

KAREN CARSON

Movers and Shapers:

Combines, Tractors, and Swathers

*Well she ain't into cars or pickup trucks,
But if it runs like a Deere man her eyes light up ...*

Kenny Chesney, from *She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy*
(Jim Collins and Paul Overstreet, songwriters, 1999)

Karen Carson
Untitled 1971
Cotton duck and industrial zippers
Approx. 95 x 83 in. (241.3 x 210.8 cm),
variable depending on installation
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Purchased with funds provided by the
Pasadena Art Alliance and the Rosamund
Felsen Gallery Photography by Kerry
Kozak.

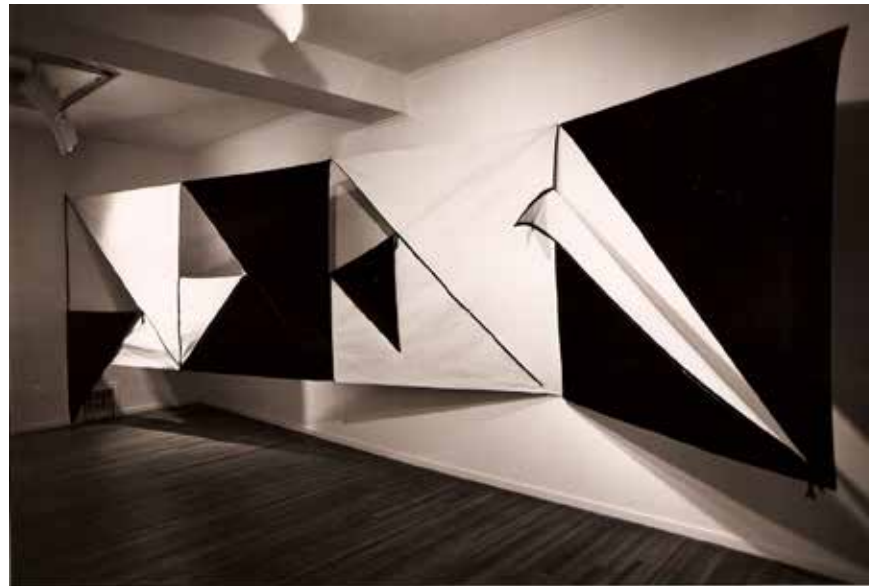


fig. 1

Big tractor paintings by a female artist from Los Angeles. Huh?? Those who have followed the development of Karen Carson's work have come to expect the unexpected. Only Carson would come up with subject matter so startling and outside the comfort zone of the urban art world. For over four decades, Carson--unlike so many of her peers--has thrived on defying expectations, radically shifting her enterprise with every exhibition. Consistently, she has pulled this off with artworks so outrageously engaging and well-executed that they have us hooked. A contentious, playful dialogue with the conventions of nature painting has enlivened her work for the past two decades. She has expanded our consciousness of the visual and social worlds at the cost of establishing a signature subject matter or medium. No one-trick pony, she continues to push her art further into unexplored realms.

Just out of art school, Carson debuted in 1971 with wall pieces made of zippered canvases that could be reconfigured to create multiple abstract compositions. (*fig. 1*) Since then, she has continued to shift and change, working in a wide variety of genres and mediums, including abstract painting, figuration, collage drawing, large scale installation, painted vinyl banners, and light boxes. After the zipper works, Carson discovered painterly expressionism as the fitting style for her vision of the turbulence of contemporary life. Her projects seem united by a desire to represent the flux of visual reality, manifested both in nature (earthquakes, fires, windstorms) and culture (wars, politics, spirituality). All her

projects--including abstract paintings that emulate tectonic shifts (1980s), symbolic tableaux with feminist themes (1990-91), painted globes representing celestial struggles of mythic gods (1992), commercial-style banners that advertise spiritual truths and the glories of nature(1994, 2001), light boxes depicting blurs of forest fire and smoke (2004), skyscapes of clashing herds of Pegasus-like horses (2007), and beach-scapes filled with mysterious dancers in silhouette (2010) (*fig. 2*)--have manifested Carson's desire to find visual analogs for the spiritual commotion of contemporary life. Unlike so much of today's art-about-art, her ambitious work speaks to what we see and feel in the experience of the everyday.

For almost a decade, Carson has lived half the year in the rural setting of Big Timber, Montana at the intersection of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. She explains that whenever she looks at this dramatic landscape, her views are interrupted by the ubiquity of tractors and other farm machinery. Under the West's big skies and grand mountain ranges, tractors are signs of human presence and human intervention. Carson was struck by the importance and relative cultural invisibility of these cultural signs. Once you start noticing them, farm implements trump the view of any wide vista, focusing the eye on a moving cog that is a symbol of industrialized life.

In the new paintings, tractors and farm implements become subjects for expressionist portraits that in roundabout ways slyly comment on two loaded topics: industrialized agriculture and sexual politics. In a way, Carson's depictions of machines de-sublimate nature, deflating its romantic connotations. Several surprisingly disparate art historical precedents contextualize Carson's perspective. For example, her tractor paintings might be seen as twenty-first century updates of Jean-François Millet's *The Sower* (1850) (*fig. 3*), replacing Millet's dramatic foreground depiction of an idealized working peasant with looming close-ups of the gargantuan machines that cultivate fields today. They operate like *The Sower* to connect nature to its most primal function for mankind as a source for food.



fig. 2

Karen Carson
Coming Out. 2009
 Acrylic on linen, framed
 27 5/8 x 70 3/4 in.



fig. 3

Jean-Francois Millet (French, 1814-1875)
The Sower, 1850
 Oil on canvas
 101.6 x 82.6 cm (40 x 32 1/2 in.)
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 Gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw, Jr., and Mrs. Marian Shaw Haughton, 17.1485
 © 2015 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

George Stubbs (English, 1724 – 1806)
Whistlejacket, ca. 1762
Oil on canvas
292 x 246.4 cm
Bought with the support of the Heritage
Lottery Fund, 1997
Image courtesy of The National Gallery
London, England 2015



fig.4

In contrast to *The Sower's* dance-like procession scattering seed through a muddy field, Carson's lumbering clod-hoppers till and cultivate the soil without sign of a human hand. Millet's images of farm workers disturbed the idealized views of nature that were the standardized fare of his time. For critics, his depictions of the travails of common folk marked a radical shift towards realism and away from the stylized neo-classical renditions of mythic, legendary, and historical events regularly seen in the annual French Salons. Following a not dissimilar iconoclastic impulse, Carson wanted to find an alternative to the romantic landscapes and cow paintings that continue to fill "Western" art galleries and museums. "Nature is too big there to contain: all those mountains and broad fields," she explains. "As an artist, I can't compete with the impact of the real landscapes. These machines seem more right for me. There are too many cow paintings already."

Although Carson's machines subsume the nature that surrounds them, the artist seems far from offering a critique of industrialized farming. In his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck wrote of the changes for migrant workers caused by industrialized agriculture:

Is a tractor bad? Is the power that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours, it would be good--not mine, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But this tractor does two things--it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people were driven, intimidated, hurt by both.

While Carson might

accept Steinbeck's critique, political rancor is not what she's after. Although migrant workers continue to be victims of the technological developments in

farming, the efficiency and economics of today's industrialized agriculture cannot be reversed.

Accepting the ruling status of these big machines, Carson seems to want to see them in a new light, appreciating their exoticism for urbanites. Although these are the machines necessary to stock our supermarkets and feed our livestock, they work behind the scenes, far away from city centers. Carson's depiction of a gargantuan swather or baler is probably as exotic for most city-dwellers as the nearly full-scale moose and kangaroo paintings by British artist George Stubbs made to amuse and mystify late eighteenth century viewers. Stubbs is perhaps best known for the ten-by-eight foot painting *Whistlejacket* (c. 1762) (*fig. 4*) commemorating the Marquess of Rockingford's prized race horse. Poised against a monochrome, tawny beige background with only a modicum of shadows placing him, the carefully bred racing stud rears up as if to assert his commanding presence. The large scale of Carson's tractor paintings seems similarly intended to impress viewers with a different kind of domination of nature.

With a kind of fondness, she celebrates the studly presence of the motorized characters, anthropomorphizing them and enfoldng them into the realm of portraiture and art. For several centuries now, machines have made the industrialized world work. But what artists have highlighted them or used them as dominant subject matter? Only a handful of works come to mind, all primarily concerned with formal or political issues, all with different agendas than Carson. Fernand Léger's labor-conscious paintings of the 1930s (*fig. 5*),

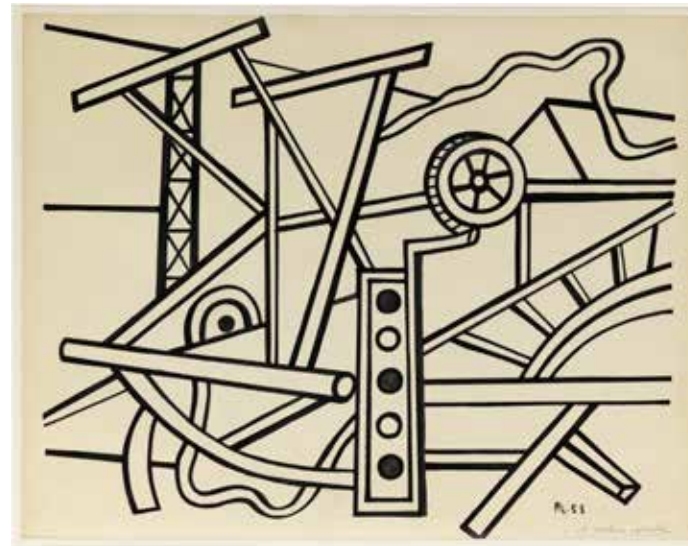


fig.5

Léger Fernand (French 1881 -1955)
Agricultural machine (Machine agricole), 1953
Black ink on paper
50.5 x 65.2 cm
© 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
/ ADAGP, Paris
Photo credit: bpk, Berlin / Musee National
Fernand Leger, Biot, France / Gérard Blot / Art
Resource, NY

Gerald Murphy
Watch, 1925
Oil on canvas
Overall: 78 1/2 x 78 7/8 in. (1 m 99.39 cm
x 2 m 0.343 cm)
Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for
the Arts Collection, gift of the artist
© Estate of Honoria Murphy Donnelly/
Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
Image courtesy of Dallas Museum of Art



fig. 6

Gerald Murphy's open-cased pocket watch (*fig. 6*), Walter Murch's moody still-lives of broken down machine parts, Konrad Klapheck's strange fetishistic close-ups of sewing machines (*fig. 7*) and cash registers, all obliquely honor the role of mechanized devices in modernity. Jokingly referred to in the West as "Girl-Meets-Tractor Art," Socialist Realism, the movement exclusively endorsed in Soviet Russia and Communist China, regularly featured noble farmers aboard their prized harvesters. In the late 1940s and 1950s, California artists, Channing Peake, Rico Lebrun, and Howard Warsaw depicted outmoded or decaying farm machinery parts found around Peake's Santa Barbara ranch. Their modernist compositions commemorated the vanishing tools of traditional farming.

Machinery also has appeared as subject matter in pop culture, most often in animated films inspired by children's play such as Disney's *Cars* (2006) or the Chevron commercials featuring talking automobiles. Pop Art of the 1960s seems related to such anthropomorphism in its elevation of supermarket items and popular culture references to symbolic and iconic realms. As art critics and historians have noted, Warhol's soup cans seem stand-ins for plain-spoken American values; Lichtenstein's comic strips can be read as psycho-sexual cultural commentaries; Mel Ramos's superheroes seem luminous, nearly religious icons.

Carson follows a Pop approach to her subject in embracing the iconic appeal that these machines have for enthusiastic connoisseurs of the breed. An Internet word search for "tractor" produces a variety of sites dedicated to the restoration and preservation of antique tractors, collector's associations for every manufactured brand, and t-shirts and bumper stickers that read "I Love Tractors." *My First Tractor: Stories of Farmers and Their First Love* (2010), edited by Jerry Apps, includes essays and reminiscences including "How Could a Grown Man Be Nuts About Old Farm Tractors?," "A Farm Lad's Fantasy," and "Elvis's Tractor." Nebraskan humorist and former CBS News correspondent, Roger Welsch has used his enthusiasm for tractors to build a writing career with books like *Love, Sex and Tractors* (2000). In *Old Tractors and the*

Men Who Love Them: How to Keep Your Tractors Happy and Your Family Running (1995), he states:

The goofiest part of my vision, I suppose, is my concern for the feelings of the tractors. And I can hear the hard-headed mechanics among you hooting at that notion. But look here, grease-monkey, I've talked with you and listened to you up at the tavern and at the tractor shows. I've read your letters. I've heard what you say about these machines, and that ain't all iron and hardware I hear in your voice. You may not use the words "love" or "respect," you would probably deny any hint of an idea that these old machines have souls, but you don't have to say a word: it's there in your voice. You feel it too.

W

Walt Carson's books are pointedly geared to male audiences who joke that they prefer their loyal tractors to their wives.

With brio, Carson taps into the appeal of tractors

from a different direction, one with a distinctly female point of view. In rendering the machines, Carson used photographs from promotional sales brochures, streamlining some details for effect but staying true to basic body shapes and scale. They read as affectionate portraits of masculinity with an eye for the humorous nature of male vanity. Dramatically set off by a violent red and blue sky, the nearly twelve-foot wide tractor of *Big Love (John Deere #3)* presents a profile view, as if taking the best angle to show off his taut torso. A dapper yellow stripe along the body coordinates with the bold matching color of the wheel rims. Full of boyish energy, the small front wheels seem to be in motion, jostling over irregular terrain; the tractor is crisply rendered, surrounded by Carson's quick exuberant brushwork that fills in the sky and ground.



fig. 7

Konrad Klapheck (German b. 1935)
Inquisition, 1971
Oil on canvas
39 3/8 x 43 1/4 inches
100 x 110 cm
© 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
Image courtesy of David Zwirner,
New York/London

Warhol once stated, “Pop Art is a way of liking things,” revealing his desire to put a positive spin on outré subject matter (soup cans, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe). In the mode of the “Hand-Painted Pop” paintings of the early 1960s, Carson’s works clearly reveal affection for these stand-ins for the male gender. The artist has jokingly stated, “I think of these as my big boyfriends.” Carson’s attraction to these big lugs seems palpable. Glistening, polished, presented in flattering light, the brightly colored machines appear to be preening, selling their girth and power like models in a plus-sized catalogue. Each machine has its own special features. As seen from the side, the big rig tires of *Big Job (Case International Combine)* appear as wide googly eyes. *Big Baler (John Deere)* is seen from behind, the better to feature its bootylicious rear end. In *John Deere Swather*, the thick strokes of green paint depicting cut hay form a kind of brushy green goatee.

All the clearly articulated machines are activated by the rough painterly strokes of their surroundings. Carson highlights the gargantuan size and lumbering presence of the farm machines with outlines shimmering from the heat of the day, thus emphasizing their imposing power. Their claw-like treads and massive mouths dominate the turf beneath them. Realistic details and virtuosic brushstrokes that indicate motion mitigate comic-book effects so that the works serve as individuated, yet still comic, portraits. A John Deere tractor in glistening trademark green has a snub-nosed body and an overhanging cab that seems eager to please. Carson dedicated the exhibition that debuted most of these works to her husband, a part-time rancher, part-time art historian. Carson’s tractor paintings have two wheels in the pasture and two in the museum, plowing forward with Deere-loving gusto into fresh terrain.

Michael Duncan

THE **MOVERS**



1 *Big Guy (John Deere #2)* 2013
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
9 ft. 1/2 in. x 12 ft.



2 *Big Love (John Deere #3) 2013*
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
9 ft. 10 in. x 12 ft. 2 in.

3 *Case International Swather* 2013
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
9 ft. 2 in. x 11 ft. 1 in.



4 *Big Job (Case International Combine) 2013*
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
12 ft. 8 in. x 12 ft. 2 in.





5 *Big Baler (John Deere) 2013*
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
10 ft. 1 in. x 13 ft. 2 in.



6 *John Deere Swather* 2013
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
8 ft. 5 in. x 12 ft. 1 in.





7 *New Holland Combine* 2012
Acrylic on paper, framed
3 ft. ¼ in. x 6 ft. 7¼ in.





8 *Corn Combine 2013*
Acrylic on paper, framed
3 ft. 2¼ in. x 6 ft. 9¼ in.

9 *John Dear* 2014
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
7 ft. 5 in. x 12 ft. 1 in.



10 *Strong Guy (John Deere)* 2015
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
9 ft. x 12 ft.



11 *8 Wheels (New Holland)* 2015
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
6 ft. 5 in. x 8 ft.





12 *Ol' 435 (Case International)* 2015
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
6 ft. 5 in. x 8 ft.



13 *Big Friend (New Holland Tractor)* 2015
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
9 ft. 5 in. x 12 ft.
Collection of Shoshanna & Wayne Blank

Stillwater, Oklahoma, is a college town deeply rooted in agriculture and engineering. *Karen Carson: Movers and Shapers: Combines, Tractors, and Swathers* provides an opportunity for our museum to engage our Oklahoma community on many levels. These thirteen large-scale paintings fill our galleries with undeniable life and provide a chance to see the common tractor or combine through the artist's perspective. They are both humorous and anthropomorphic in form. Carson gives these paintings names such as *Big Guy* and *John Dear* reinforcing what the viewer can already see as a personality for each one. The museum staff was pleased to work with Karen Carson. Her drive to explore the visual—never satisfied with repeating earlier successes—was revealed in her new paintings in this series. Her work is fresh and intriguing, and the energy is unmistakable. Michael Duncan's essay helps the viewer make connection between historic conventions and Carson's contemporary approach to depicting machinery as subject.

The Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation provided financial support for the brochure and catalogue. Additional support for the exhibition is provided by P & K Equipment, Stillwater, Oklahoma; The Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, Oklahoma State University; and our Museum Founding Patrons, Charter Members, Friends of the Museum; the OSU/A&M Board of Regents; and the Oklahoma Arts Council. We would like to thank Rosamund Felsen, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, for Grant Mudford's photography of eight of the paintings for this publication.

I would also like to acknowledge Valerie Kisling for her graphic design for the project and Phil Shockley for his photography of the new work added to this exhibition. I am appreciative to the museum staff for support of this project: Jordan Hays, Shawna Goodwin, Carrie Kim, Arlette Klaric, Shelby Needham, Casey Pankey, Carla Shelton, and Shawn Yuan. A special thank you goes to Gary Hickerson who stepped in to help us install on short notice. I am grateful to have such a professional team who makes what seems an impossible feat possible.

Victoria Rowe Berry