

Review: *Karen Carson: Middle Ground*  
Artforum, April 2021 issue.



## Karen Carson

GAVLAK

For painter Karen Carson, an early West Coast Minimalist, the abstract has been, and continues to be, a quiet and powerful tool for navigating the maelstrom of life in the here and now. This notion was made strikingly clear in “Middle Ground,” an exhibition that featured two bodies of work created nearly fifty years apart.

Carson’s more recent bas-relief paintings are small, intricate, and intimate, crafted from numerous hand-cut and individually painted pieces of wood. Taking inspiration from the environment of her Montana studio, Carson uses some of nature’s more vivid hues to create kaleidoscopic effects. Colors such as robin’s-egg blue, lilac, blood red, and aquamarine scintillate through angular symmetrical compositions. These revelatory works called to mind Byzantine mosaics, hallucinatory DMT trips, and prisms of dancing light in rippling waves. The most impactful of these paintings are *Yellow Diamonds*, 2018, and *Red Diamond*, 2019, as they seem to do a great deal inside a small amount of space, perhaps even more so than the other relief works on view. *Red Diamonds* is especially captivating—two of the titular forms, tilted horizontally, almost feel like facial features, as though they are a pair of otherworldly, alien eyes that gaze back at (and perhaps even deep *into*) the viewer. Their “pupils” are made from a pair of triangles done in magenta and aqua, while the tops of their “irises” feel like narrow portals that give us a glimpse into a dusky, sanguineous sky. We disappear into Carson’s vibrant voids and are confronted by a quiet and humbling sense of awe—cosmic, transcendent. Her deeply formal

Karen Carson,  
*Butterfly*, 2018, acrylic  
on bas-relief wood,  
21½ × 32½ × 3".



tableaux are in line with those made by certain forebears, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint, and Agnes Pelton: painters whose nonobjective imagery embraced the multivalent aspects of the infinite, the spiritual.

Contrasting with these pieces was a selection of Carson’s iconic series of zipper paintings (clearly a winking homage to Barnett Newman’s famous “zips”), which she debuted at her 1971 graduate exhibition at the University of California, Los Angeles. The large unstretched canvases on display here—made from overlapping and contiguous panels, either left raw or painted red, black, and white—were held together by zippers. Viewers were invited to interact with them, zipping and unzipping to their heart’s content. Pieces such as *Two Right Angles*, 1972—an upright rectangle made from L-shaped lengths of canvas painted a rich shade of onyx—drooped off the wall and sometimes languorously flopped onto the floor. The work, though formally rigorous and ingeniously conceived, is also unabashedly open and playful. Carson eschews Minimalism’s aesthetic cool and standoffishness for something more inviting, gentle, even puckish. *Two Right Angles* could be a funner sibling to one of Frank Stella’s “Black Paintings,” 1958–60. Stella’s dark bars in his series are punishing, prisonlike. Carson’s, thankfully, are the exact opposite—they are spirited, inviting.

Throughout “Middle Ground” we were treated to Carson’s unique takes on Minimalism and various forms of abstraction. Though her work is entirely singular, it is rooted in art history. She speaks to the past as her works speak to us: generously and with great feeling.

—Jake Yuzna