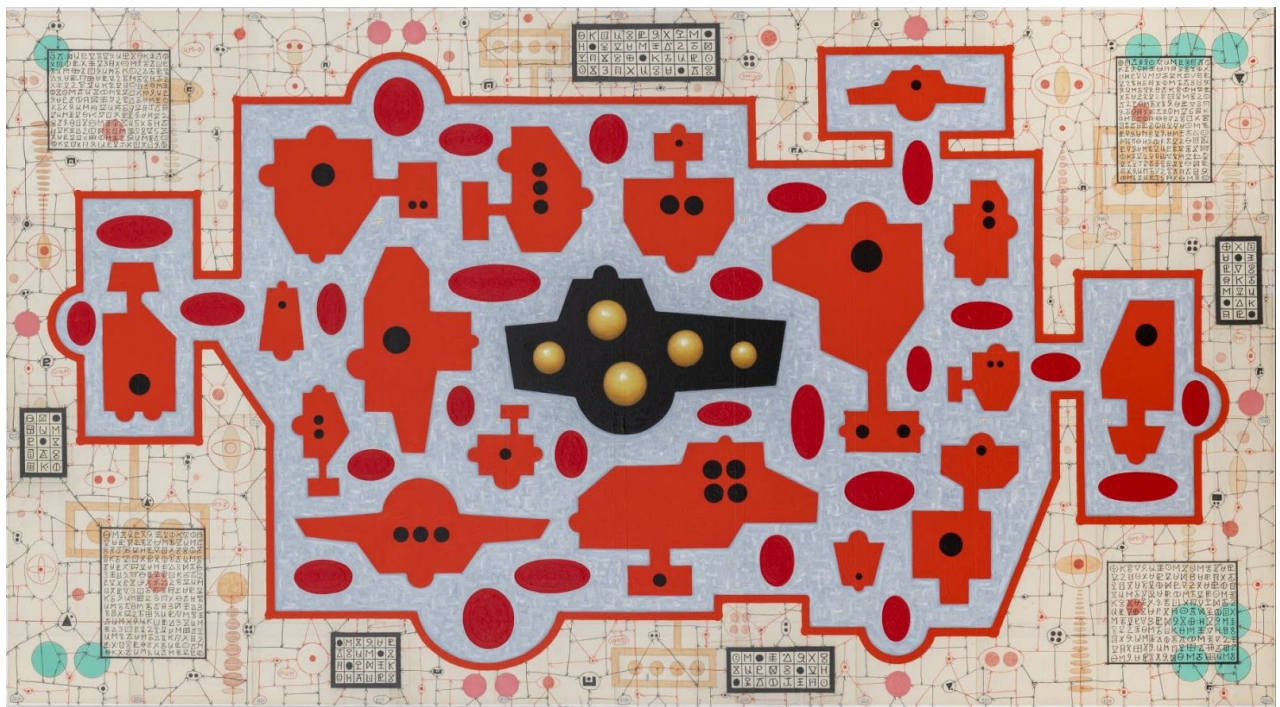


BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Karla Knight: *Notes from the Lightship*

By [Jonathan Goodman](#)

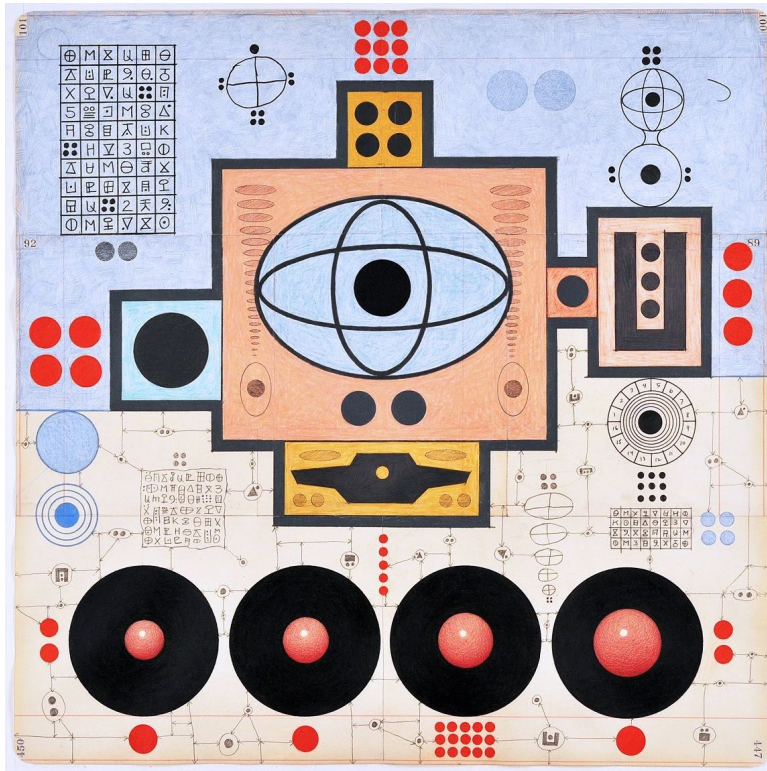


Karla Knight is interested in conveying an extraterrestrial symbolism that is informed by both canonical modernism and outsider art. She is a trained contemporary artist, with a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, whose father was the author of books which dealt with UFOs and extrasensory perception. Her father's influence might explain the hieratic writing and spaceships that inhabit her images, which are made on ledger paper attached to canvas or linen. At the same time, a kind of writing, seemingly legible but ultimately not comprehensible, appears as a distinct element among the

separated, perhaps hierarchical signs that populate Knight's composition. These illegible graphemes, nearly pictographs, emerge from the artist's interest in her son's attempts to learn to write. If he didn't know the exact markings for a given letter, he would improvise, and Knight seems very taken with this gray area between legible writing and abstract sign.

Knight's paintings are resolutely flat, covered with a broad range of hieroglyphs. The placement of elements appears to be slightly arbitrary, although inevitably it is the artist herself who could inform us if that were true. Whatever her motivations, the compositions read like inspired directives from another world. In *Fleet 1 (Gray Matter)* (2019), the artist has produced a rough rectangle, studded with offset bumps and small right-angled containers that hold what look like eccentric red spaceships with circular black openings. Indeed, the image is filled with such vehicles surrounded by gray matter—are these shapes the “fleet” of Knight's title? In the center is a single black vehicular shape, containing five golden spheres. Outside the polygonal enclosure that dominates the image are charts of Knight's near-writing, usually enclosed by a heavy black line, as well as other, usually geometric, abstract symbols on a light tan background. There is an unusual amount of visual information being conveyed—even if it is readable only in an abstractly symbolic fashion.

Orbit (OUM-33) (2019)—Knight has made it clear that the nonsense syllable “oum” collapses the meditation syllable “om” with the throat-clearing “um”—looks like a game board filled with arcane symbols. Eyes occupy the four corners of the composition, while X's, spheres, letters, the number nine, and eccentrically shaped airships appear in quantity throughout. These signs are cloistered within narrow containers, both vertical and horizontal. An outward frame circumscribes three complicated shapes within, each of them again filled with these symbols. Inside the frame, the background space is gray, allowing four golden spheres in isolated black squares to draw our attention.



In *Spaceship 1* (2017–19), we encounter the symbol for the atom: a black sphere surrounded by curving lines. Quadrilateral niches emanate from the sides of the square that contains this schematic atom. Beneath are four large black circles framing reddish spheres that increase in size as they move to the right—there is a logic that governs Knight’s compositions, but it remains opaque. In the upper-left

corner, another of Knight’s tablets of hieroglyphs appears, and various other symbols further complicate the image. Here, as throughout Knight’s show, the artist conveys abstract thoughts via abstract designs and emblematic marks. At first, one might look askance at Knight’s sophisticated use of a vernacular symbolic language, but the more time you spend with the images, the more they evoke signage familiar from academia or advertising, although they bear messages that have been filtered through spheres of experience beyond our ken. It is a cosmic globalism that works.