

Karen Kauffman, “Grounded”

When we say something is grounded, we mean it’s firmly fixed and stable. That makes it something reliable and something safe – both desired qualities of many objects. When we say a *person* is grounded, however, responses can be mixed. For some, a grounded person is also stable and solid, immovable and without lofty ideals or conceit. While these traits are favorable under many circumstances, they can also be limiting – chaos, after all, is the breath of life. When anarchy unearths and destabilizes, the world becomes exhilarating, even terrifying, and when one becomes untethered, the vast unknown can become known, and what lies ahead is neither predictable nor safe.

Most people live in a hybrid of these two states, with some swinging more into chaos and others swaying more toward stability; Karen Kauffman is one of those people, too, and what her exterior solidity does not betray is the maelstrom that whirls within, spinning and surging until it finally breaks through that cool surface. It’s this genesis that imbues Kauffman’s artwork with dual qualities, as well, and within her work one can find both the grounded and the unhinged.

In her large scale geometries of black and white circles and squares, we find structures that chime equal parts earthly sediment and cosmic dust, but the exact nature of this rule and rebellion dichotomy is at first elusive. If one were to consider Kauffman a type of archeologist, however (and it seems that the goal of most artists is to urge an excavation of your soul via a mining of their own), we begin to piece together the evidence of her enterprise – but is she exhuming, or is she concealing? This is the most important question, and one that the artist might answer as “both.” Whatever is present, whatever is *presented*, is just part of the picture, a part of the journey. We don’t know if the fragments and movement denote beginning or ending, and it’s quite probable that it’s neither, that what we are experiencing through her brash strokes and diffused layers is actually the middle. And the middle can really go on forever.

This feeling of defragmentation of time and space is present in all of Kauffman’s works, and it makes large exhibitions such as this one feel profound. Her chunky petals of inky black and ivory white vibrate life and beckon exploration; her luminous spheres and shadowy boxes echo the Alpha and the Omega, reflecting a boundless world, endless and unbroken. Each piece can be puzzled together or apart, and each configuration creates a blueprint of the cycles of life. Choppy waves of iridescent paint chips are both primordial soup and glistening 23rd century puddles. Tendriled orchids warp and cling to forgotten wastelands, as well as to worlds unborn.

Through them all, there is a sense of center and truth that can be directly related to the Hindi “Om.” Kauffman may be unaware that she’s a conduit for this ancient incantation, and regardless if her works are the result of evasion or exclamation, they are always accessible and always enlightenment.

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