

ARTFORUM

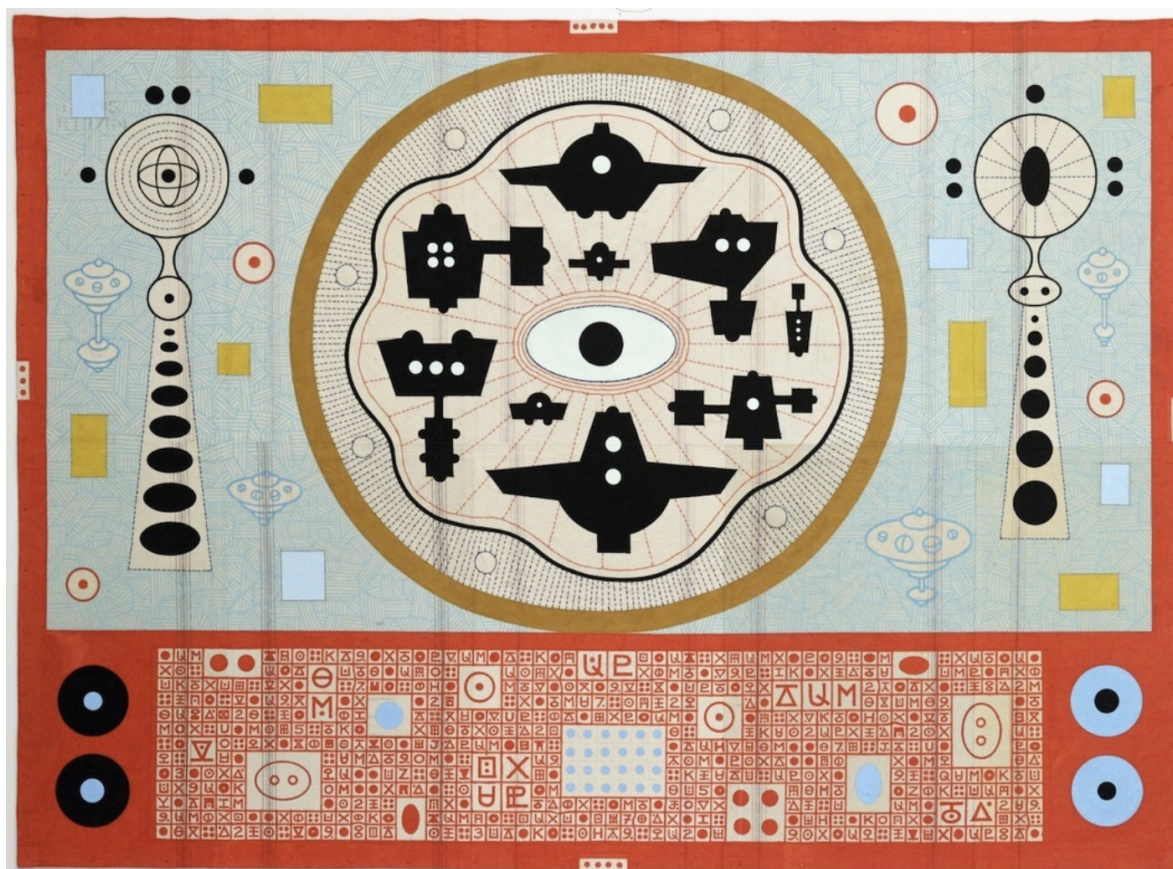
INTERVIEWS

KARLA KNIGHT

Karla Knight on living with the unknown

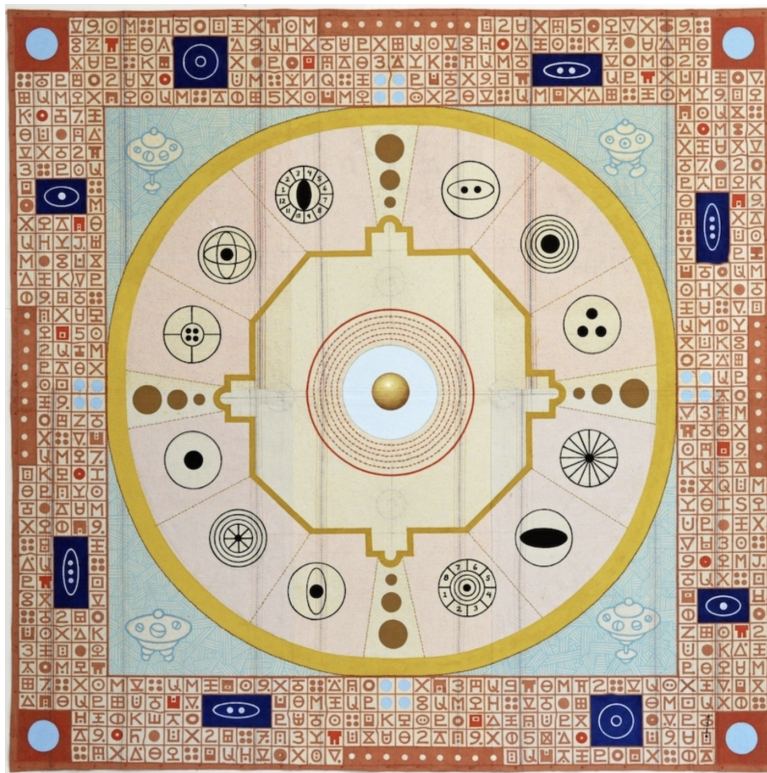
June 21, 2022 • As told to Cassie Packard

Over the past four decades, artist-conlanger Karla Knight has doggedly worked in an extraterrestrial idiom, cultivating an otherworldly iconography and an invented language so potent she dreams in it. Arriving on the heels of “Navigator,” her survey at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, “Road Trip,” on view from May 20 to July 1 at Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York, features recent drawings, paintings, and tapestries that hover between spaceship blueprint, geometric abstraction, and impenetrable abecedary. Below, Knight addresses her diverse influences, her relationship with paranormality and language, and the critical function of unknowability in her oeuvre.



Karla Knight, *Red Road Trip 1*, 2021, Flashe paint, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton, 56.5 × 77.5 inches

THE FIRST WORK I showed in New York, at Lorence-Monk Gallery in 1985, was a painting of an orb floating in a Hudson River School–style landscape reminiscent of where I grew up in Dobbs Ferry. A year or two later, I dropped the landscape and what remained was the orb, which began to float in abstract space. My aesthetic gradually became less romantic and biomorphic, and more diagrammatic and geometric. At my recent forty-year survey at the Aldrich Museum, I had the opportunity to see how long-standing motifs—orbs, eyeballs, spaceships, the invented language I’ve been developing for the past twenty-odd years—have grown and mutated and really flourished. As I work through an image or idea, I often think of the way Jasper Johns’s imagery changed across each body of work and each medium. Several pieces in “Road Trip” appropriate Johns’s crosshatching motif, approaching it like an ectoplasm in which pictographs are suspended.



Karla Knight, *Wheel*, 2022, Flashe paint, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton, 65 x 65 inches

I try to keep my life and work open to possibility, including things that I don’t understand. I grew up with the paranormal, doing séances and Ouija boarding at East Coast Thanksgivings. There were transcendentalists and occultists on my paternal side, and my father and grandfather wrote about the paranormal and UFOs. In this context, questions around, say, what happens to the soul after it leaves the body were normal avenues of inquiry.

From a young age, my outlook and interests were otherworldly, and I’ve always stubbornly pursued those interests in my work. I think that Hilma af Klint’s 2018 Guggenheim show, which was such an unexpectedly huge hit, helped open up space for

me and what I do in the art world, as it gave rise to broader acceptance of work that explores the inexplicable or unfathomable.

My invented language came out of watching my son learn to read and write. As they enter the world of written language, kids make up and transpose letters; it's fascinating to watch. Especially as someone who grew up around writers, I thought: Why can't I concoct my own language? I began to invent characters, interspersing them with recognizable letters and numbers. The characters aren't finite, and if I devise a new one, it enters the lexicon. Eventually, the language became real to me. I write fluidly in it. I even dream in it. I don't know what the language means or doesn't mean, and I prefer to keep it that way. It's not about decipherment; it's about living with the unknown.

I've been incorporating old ledger paper into my work since the mid-1980s. I apply the paper to the surface of gessoed linen and paint and draw directly on top of it. On eBay, where I get a lot of my ledgers, I also buy seamless agricultural feed bags from the 1940s and '50s. I combine the bags into fields of fabric that I paint with glyphs and images, sew, and embroider. These tapestries, which are fairly new to my practice, were greatly influenced by winter counts, which I first saw in a 2015 exhibition at the Met on the Indigenous people of the American plains. Winter counts were created by the Lakota and other Plains tribes to function as calendars and accounts of their lives. Often working in a spiral, tribes added a pictograph annually to represent an important occurrence from that year, such as a major death or celestial event. They're amazing, and often done on muslin or animal hide, though you can also find examples on ledger paper. It all comes back to storytelling, or story-accumulating.

My work also contains poems made with lists of paired English words. I source the words from a book on invertebrates from the late 1930s, *Animals Without Backbones*. I used to be a freelance book indexer, and when I perused this index, I encountered scientific terms like "ooze dweller" and "primal slime". These designations struck me, so I started making lists of them, intermixed with made-up terms. The lists are numbered, and the last number is always left blank, for whatever's coming in the future. What comes next? Who knows, could be anything.