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"Karen Carson at Gavlak," by Christie Hayden for Contemporary Art Review LA (CARLA), February 3, 2021

Contemporary
Art Review **.la**

Karen Carson at GAVLAK

Karen Carson, Butterfly (2018).



Acrylic on bas relief wood, 21.5 x
32.5 x 3 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist and GAVLAK Los
Angeles / Palm Beach.

For upwards of 50 years, artist Karen Carson has been breaking down barriers between art and the architectures that support it. This is compellingly exemplified in her current

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exhibition *Middle Ground* at [GAVLAK Los Angeles](#) through vibrant mixed-media reliefs and impeccably restrained wall-mounted canvas sculptures. Objects associated with art’s context—the gallery’s floor, the walls, or a frame—become integrated into Carson’s work as essential supports, prompting a reconsideration of the space between infrastructure and what we view as art.

Middle Ground includes two distinct bodies of work, both of which combine sculpture and painting effortlessly, dismissing any superficial boundaries between the mediums. The first, mostly constructed between 1970 and 1972, is a series of unstretched canvases with metallic zippers installed in linear patterns across their surfaces, allowing for adjustable abstractions in which various interplays between the canvas and wall are possible. In *2 Stripes* (1970), five sections of raw, unstretched canvas have been zipped together with brass zippers. Two of the panels are partially unzipped and fall away from their tracks, exposing a bit of wall behind them. Though white gallery walls typically serve to draw the eye toward the artwork, Carson foregrounds these structures—they become prevalent color blocks in each composition, calling for a closer consideration of other architectural elements and how they too might reflect Carson’s artistic structures (the silver pipes overhead, for instance, glint like the zippers in *2 Stripes*, mimicking the artwork’s metallic striations).

The second series in the exhibition are 10 bas-relief paintings made between 2018 and 2020—compilations of vibrant-colored wood slats mounted on flat bases to create layered, geometric shapes. Arranged as they are, the slats create ridges within the piece to frame enclosed starbursts of paint or geometric assemblages. Though precise in their geometries, these bits of wood (which resemble frame-like components with angular joinery) don’t quite align: the cuts are frayed and their edges don’t always meet. Yet, the actual wood frames that enclose the finished reliefs are impeccably finished, the contrast further emphasizing the idiosyncrasies that characterize the work and the pristine nature of Carson’s framing devices.

Carson’s work, though at times subtle, is at its best when it questions the limits of art itself; the ’70s zipper series did this at its outset, introducing human intervention into the austerity of minimalism. *Middle Ground* continues to serve this end; by including the gallery’s architecture in her sculptures while blurring the distinction between art and frame, Carson extends the attention that art commands beyond the spatial boundaries of each piece. As such, there is a redistribution of power; the art object becomes lesser as its surroundings increase in importance. This subversion—Carson’s superlative broken barrier—continues to shed new light on what art can be and do.

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Karen Carson, *2 Stripes* (1970).
Unstretched canvas and zippers,
78.75 x 62 x 2.75 inches;
dimensions variable. Image
courtesy of the artist and
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Karen Carson: Middle Ground
(installation view) (2021). Image
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Karen Carson, *Yellow / Black Diamond* (2018). Acrylic on bas relief wood, 21.5 x 29.5 x 3 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and GAVLAK Los Angeles / Palm Beach.

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