

Sabrina Amrani is delighted to present 'After the wake', the third solo show of Alexandra Karakashian at the gallery, as part of APERTURA Madrid Gallery Weekend.



« Elle a dit d'une voix neutre : 'C'est fini' » (La Place, Annie Ernaux, 1983)¹

Mourning is a perpetual state. The grim march of the contemporary world is rhythmized by a succession of tragedies, the collective accumulation of loss, and the recurrent erosion of respect, making exit impossible. The wake, in this context, can no longer be seen as a conclusion—a moment of reckoning with death, a ritual to bear witness and enact closure. Rather, the wake is a continuum. Just as the deceased and the living linger in that liminal vigil, the residue of death is incessantly present, forever clinging to the living. By situating us 'after' the wake, Alexandra Karakashian confronts the viewer with this residue, drawing us into the uneasy co-existence of death and life.

The wake is mute. But it is not silent. Nor is it still. In Karakashian's works, everything is alive, even if they emerge from death. Soaked and tattered cloths—the remnants of the artist's process of applying engine oil and salt to surfaces—envelop paintings like shrouds. Through slits and folds, a fragment of an image appears, while the rest is swaddled, out of sight, in the stained fabric. The works 'Wake I' and 'Wake IV' (all works 2024) hold a host of tensions, not just between the seen/unseen, but within the very act of draping in fabric, which teeters between shrouding a 'dead' painting, or swaddling the work as one would a newborn.

¹ "She said in a blank voice, 'It's over.'" (A Man's Place, Annie Ernaux, translation Tanya Leslie, 1992)

While the artist candidly refers to the hidden paintings as 'dead,' they are nonetheless sites of restless activity—the ongoing chemical reactions of her material ensure they are teeming with unexpected life. Sump—'exhausted' engine oil at the end of its life cycle—mixes with salt (ironically a substance that both heals and excoriates) in a volatile chemical dance that churns clandestinely behind the cloth. Similarly, in 'Laid to Rest', paintings are folded and stacked, seemingly poised for 'burial,' crowned by a rock which oddly reads as both tombstone and counter-weight (to suppress the engine-oil-induced activity beneath).

This life-ensconced-within-death dynamic threading through the works in 'After the Wake' makes a critical point about potency: the dead—whether human or material—continue to act on the living. The oil in 'Broken sun I', 'Broken sun II', and monolith slowly seeps on the reversed canvas over time, altering the halo effect as it bleeds. The cloth in 'Towards the sun' defies stasis, hanging defiantly over the frame's edge, signaling the near see-through nature of its composition. Echoing the same monolithically vertical mark-making-strokes, 'The mourners,' perhaps the most figurative work in the show, literally captures the life-death pivot moment of the wake itself: bodies, elsewhere evoked obliquely in works like 'Come adrift' and 'Laid to rest', suddenly coalesce in a solemn vigil, the oil's conquering bleed casting an eerie halo over the convening.

Unsurprisingly, the body underpins Karakashian's interrogation of how works inhabit space. 'Come adrift' is the most exuberant manifestation of the artist endowing a work with bodily presence. A larger-than-human-scale painting floats in space, tied around what might be its neck, its head masked in the turbulent folds of a dyed cloth, the 'body' splayed in a floor-bound swathe. The work's stately poise is belied by a sense of imminent collapse and fall, to say nothing of the muffled violence bound up in the scene. More abstractly, 'Weep' summons the titular bodily function in its downward cascade of oil-tinged paper sheets.

Just as 'Come adrift' seems to relish disrupting the conventional display space, and 'Weep' shares this delight in breaking away from the plane of the wall, works like 'Wake I' and 'Wake IV' confound the function of the frame. The picture frame is a dictator: it determines what a viewer is 'allowed' to see, cordoning off the visual field as the sole locus of attention. Karakashian thwarts the power of the frame by stifling it below cloth, which has, consequently, usurped and altered its role: the shrouds only allow fragments—strips, patches, corners—to be seen, fairly haphazardly. This 'emasculatation' of the frame is, in fact, a deeply profound gesture, further problematizing how a work is 'contained' in white cube conditions. Moreover, 'Wake II' goes so far as to entirely upend viewing convention: the enshrouded painting, itself the 'blotter' layer used during the process of painting 'Towards the sun', is actually facing the wall, doubly distancing its reception by the viewer.

Such strategies of concealing and containing constitute one of the most satisfying tensions in Karakashian's works, principally because she performs a double shift. First, she topples the somewhat predictable longing for a 'reveal' as a counterpoint to the act of concealing. Not only does the reveal never come (even though the peeking game is indulged in, slyly, in works already mentioned), it becomes unnecessary. We grasp the secret existence of the concealed work as part of a whole, like some symbiotic latent/potent binary machine generating a holistically legible artwork. The latency of the work, not the work per se, becomes the focal point. Second, she elevates a process-bound, normally cast-off tool to the status of stakeholder in the display and reception of the work. The humble cloth—with which the artist paints, dabs,

swabs, and wipes—participates doubly: as part of the genesis of the work, and as the work itself. Shrouded is emblematic of this strategy: the cloth-as-concealer-as-work. The accessory forecloses any revealing of the concealed work it has shepherded to life, asserting its claim both as participant in the process and as determining agent of the whole work's interpretation. This tantalizing balance of latent/potent is yet another wry articulation of the death/life overlap.

It is over. Or is it? The potency of the dead hides in the recesses of these draped cloths, in the sullied and stained surfaces of invisible paintings, in the still-bleeding halos of sump. Death may have ignited this show, but the subtle gravitas of Karakashian's works makes us understand how they can be alive, yet on entirely different terms.

- Text by Kevin Jones

After the wake

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#AfterTheWake

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