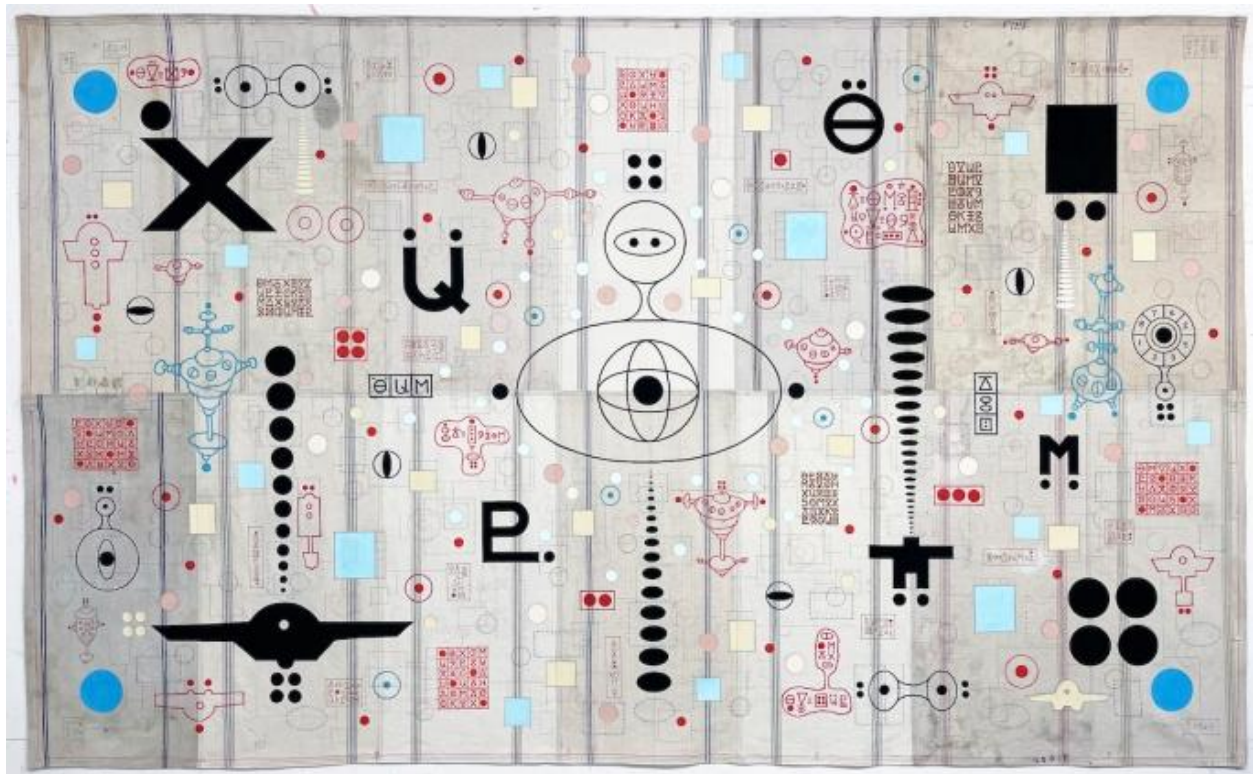


ARTnews

How I Made This: Karla Knight's Otherworldly Art

BY HOWARD HALLE

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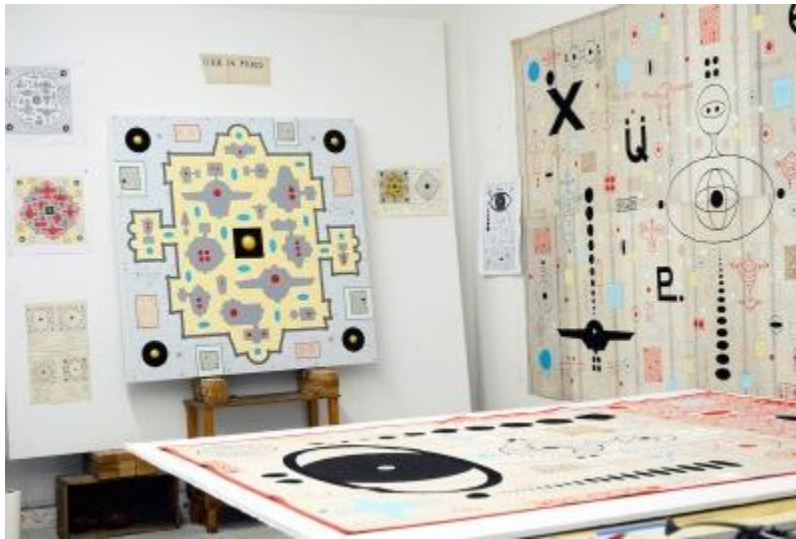
Karla Knight, *Fantastic Universe (More Than You Know)*, 2020, Flashe, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton, 73 x 120 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. KARLA KNIGHT.

Seeing Karla Knight's art for the first time, you might think that her work was the product of an outsider artist who'd experienced a close encounter of the third kind. But you'd be wrong on both counts. For one thing, Knight, 63, graduated with a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1980; for another, she's never met any little green men decamping from an extraterrestrial vehicle filled with a blinding light. "I don't have a personal experience of being visited by aliens and being kidnapped by them," she says. (But *would* she voluntarily accompany ETs into the void? "If they were friendly, then probably yes!")

Still, confusing Knight's efforts with those of a self-taught alien abductee artist is understandable. Her paintings and drawings feature layouts of unintelligible glyphs, geometric motifs, and silhouettes of UFOs. They resemble what might happen if an Egyptian tomb were somehow painted with extraterrestrial

symbols. “I guess you could say I’m an educated outsider,” she says, describing her work as a “weird mix of stuff.”

This month the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, opens a survey of Knight’s 40-year career. Featured are works on paper and canvas, created with colored pencil (which is sometimes built up and crushed into the surface until it looks like paint), acrylics, and Flashe, a water-soluble, vinyl-based pigment. Also on view are large embroideries on found fabrics, such as a vast composition aptly titled *Fantastic Universe (More Than You Know)*. That piece, and indeed, the exhibition as a whole, reveal the consistent quirkiness of Knight’s efforts—an eccentricity that percolates through her family history.

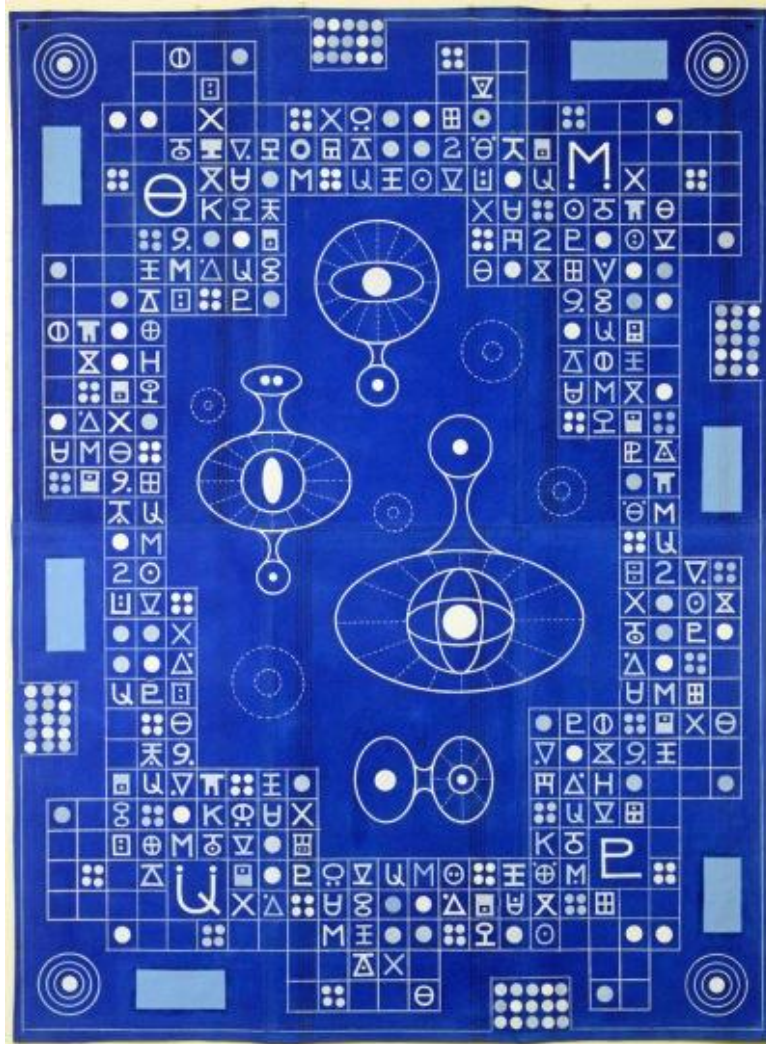


Studio view. KARLA KNIGHT

Knight’s father was fascinated by extraterrestrial intelligence and the paranormal and authored several tomes on the subject. “Growing up with someone who was into all that didn’t seem so strange,” Knight says. “I didn’t think that other realms or realities were unusual.” And it wasn’t just her father. “At Christmas and Easter, we’d go to my grandmother’s house and do the Ouija board. Occasionally we’d hold séances. The whole family was interested in out-of-body experiences, so it was perfectly normal to me.”

Knight says that they often made contact with the other side. “There was definitely stuff that wasn’t being forced by us. People we didn’t know would come through on the Ouija board, and they definitely had things to say.”

As for herself, “I’m pretty psychic, so I do hear voices in my head,” Knight says. “I see stuff, and a lot of my work is very much intuitive in that I just kind of stay open and let it come through me. So I would have to say that it’s channeled.”



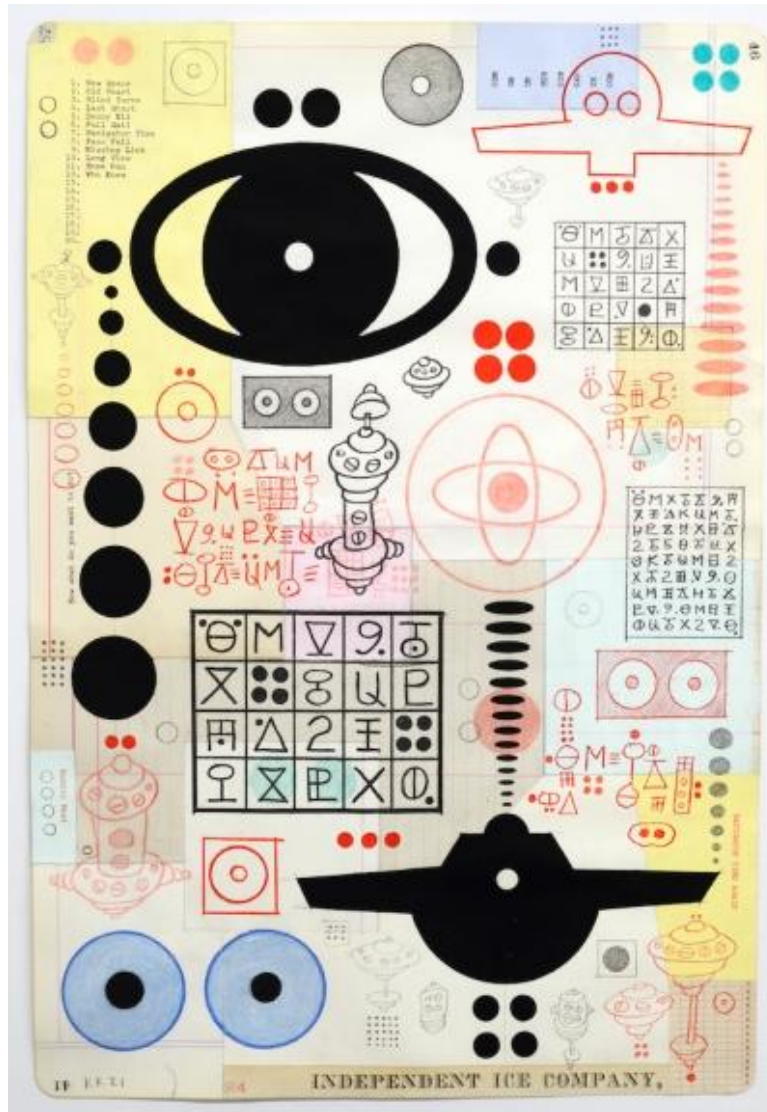
Karla Knight, *Blue Navigator 2*, 2021, Flashe, acrylic marker, pencil and embroidery on cotton, 68 x 50 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. KARLA KNIGHT.

The motifs recurring in *Fantastic Universe* include the aforementioned spaceships, as well as eyeballs and mysterious spheres that have been part of Knight's work since the 1980s. Back then, "I did paintings of floating orbs in landscapes. They were very surreal." Her efforts eventually evolved into a diagrammatic approach characterized not only by UFO imagery but also by blocks of text written in an illegible alphabet devised by the artist. The idea was inspired by observing her son, now 27, attempting to master letters as a toddler. "He'd transpose E and R and write them backwards," she says. "He was making up stuff and it looked really otherworldly. I watched him and thought, why can't I make up my own language too?"

Knight compares her mix of Roman characters and invented signs to automatic writing. "People always ask me, is it a code? Is there a key? Are you sending a message? And I always say no." She admits that such viewers get frustrated with her gnomic inscriptions and even agrees that they may constitute "complete gibberish."

Knight has lately been concentrating on tapestries like *Fantastic Universe*, which pair her go-to mediums with fabric ink and embroidery on vintage feed sacks sourced from eBay that Knight stitches together into panels. Dating from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, they're printed with delicate stripes resembling mattress

ticking. She mostly leaves the bags in their original buff color (“I really like to work any cream-colored surface”), but some are dyed a deep blue with imagery rendered in white ink and thread. Their resemblance to blueprints is completely intentional, since, as Knight puts it, “a lot of my work looks like architectural floor plans anyway.”



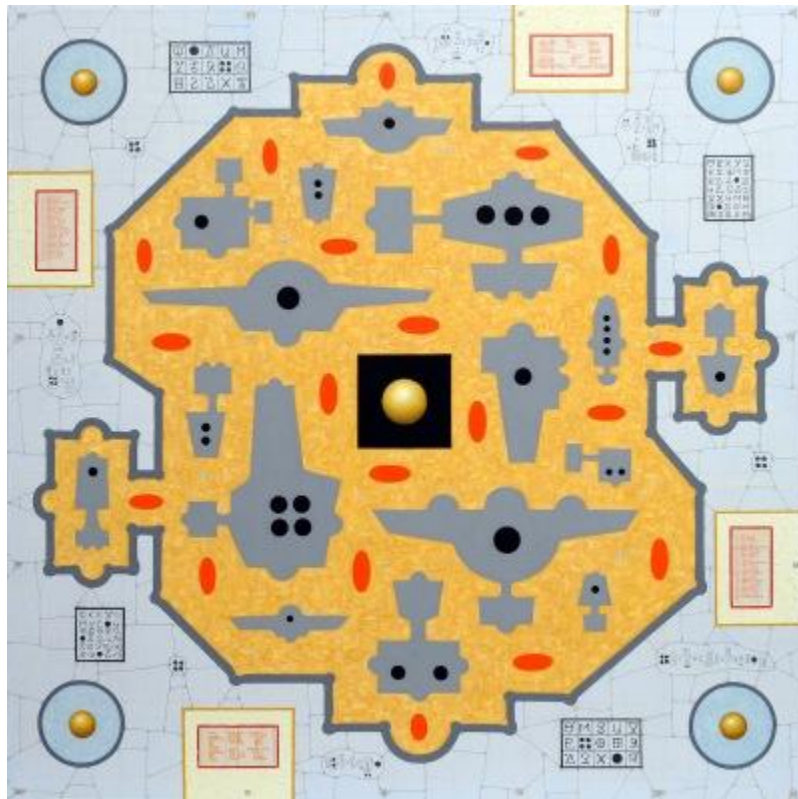
Karla Knight, *Orbit 5*, 2021, Flashe, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 22 x 15 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery. KARLA KNIGHT.

The fact that individual sacks measure approximately 20 by 40 inches allows Knight to ramp up her scale by sewing more of them together. *Fantastic Universe*, for example, measures 73 by 120 inches, and transporting it and other large tapestries to the museum posed something of a logistical challenge. “The Aldrich built boxes for them because they can’t be rolled or folded,” she says. “They couldn’t be tipped upright without being tacked to something, because they’d slip down and bend. Since that would have been disastrous, the boxes were carried flat.”

Knight says that *Fantastic Universe* took three months to make thanks to the painstaking process of producing it. She began by stitching the bags together with an old Singer sewing machine, after which she

completed several studies to decide what images would go where and which medium to use for each. Black shapes were done in Flashe, while smaller, geometric forms were colored with acrylics. Knight used a paint marker for outlines and added the embroidery last. “There’s a lot of embroidery in there,” she notes, citing the faint, delicate, circuitry-like pattern covering the work’s background.

The tapestries came out of Knight’s desire to “make a big surface that was just loose.” She mentions Native American art as an influence, specifically the “winter count” calendars kept by the Lakota Sioux. Drawn and painted on buffalo hide, they kept track of tribal history by marking each year (defined as lasting from the first snowfall of one season to that of the next) with a pictograph representing a major event during that period. Given their pliable state and cryptic content, it’s easy to see the impact they made on Knight.



Karla Knight, *Fleet Mind 2*, 2020-21, oil, Flashe, and pencil on paper mounted on linen, 51 x 51 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery. KARLA KNIGHT.

Unlike winter counts, her tapestries don’t measure time, or collective memory. They’re impenetrable, not only to viewers but to the artist herself. “I don’t know what they mean either, and I don’t try to figure them out,” she says. “Ultimately, they’re about living with the unknown, like wondering what happens to the soul when the body dies. That can be an uncomfortable feeling, but it’s also what connects my work to the paranormal.”

“Karla Knight: Navigator” is on view at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, October 17, 2021–May 8, 2022.