

# Anton Kern Gallery

## Carole Caroompas

September 3 - October 22, 2025

Anton Kern Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of paintings by the late Los Angeles artist Carole Caroompas (1946–2022), her first in New York in over three decades. Bringing together nine works from four distinct series—*Hester and Zorro: In Quest of a New World, Before and After Frankenstein: The Woman Who Knew Too Much, Heathcliffe and the Femme Fatale Go on Tour*, and *Dances with Misfits: Eye Dazzler*—this exhibition presents an overview of her practice between the 1990s and early 2000s, showing the vast milieu from which she could cull stories, heroes, antiheroes, and victims from popular culture, restructuring them into complex tableaux that lay bare the mechanics of power, identity, and desire embedded within our shared narratives.

Caroompas's paintings are densely layered with images, intricate patterns, and collaged materials. Like many of her peers working in Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s—artists such as Alexis Smith, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy—her work reveals a voracious engagement with American pop culture's vast archive of characters, myths, and narrative archetypes. By extracting familiar figures from this spectacle of mass entertainment, Caroompas recasts them in deliberate juxtapositions that often veer toward the absurd or outright incongruous.

In one painting, Heathcliff, from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, as played by Laurence Olivier in William Wyler's 1939 film adaptation, stands over the nineteen nude women featured on the banned UK cover of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*. In another, the rock musician Nick Cave sits center stage in a dreamlike trance, surrounded by eight women *LA Weekly*'s sex advertisements painted on Oaxacan kitchen towels, overlaid by the "feminist kitsch" messages from the ads themselves—like Megan's promise, "I'll bend more than the rules." In a bright, colorful painting with a needlepoint patchwork ground, Zorro is seen swinging across the composition triumphantly above an image of Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and an anatomical diagram of a hermaphrodite. Then, in another, Iggy Pop springs out of the head of Janis Joplin and into that of Gilda, played by Rita Hayworth. This parthenogenic act frames the center image in the painting of a young girl in a plaid Sunday dress, sucking on one end of a comically oversized candy cane held by a little boy kneeling beneath her—a scene that is both as saccharine as it is deeply disturbing. And finally, there is Caroompas herself, wide-eyed in horror inside a psychedelic star over a psychedelic ground, flanked by repeated images of conjoined twins who share a penis that pokes through both of their zipper flies.

Beginning with meticulous research, Caroompas leaves nothing to chance. Each material incorporated in her paintings is carefully selected for its latent associations: embroidery alluding to domesticity and a reference to Hawthorne's repeated emphasis on Hester Prynne's "skill with the needle"—her creative outlet that simultaneously signals her sin. In *Blue Impressions Are Left on Her Colorless Skin*, both the title and the blue acrylic painted embroidery and messages obscuring the sex workers nod directly to Brontë's description of bruises on Catherine Earnshaw's arm, left by Heathcliff in their final encounter.



Carole Caroompas, *Before and after Frankenstein: The Woman Who Knew Too Much: Spectre + Emanation II*, 1993, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

The dense cacophony of images in each work not only reflects the flood of cultural material she absorbed daily but also exposes how these fragments coalesce into a framework that shapes how she—and the culture at large—thinks. Her sustained preoccupation with mass media aligns her with the postmodern strategies explored by many Los Angeles artists in the 1980s and '90s, who paced their focus on the relentless stream of television and cinema and sought to peel back its glossy facade and expose embedded habits and tacit choices that collectively manufacture and perpetuate ideals around gender, identity, and power.

Living on Hollywood Boulevard, Caroompas was at the industry's epicenter, and she was particularly attuned to the ways in which cultural archetypes get systematically repackaged and recycled across generations—so that the figures populating her canvases often appear less as their original literary selves and more as their adapted-for-screen counterparts. The sprawling array of sources she draws from performs its own kind of analog to television—where decades and genres get flattened with the click of a remote, Film Noir abruptly gives way to MTV, if not to be temporarily interrupted by an ad for Pepsi or fragrant shampoo —each offering a distinctly different yet ultimately consistent portrayal of women.

Yet Caroompas's work cannot be classified as straightforward critique. She does not simply condemn the dynamics embedded within these cultural threads; her paintings reveal an equal fascination with the media she consumes, and an acknowledgment of being as captivated by these myths as anyone else. Instead, her focus often rests on punk figures who defy their prescribed roles—the rock stars who slip the noose, defining their own identities on their own terms, and she delights in their defiance.

In her notes, Caroompas wrote: *"All my pictures are on the verge of physical and psychological collapse, they are sustained for a moment by desire and belief (hope). Moments of recognition are what sustains (them, us, me)."*

Carole Caroompas (b. 1946, Oregon City, Oregon; d. 2022, Los Angeles, California) lived and worked in Los Angeles for over five decades. She received her B.A. from California State University, Fullerton in 1968 and her M.F.A. from the University of Southern California in 1971. Her work is held in numerous public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Getty Museum, Los Angeles; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the New Museum, New York; the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah. Additional collections include the Benton Art Museum at Pomona College, the University of Southern California's Fisher Museum of Art, and the University of California, Irvine's Langston Institute and Museum of California Art. Caroompas was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship (1995), two National Endowment for the Arts grants (1987, 1993), and a COLA Individual Artist Grant (1999). She taught at Otis College of Art and Design for over 30 years.