

Haptic Hallucinations: The “Suns” and “Wavy Rays” of Karen Arm

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Karen Arm burrows into essential formulae of nature. Her motifs have been few, but comprehensive: tree branches, water droplets, spider webs, smoke, stars, and waves. Or rather, her motifs are distilled from those sources, broken down into constants and variables. From here she reassembles a vision of nature truer than optical transcription. Her spare, articulate images of restless seawater, for instance, probe beneath the surface, beyond the moment, to capture its fluid drapery. Her work bears superficial similarity to that of Vija Celmins, particularly the water images, but in contrast to photo-based drawings by the latter — uncanny ghosts which provide only the tease of nourishment — Arm really wants to show us how water works.



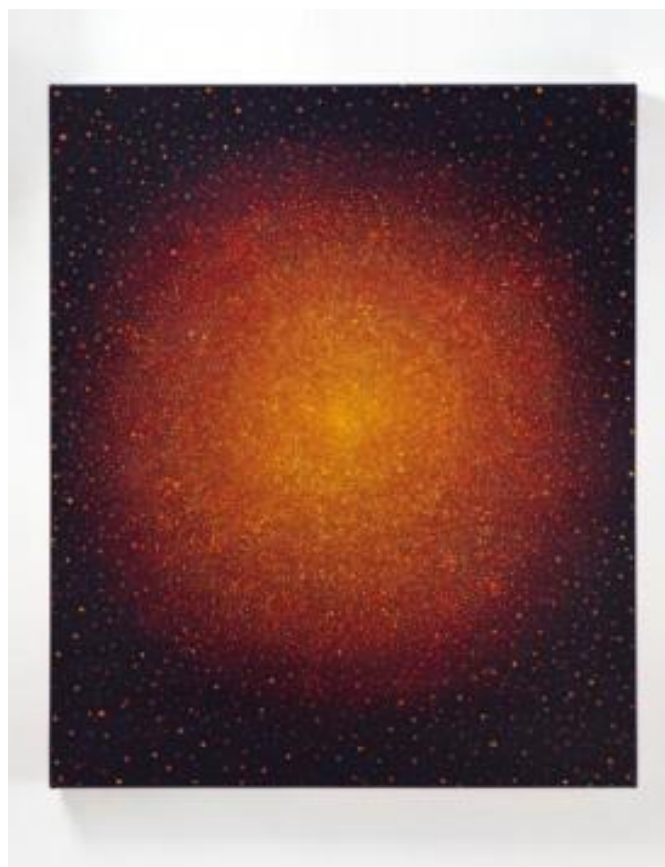
Karen Arm, *Untitled (Yellow Wavy Ray on Brown Red)*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W.

There are two motifs in exclusive rotation at Arm’s current show at P.P.O.W.: “suns,” being centripetal accumulations of small circles into enormous ones; and “wavy rays,” in which numerous bendy lines radiate from a central point. The painting *Untitled (Yellow Wavy Ray on Brown Red)* (all works 2016) is the best of an impressive bunch. Here the radiating line motif, flexible and exact, can be read as a gathered topknot of angel hair, perhaps,

or the pulsating rings of a pebble dropped in a pond. If the exquisite dry precision of Arm's works on paper often eclipses the glazed depths of her larger canvases, in this superb painting the layers of acrylic mix richly, projecting graphic energy forward with wriggling intensity. The complex method of Arm's color is left for the viewer to contemplate on the dripped edges that fold back to the wall like photochemical rainbows at the bleeding margins of pre-digital art prints; here one sees that the painting's basic two-color scheme is woven from many strands.

The wavy rays recall Bridget Riley's *Current*, and thus of Philip Taaffe's tribal re-enactments of her imagery. The central burst has also been a device of Mark Grotjahn and an occasional motif of James Siena and Marsha Cottrell. These artists, along with Daniel Zeller, Jacob El Hanani, the late Lori Ellison, and many other participants in the thriving afterlife of linear abstraction, think algorithmically to some extent — most notably Siena, whose gamesmanship is steadily electric. But to a greater extent than most of her peers, Arm is oriented toward the singular, concentrated image. Her true forbear may be Agnes Martin, whose horizontal lines hover above specificity, in search of pure spirit.

If picturing was anathema in a previous age of linear abstraction, artists working in that vein today take inoculating sips of scientific illustration, decorative and shamanic arts, Op and Pop, 19th-century engraving, the animism of Paul Klee, comics, *comix*, and other pathogens that the scrupulous Riley and the wise Martin steered clear of — as does Arm in her own way, her steely eye always striving to build a convincing image, not a quotation or diagram, out of persistent studio ritual. So it is with the second motif in the current show, the suns, which began some years ago, an order of magnitude more distant, as "globular clusters" — galactic-scaled works that were comparatively dispersed, pinprick stars against unknowable void. In the new work, we are far more quickly drawn into dense gravity. Incalculable accumulations of tiny, concentric bursts of color thicken, in some of them, to haptic hallucinations of pebbly skin or bubbling tissue at a thermonuclear center.



Karen Arm, *Untitled (Yellow and Red Sun on Blue)*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W.

Biographical information is irrelevant to interpreting such formally driven work, but as Nancy Princenthal points out in her biography of Martin, it nevertheless helps to know that her subject grew up in the sere plains of Saskatchewan, and that she was at times overwhelmed by mental illness; perhaps for Martin (as for Ellison) the balm of abstraction was a vital necessity. Arm nowhere puts forward the fact in titles or press releases, but she is personally frank about a long and difficult fight with breast cancer, and it is hard not to see that the suns are breast-like, and subject to a cellular logic bound to run amok — the ineluctable logic of supernovae and black holes.

As serious as these works are — as obsessive, cosmic and, possibly, autobiographical — they are full of lively questions about color and touch, compositional freedom and strategy, and the contours of taste. *Untitled (Yellow and Red Sun on Blue)* pushes things almost too far, into an excessively hard-won illusion of sphericity. It is as gaudy as an encrusted Lucas Samaras box, and in its own remarkable way, as mystical and gorgeous.



Karen Arm, *Untitled (Yellow Red Sun on Black Red)*, 2016. Watercolor on paper, 18 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W.