

"Essential Arts: With a zipper, Karen Carson adds sensuousness to chilly minimalism," by Carolina A. Miranda for the Los Angeles Times, January 30, 2021.

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A detail of "Yellow Diamonds," 2018, by Karen Carson, on view at Gavlak gallery.

Greetings from our ongoing pandemic, where we're all a little bit of Mads Mikkelsen in the Danish dramedy ["Another Round."](#) I'm **Carolina A. Miranda**, culture and urban design columnist for the Los Angeles Times, rounding up the week's essential art news — and satirical architecture speak:

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Minimalism, but make it tingle

For her graduate show at **UCLA** in 1971, **Karen Carson** presented a series of works that consisted of simple geometric pieces of fabric — sometimes produced in two or three tones — that were bound together by zippers. These were pinned to a wall and could be manipulated by viewers who were invited to open and close the zippers, changing the shape of the piece in the process.

The works, known as **the “zipper” series**, take the tropes of **minimalism** — its remoteness, its chilly control (think of **Donald Judd**’s stainless steel) — and imbues it with sensuousness. To tug at a zipper is to feel the tingling anticipation of fabric that is about to be shed. Carson cedes that control to the viewer, who with a few pulls, can determine the final form of the work. It is a minimalism of total release.

These works take a hard edge and make it soft. They take an area of art dominated by men and imbue it with feminine craft. (There is no outsourcing to a fabricator here; Carson sews these herself.) And in an age of art with towering carbon footprints — the room-sized installation, the architectural environment — I deeply admire the fact that the zipper pieces can make a bold statement, then be folded up and easily transported to another site.

Of these works, independent critic **Dave Hickey** told Times contributor **Hunter Drohojowska-Philp** [in 1996](#): “They were investigating the parochial unctuousness of minimalism with a cosmopolitan irony. They were smart, funny, good-looking and secretly serious.”

A small selection of Carson’s zipper pieces is on view at **Gavlak** gallery in the Arts District in the solo exhibition [“Karen Carson: Middle Ground.”](#) And, I for one, couldn’t be happier to become reacquainted with them. The last time I saw these works was in an exhibition the artist had at **Rosamund Felsen Gallery** in 2016, where I happened to catch her installing the pieces as I cruised through. Ever since I’ve regretted not writing about that show since the work is so smart and so wry and so wildly underseen.

It feels like a crime that New York’s **Museum of Modern Art** doesn’t have one of these in their minimalism galleries. Also, *ahem*, the **Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles** — one of Carson’s hometown institutions.

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"2 Stripes," 1970, by Karen Carson. A rectangular piece of plain canvas is pinned to the wall and bisected by four zippers, which are partly pulled.

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Karen Carson installing one of her zipper pieces at Rosamund Felsen Gallery in downtown Los Angeles in 2016. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

The show at Gavlak also includes a series of recent works by the artist: **bas relief paintings** that layer pieces of wood frames to create geometric patterns that are then highlighted with color — colors that evoke Southwestern palettes. (Imagine a **Georgia O’Keeffe** flower painting that has been exploded, then reassembled in three dimensions out of angular bits of wood.)

As with her zipper paintings, there is a sensuousness to these works. Carson’s brush strokes are visible throughout. In some patches, she saturates the wood; in others, she lets flashes of color shine through. These are objects that are resolutely handmade, not machine-crafted. The patterns seem to evoke interior states of both mind and body — in some cases, women’s bodies and the life forces they contain.

And at a time of so much death, a little female life force is a welcome thing. Do not miss.

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"Butterfly," 2018, by Karen Carson, is part of a series of recent works.

"Karen Carson: Middle Ground" is on view at **Gavlak** through March 6. The gallery is currently open [by appointment](#) in keeping with social distancing protocols.