

An excerpt from

THE SCIENCE OF LAST THINGS

by Stella Rose McDonald 2017

When I first encountered Karen's paintings (by accident, on a too long family holiday in stifling heat just north of the Tropic of Capricorn) I was reminded by how convincing paint can be; her surfaces demand close, sustained inspection. Shadows are clues for eyes, negative space shifts into limbs, glazed pools of colour collect as faces (faces so particular—like bubble gum just before it pops.) Her work plays with its own contradictions; figuration and abstraction become useful alternates for history and myth, which collude on the painted surface as they do in life. If contemporary abstraction forms an image of how the world feels, then Black is all abstract. Time, both contemporary and historical, is shaken and stirred and settles momentarily here; developed, gently printed, but unfixed.

The familiarity I feel in the presence of Karen's work is arcane but certain. Recent works like *Bed mess*, *Floating dream*, *Body shell*, and *Table manners* recall duty, illness, the strange proximity of motherhood and childhood and, particularly, the betrayal of our own bodies. In the spectral shadows and shifting parameters of Karen's work, I see a skilled yet automatic hand that might claim to outsource creativity to a higher power. I think of the Spiritualists, of the bright and ecstatic palette of Hilma Af Klint. I think of the maudlin faces of the symbolist painter Odilon Redon. Each one of Karen's paintings seems part of a larger whole. Like Klint and Redon, her work is concerned with the science of last things—with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind—and is contained by the unhurried contemplation of everyday objects and people. Like Morandi, but on acid.

Women who paint themselves know something of duty; to paint your own image—one so used and misused in art's semantic archive—is always a political act. The task of the mother, writes the artist Hannah Black, is to hold the false coherence of history in her mind.* Since I encountered Black's women last summer, I've been trying to recall them in my mind in order to decide who they are. If they are archetypes, then the way in which they are painted—open and emerging—contradicts that prototypical definition, confirming that female experience is not made in a mirror. Karen's subjects [call them women or flowers or the artist herself] refuse equivalence and identification, both acts that erase meaningful difference. They are forged in the artist's own manifold experience—but they emerge historically.

*Hannah Black, "This is crap: Why is abjection making a comeback?", *Frieze*, Issue 23 Spring 2016