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ART : Getting to the Heart of Life : At 53, Karen Carson is still learning to deal with her feelings. Sound cliched? Maybedoesn't bother one of L.A.'s most respected, if little-known, artists.

February 11, 1996 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a regular contributor to Calendar

'Part of what is liberating about being an older artist,' Karen Carson says, 'is the realization that you are making art for real. The stakes are no longer about gallery and career. I'm not into strategizing. I'm into larger issues, like art that reminds me of being alive.'

Carson is an artist who gets plenty of respect from her peers. But she has long been a bridesmaid and never the bride. Although she has been included in countless group exhibitions during the past 25 years, she is only now having her first retrospective, drolly titled "But Enough About Me." More than 120 works are being presented at three local venues during the next two months--the Otis Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, the Santa Monica Museum of Art and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Otis opens first, on Saturday, with a show subtitled "The Language of Space."

Aside from a few early pieces, the Otis show focuses on work from the last five years, paintings that are subversively ornamental, at times incorporating such unconventional materials as shards of mirror, starburst-shaped wall clocks and erotic graphics. Anne Ayres, curator of the Otis Gallery, installed the work to represent an assemblage of Carson's varied interests and talents. Ayres also has published the first catalog of this veteran L.A. artist's work.

At the Santa Monica Museum of Art beginning March 9, curator Noriko Gamblin will present a 25-year chronological survey documenting Carson's movement between abstraction and figuration. Beginning Feb. 29, LACE will present a re-creation of Carson's 1992 installation of painted globes and wall drawings called "It's a Small World." In addition, a show of Carson's drawings opens Friday at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, which has represented Carson since 1979.

Art in America critic Michael Duncan, who has written frequently about Carson's work, believes that the artist has been overlooked, in part, because she has moved back and forth between formalist abstract painting and more personal and amusing figurative drawings.

Nevertheless, he says, "her changes have made her one of the more fascinating artists to watch. But because of her complex evolution, art institutions have been lax in giving her attention.

"The bravado of her stylistic changes threatens them," Duncan says. He thinks, too, that she ran into the special difficulties of being a woman in a sexist art world. "Why wasn't she included in 'Helter Skelter?'" he asks, referring to a pivotal show about Los Angeles art presented in 1990 at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Carson says few museum curators have visited her studio. "It's hard, being a woman, to get attention," she says.

Art critic Dave Hickey, who wrote an essay for the current shows' catalog, said in an interview that he believes Carson is misunderstood because her art doesn't fit "the academic idea of women's art."

"It's not vulnerable," he says. "It doesn't ask for forgiveness. Her art is cool and knowing but not pretentious. That is a position we will take from men before we will take it from women."

Last year, Carson was appointed to a full-time teaching position in the art department of UC Santa Barbara, and she has since been commuting to her Venice studio on weekends to complete work for the show. In the high-ceilinged space adjoined to her house, Carson, 53, discussed her lengthy career as one of L.A.'s most respected, if under-recognized, artists.

Even dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, with paint on her hands and her hair piled up in clips, Carson appears statuesque. Amid the cheerful chaos of her studio hang several recent heart-shaped canvases, but these are not conventional valentines. Each rosy interior contains a death's-head, which mirrors the profile of a woman's face. Some of these bear the expressions of tragic and comic masks.

In frank tones, Carson explains: "I'm waking up to a real sense of sentimentality. And I'm learning to live with my feelings. If I am depressed today, I'll be happy tomorrow. The idea of perfectness, things always being right, is a constant that doesn't exist. In life, pain, sorrow and beauty are simultaneous things. These hearts are about such basic cliches."

On another studio wall hangs a 10-foot-tall white vinyl banner depicting a person in a glittery gold parachute floating slowly from the cradle above to the coffin below. "Birth, death, life, the soul, all the big issues . . .," she says with a laugh.

These are the topics of paintings of the last few years--mortality and morality spelled out graphically in the style of gaudy signage in Las Vegas, a city where she taught, at the University of Nevada, for a semester in 1994.

With self-deprecating humor, Carson acknowledges the preconceptions viewers often bring to such art.

"When a middle-aged woman wants to do work about spiritual matters, it's a cliché. Making the invisible visible is difficult. But the soul, for me, is not some Christian concept. It's just an unknowable--mysterious, perhaps--kind of thing."

Among her recent spiritually oriented work is a drawing in which the words "Birth" and "Death" graphically label the white bread of a sandwich, while "Thank you" makes up the filling. This piece, which was featured on the cover of *Art in America* in 1994, was seen by some art critics as satire. But Carson insists that satire was not her intention.

"I can see why it would happen, because in this century anything direct is seen as irony. Who would be so uncool as to talk about these things?"

Who indeed?

Carson's work of the last three years has been focused on such concerns for a reason. In 1992, she began a painful recovery from a 20-year addiction to Valium. In 1971, she separated from her then-husband, John Carson, who was then a deputy district attorney IN L.A.? The following year, her mother died, unexpectedly, at 57. To alleviate the artist's anxiety attacks and sleeplessness, doctors prescribed Valium.

"When I tried to quit a month later, I had withdrawals," she recalls. "I told the doctor and he prescribed more Valium." As years went by, Carson tried to quit on her own but was never able to bear the anxiety. "I was convinced that I had a serious problem. I wasn't sleeping and I was depressed." When she finally went to detoxify in a recovery center, it was "terrifying," she says now.

"I didn't sleep for two months. I was shaking all the time. It was so profound, I thought I was going to die.

"As horrible as the whole thing was," she says, "it was almost worth it. That's when all those pieces about the soul came out. That's when I decided to go public with what was happening privately. I always tried to hold my feelings down before. After detox, I wanted to do art about spiritual matters. It really changed me forever."

Looking back, Carson says that Valium dulled her feelings and separated her from her natural instincts. Her sobriety has made her work of the last few years closer in appearance to her work of the early '70s, when she was making witty, post-divorce drawings of beds on fire, beds wrapped in chains or beds being sawed in two.

In the interim, she continued to produce drawings as a journal of her interior life but felt uncomfortable bringing such intimate work to light until recently. Instead, she exhibited cool abstract paintings during the mid-'70s until the late '80s.

"The whole thing with tranquilizers is that I took them to cool down my feelings," she says. "I was so afraid of having my high-strung nature come out. But I cannot afford to not look at my feelings. That's how I made art as a kid."

The artist, born Karen Hansen, was raised in the country near Corvallis, Ore. Her father, a paleobotanist, was a dean at Oregon State University; her mother was an artist who channeled her creative energies into raising four children. Both parents were first-generation Norwegian American. Carson refers to her youthful environment as "Bergmanian."

"Both my parents were really quiet and reserved," Carson says. "I taught myself how to be social because I thought it would help me. If I hadn't done it, God knows, I'd still be sitting in Corvallis with the clocks ticking."

Her mother proudly saved her childhood drawings of "all these little white houses with birds and trees." Carson looked at them in 1971 and thought, "God, I had a beautiful childhood." But then she remembered, "I was depressed from the time I was little." It turned out that her mother had edited out any depressing drawings. "She couldn't bear the pain and sadness, so she tossed out all my drawings of fires and dead people."

Carson never considered any profession other than art. At the University of Oregon, she studied drawing and painting in a conservative art department that, in the early '60s, was driven by teachers interested primarily in Cezanne and Matisse. One member of the all-male faculty told her, "You've got talent, my dear, but you'll never go anywhere. You're a woman."

In 1969, Carson and her husband left Oregon and came to L.A. She was 26. "All that minimalist stuff was in the air, and everybody was talking about unorthodox art materials," she recalls.

She received her master of fine arts degree in 1971 from UCLA, where her graduate show consisted of zippered fabric composing soft geometric shapes on the

wall of the gallery. By moving the zippers, a viewer altered the shape of the work. They seemed an inventive conjunction of work being done by Robert Morris and Claes Oldenburg, with an awareness of the burgeoning feminist movement. In sophistication and ambition, they signaled the arrival of a new artistic voice in the L.A. community.

"I regarded them as striptease minimalism," says critic Dave Hickey, who first met Carson at that time and has written a catalog essay for the current shows. "They were investigating the parochial unctuousness of minimalism with a cosmopolitan irony. They were smart, funny, good-looking and secretly serious, just like Karen."

In the mid-'70s, Carson returned to her earlier Cubist training in a series of abstract oil paintings executed on round or oval supports. By this time, her marriage had broken up and she was involved with artist Tony Berlant. A sense of competition grew between them. In answer to his playful and experimental work, Carson tried to emphasize her cerebral side.

"I think, subconsciously, I thought I had to be a really serious artist to overcome the struggle I was having being with him. I took my own thunder and my own richness and undermined it. Those formalist things were really about sidetracking my journey. The biggest mistake as an artist is to consciously try to be serious. It makes you ignore the more compulsive, pleasure-seeking intelligence that you might have as a human being."

Such seriousness led Carson to move to New York in 1979. Her abstract paintings became more architectonic, but in New York the galleries were mostly looking for Neo-Expressionist artists, like the then-emerging Julian Schnabel. So, in addition to making art, Carson spent a lot of her time viewing art. "In five years, I made up for all those years of not seeing enough art by being on the West Coast," she says.

By 1985, Carson was finding New York too expensive and too distracting. She returned to L.A. after accepting a one-year teaching position at UC Santa Barbara. It turned out to be a rough year. The relationship with Berlant ground to a close. She was commuting twice a week to Santa Barbara from Venice. She developed tendinitis. And, most devastating, the moving truck that brought her things back from New York lost two large boxes containing 80% of her works on paper, more than 300 pieces, including her childhood drawings. They were not insured.

"I didn't get any Zen lessons from losing that stuff," she says with resignation. "I couldn't find any way to deal with it except to let time take care of it." Nonetheless, a radical transition began in her work. She started embedding slivers of plexiglass mirror in the surfaces of her abstract paintings.

"I was going down to Tijuana a lot and for some reason wanted to put some of that kitsch into the work," she explains. "Also, it was about vanity, about making the abstract figurative, about literally putting yourself into the painting."

Carson's operation for a hysterectomy in 1989 and the onset of menopause contributed to a series of explosive Baroque paintings that incorporated symbolic and literal references to sexuality and reproduction. "A woman's life changes when she loses her womb," Carson says. Soon, starburst clocks from the '50s were the focus of radiant and unexpected bursts of painting, which were bordered by the iconography of serpents, daggers, hearts, labia, ovaries and text.

These dramatic paintings grabbed curator Ayres' attention: "These are issues that are pertinent to women's bodies," she says. "But none of this would mean zip to me if they weren't visually arresting."

Says Carson: "I'm very literal. If something happens to me, I put it on the wall. For years, I tried to stabilize my feelings so I'd always feel good. Now I'm in full

acknowledgment that I'm going to die, inevitably. These [valentine] paintings are about feeling that deep in my heart. I need cliches to remind me of things that may be obvious. The heart is a symbolic container of the way we feel, the way it has been used by hundreds of hacks for hundreds of years.

"But as I grow older, and get more sophisticated, I want to get simpler."

* "Karen Carson--But Enough About Me" retrospective: "Karen Carson--The Language of Space," Otis College of Art and Design, 2401 Wilshire Blvd. Saturday to April 13. Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (213) 251-0555. "Karen Carson's It's a Small World," LACE, 6522 Hollywood Blvd. Feb. 29 to March 30. Wednesdays to Sundays, noon to 5 p.m. (213) 957-1777. "Karen Carson--A 25-Year Survey," Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2437 Main St. March 9 to May 26. Wednesdays to Sundays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Friday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. (310) 399-0433.