequent collaborations and exchange with artist peers across two-person shows and co-authored projects. Through her engagement with photographic material and the historical echoes of environmental and industrial collapse, Karlson punctures holes in dead space: the notion of a solitary artistic practice, fantasies of impermeable bodies, the boundaries of a painting, the validity of a photograph. Imbued with the visual language of decay and disruption, her paintings reflect the fragility and volatility of what we consider “sealed” systems. Karlson challenges the technological ideal of a seamlessly controlled world and makes room for new possibilities in the very cracks that we typically try to smooth over. Isn’t solid ground really just an accumulation of dust?

**Maren Karlson** (1988, Rostock) lives and works in Los Angeles. Karlson’s work uses the speculative technology of painting to examine inconsistencies found within systems of control. Recent solo exhibitions include: Soft Opening, London; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; and Ashley, Berlin. Her work has been included in group shows at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles; Soft Opening at CFA, Milan; Gathering, London; In Lieu, Los Angeles; Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich; Galeria Municipal do Porto; Soft Opening, London; The Drawing Center, New York; Chapter, New York; and stadium, Berlin. Karlson’s solo exhibition “Staub (Holes)” is on view at Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles, through December 21, 2024. Her work will be on view in the group show “And since my love is spent (an image repertoire)” at Antenna Space, Shanghai from January 19 until February 28, 2025.

**Marie Catalano** is a writer, curator, and educator based in New York. She holds an MA in art history from Hunter College and is currently an adjunct professor at NYU. Previously she was a partner at JTT gallery, New York.

- 01 *Staub 4*, 2024. Oil and graphite on inkjet print on paper. 31 × 107 cm. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.
- 02 *Staub 6*, 2023. Oil and graphite on inkjet print on paper on wood. 43.4 × 52 × 5 cm. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.
- 03 *Staub 7*, 2023. Oil and graphite on inkjet print on paper on wood. 42 × 50.2 × 4 cm. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.
- 04 *Staub 3*, 2024. Detail. Oil and graphite on inkjet print on paper. 53 × 31 cm. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.
- 05, 06, 07 *Studio*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.
- 08, 09 *The Open*, 2023. Detail. Oil on canvas. 18 × 21 cm. Photography by Nik Massey. Courtesy of the artist and in lieu, Los Angeles.
- 10 *Port II*, 2023. Detail. Oil on canvas. 74 × 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.
- 11 After the fire at Greifswald-Lubmin nuclear power station, 1975. Courtesy of the artist.
- 12, 13 *Studio*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.
- 14 *Port I*, 2023. Oil, ash, beeswax and graphite on canvas. 31 × 179 cm. Photography by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.
- 15 *Staub (Störung) 6*, 2024. Oil and graphite on linen. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.
- 16 *Staub (Holes) 9*, 2024. Silver gelatin print. 10 × 15 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux 24* (April 2011).



# Bitter Reviews, 2024

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## Records

7 November 2024

### **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

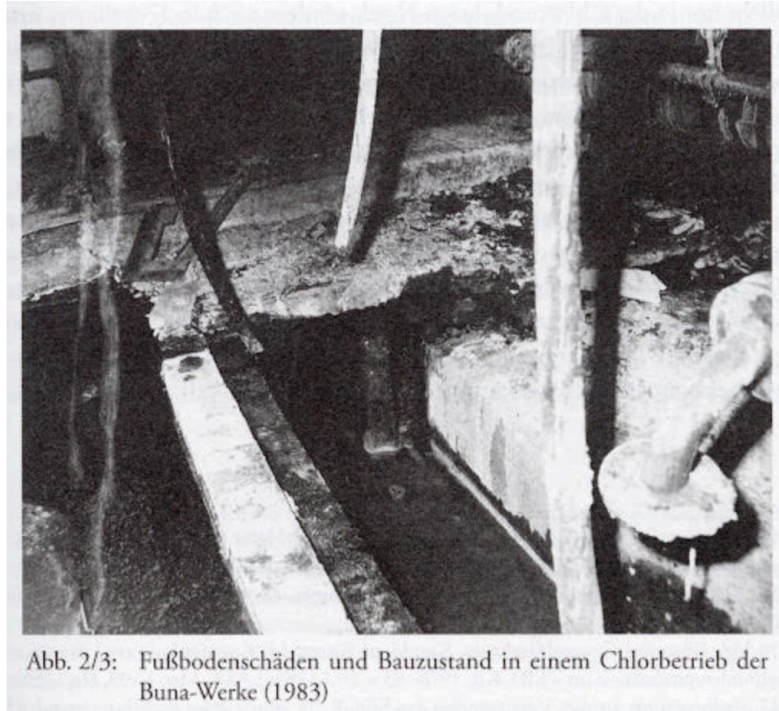


Abb. 2/3: Fußbodenschäden und Bauzustand in einem Chlorbetrieb der Buna-Werke (1983)

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.

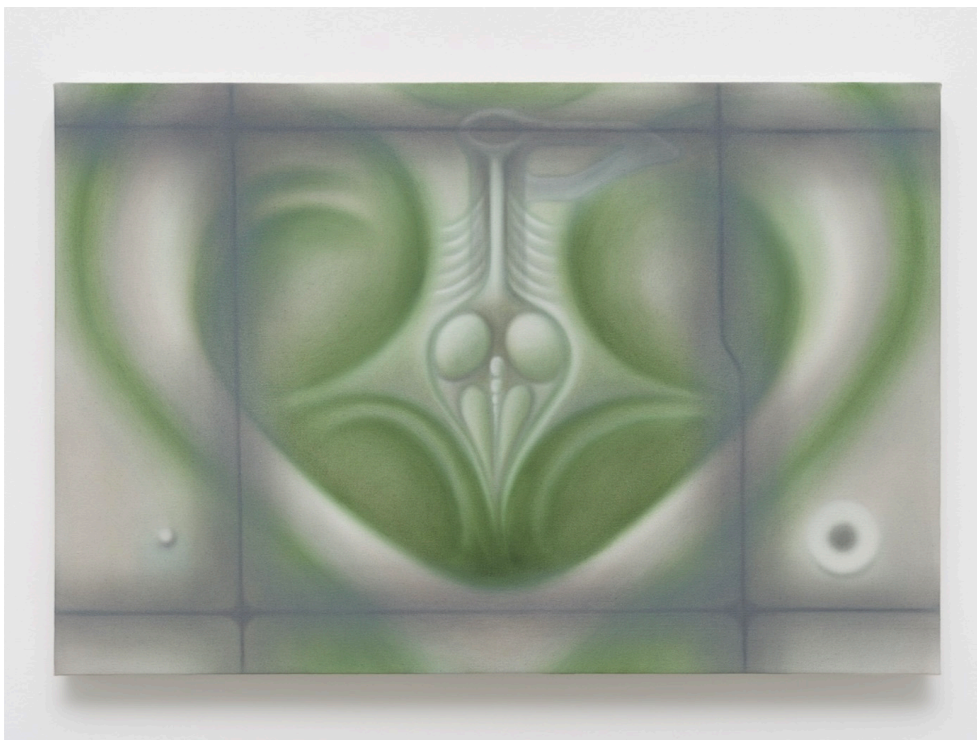
In the exhibition's text is another story of disturbance. This same German factory pumped water from a nearby river, later returning it warmer than before. Another nearby factory did the same thing. Together, they heated the water to the point where it was no longer useful to them — disturbing it until 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, corpse-like 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.



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 1*, 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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