

Karen Carson: "La Condition Humaine" at Rosamund Felsen Gallery



Constant Paranoia, 2011, Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 52 3/4" x 56"

In "La Condition Humaine" Karen Carson pushes the conceptual boundaries of image/text juxtaposition by offering large banner-like paintings with kitschy type situated above and below loosely rendered yet enigmatic faces. In these works, she combines the gesticulation of an expressionistic application of paint with the funkiness of circus banner typography and the verbal acuity of advertising slogans. The 26 un-stretched works on canvas are push-pinned to the walls. Each work boldly asserts a two-word pairing that at first glance seems obvious, but upon meditation, especially in relation to Carson's images, resonates on multiple levels. The faces can be read as male, female or animal, depending on how the words are interpreted. For example the red flowery type in *Insatiable Desire* (all works 2011) surrounds a clown-like face whose wide red mouth and spiraling eyes set in a light green field suggest an inexplicable frenzy (more male than female). The face in *Courageous Heart* resembles that of a lion. Carson's depiction of the animal suggests the being's kindness rather than its ferocious nature. *Chronic Envy* is a chilling painting. The black block letters are covered with what appears to be ice or snow. The green-toned face alludes to the cliché "green with envy," and implies a chronic condition. In *Constant Paranoia*, the spaces in the black letters are filled with arrows pointing in all directions. The face supports a frown whose background is a red, blue and yellow target. In Carson's depiction, one who is constantly paranoid feels like a moving target.

Working with cliché is never easy. The paintings are carefully constructed, starting as small drawings, and then becoming large works on paper before being translated to canvas. Carson's fluid hand and command of the paint allows her to retain the spontaneity of the original gesture. Her wit and painterly skill takes these seemingly obvious juxtapositions away from the platitudes of rational thinking, infusing them with a koan-like aura. The relationship of the three elements--the two words and the face--speaks to the human condition and build on the emotional response evoked by the separate components.

The phrases when seen in conjunction with the abstracted faces evoke a visceral response. The works are ironic and iconic simultaneously. Carson presents minimal information with maximal effect. Long after viewing the works the phrases continue to resonate--alternately offering *Periodic Happiness* and *Profound Grief*.

-- Jody Zellen