

"Karen Carson," by Joan Hugo for Frieze, issue 30, Sept. 1996.

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BY JOAN HUGO IN **REVIEWS** | 09 SEP 96

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Some feminists are artists. Their art-making is driven by an agenda, and the work functions as an illustration to a polemic as much as an aesthetic statement. A case in point is Judy Chicago, currently the focus of an exhibition entitled 'Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" in Feminist Art History' at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center. The Dinner Party (1979) is a large installation of 39 place settings, each positioned on a separate, elaborately woven and embroidered cloth, with the ensemble arranged to form a large triangle. Each setting commemorates an important mythical or historical woman, and the central feature of each setting is an ornately painted plate whose motif is usually, and unmistakably, a vulva. The names of another 999 women are written on the tiled floor inside the triangle. It took five years to complete, involved several hundred women working as unpaid volunteers under Chicago's tutelage and has been controversial since its completion.

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Some artists are feminists. While their convictions are no less strongly held and their identities as women just as vital to their work, these factors do not override their engagement with other issues equally germane to their discipline. Karen Carson is such an artist. Her work was recently seen in a three-site retrospective, entitled 'But Enough About Me', with a concurrent exhibition of drawings at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery. Organised by Otis gallery director Anne Ayres, the survey took a different approach at each site. 'The Language of Space' at Otis, comprised work that explored one of Carson's constant themes, beginning with a 'Zipper' piece from 1972, in which cotton duck and large industrial zippers are attached to the wall in ways that allow for a variety of permutations. Also exhibited were several paintings from the early 80s, which deal more conventionally with spatial issues, and a cluster of work from the oddly sinister 'Innocence' series - collage drawings full of references to popular iconography, disposed symmetrically under heavily tinted Perspex, with ornate, coloured frames. Carson also showed work from her most recent 'Heart and Soul' series, including a pink, heart-shaped canvas with a Janus head, one side smiling, the other grimacing, the whole dominated by squiggly plastic eyes like those found on cheap toys.

The Otis show was not installed chronologically; I have imposed this order on it. On the other hand, the Santa Monica exhibition, curated by Noriko Gamblin, served as the historical framework within which to situate this seemingly disparate work. It provided important linkages and reinforced the choices made at Otis. Most notably, it underscored the critical importance of drawing to Carson's work, as did the ancillary show at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery. At LACE, Ayres installed a recreation of *It's a Small World* (1992), in which angels of both sexes, drawn directly on the wall, disport themselves in erotic playfulness. 'Found' globes of various sizes, hanging at irregular heights from the ceiling, have been painted to display scenes of economic, industrial, or military extravagance and abuse, and point to ecological doom.

In addition to Carson's concern for space, a number of other elements have been at play in her work from the outset. References to the nature of vision abound, from pairs of concentric circles in *Self Exam* (1980), and the floating, plastic eyes, to titles like *Between the Eyes* (1987), *God's Eye* (1988), and the use of whole mirrors and fragments of mirrors, which slyly and unexpectedly return the viewer's gaze. There is a wry humour in much of her work, from the title of the survey itself and the reference to Barnett Newman in the 'Zipper' pieces, to paintings like *Attack of the Killer Me's* (1995), in which a well-dressed woman on a shopping spree suddenly drops her parcels as a swarm of Ms and Es swirls around her head. There is irony, especially in the later enamel on vinyl banners with their pseudo-transcendental aphorisms, as in *Sandwich*, an exploded view in which the upper and lower slices of bread are labelled 'Birth' and 'Death' and the cheese/meat/lettuce filling proclaims 'Thank You'.

One of the reasons for characterising Carson as an artist who is also a feminist is that she is unafraid to explore the emotional vicissitudes of everyday life, such as personal relationships. In the 'Bed' series, these images of ultimate intimacy smoulder, burn and shatter. The paired circles of *Self Exam* may refer to eyes, as suggested earlier, or to

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the ritual of breast examination. Erotic references also pervade the work: zippers, after all, have a long history, and the angels in *It's a Small World* are obviously having a good time.

The female ageing cycle is introduced as a theme, both literally, with the use of vintage clocks, and figuratively, in *Phoenix and the Ovaries* (1991), in which the reproductive system is schematised: a convex sunburst mirror as the clitoris and a clock in the womb, flanked by birds, knives, mirror shards, and the words 'estrogen' and 'progesterone'. The distinction between artists like Chicago and Carson is clear. Chicago's later work is didactic; there is a marked distance between lived experience and the work (although she followed 'The Dinner Party' with a series called 'The Birth Project', she has never had children). Carson's work, on the other hand, is deeply personal, even as it explores formalist concerns, building intriguing layers of complexity which resist categorisation.