

Finders' Lodge at in lieu LA (June 23rd-July 27th, 2019)

Too Real to be Fantasy: Looking Back at Brook Hsu & Maren Karlson's Collaborative Exhibition

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Installation view of Brook Hsu & Maren Karlson's, Finders' Lodge at in lieu, Los Angeles. Courtesy in lieu website.

It's unsettling to look back at Brooke Hsu and Maren Karlson's exhibition, *Finders' Lodge at in lieu, Los Angeles* from last summer. It feels like a warning signal for what's to come.

Finders' Lodge was a shelter space dedicated to those that leave California, inspired by a passage from *Always Coming Home*, a novel by science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin. "The finders are rather uncharacteristic people of this valley - of Northern California - because they actually leave the valley and go elsewhere," cites the press release.

Just about every gallery in the last several years has had a show on the topic of the "Post-Anthropocene." To cue into discourse at a digest level: the Anthropocene is a term that highlights the age of the planet dominated by the human species, however the Post-Anthropocene entails a period of control by technology and artificial intelligence. Typically, an exhibition that deals with matter on the subject uses a super high-tech medium like VR or 3D animation to create futuristic landscapes of what may lie ahead for humankind (for those that

want to learn more check out just about any show at *bitforms* in Manhattan or Transfer Gallery in LA). The press release for Maren Karlson & Brook Hsu's exhibition at *in lieu* mentioned the Post-Anthropocene, but it isn't like the other shows. *Finders' Lodge* was a completely unplugged set— and even though it had elements of Le Guin's science fiction, it was completely intertwined into the lives of the two artists. Looking at *Finders' Lodge* in October of 2020, wildfires continue to cause serious harm to California and the West Coast, and 'sheltering-in-place' has been protocol in 2020 due to COVID-19. *Finders' Lodge* does not seem to be simulated at all. It appears to be today's reality.

Upon entering *in lieu*, we suspended belief and imagine we are not in Los Angeles. The floor was covered in hay. A long table presented drawings and clay objects in the center space. Green dominated the color palette— it's almost as if an organic landscape was transplanted into the gallery, except the hue is a little too toxic and the table was lined with PVC vinyl that won't biodegrade anytime soon. It was the height of summer when I visited from Chicago and inevitably, inside the gallery was hot. The inescapable sound of LA traffic permeated through the open window. Even though the exhibition simulated leaving California, it was impossible not to be hyper aware of the location. It derailed the fantasy element or collapsed it with reality completely. Le Guin's dystopia is imaginable in the overwhelmingly hot and noticeably thick air, in the nonstop hum of automobiles.

In addition to a shelter space, the exhibition was also an ode to friendship, even radically so. Hsu and Karlson were once neighbors and formed a deep bond before Karlson moved back to Berlin from Los Angeles. Alex Perliter, co-owner of *in lieu*, candidly told me that each artist was in fact originally supposed to have a solo show of their own, but both fell through. For Hsu, a passing slowed her practice down. And for Karlson, she had to undergo surgery and additionally couldn't get a visa to America in time. As such, *Finders' Lodge* was a solution that allowed both to still show their work and brought forward an opportunity to be creative. It had a mix between polished and refreshingly unfinished works. And in the same way that the iconic sound of LA traffic and undeniable heat broke the fourth wall of the lodge setting, the ad hoc quality of the show only added to its strength by acknowledging that the artists were real people too.

The exhibition was a mix between collaborative and solo works, the highlight of *Finders' Lodge* being two collaborative framed paintings that hung across the table like puzzle pieces. Each artist painted a canvas and a frame in their own classic style, then each frame was swapped, making the diptychs appear as if both artists had glitched their styles into one another's artwork.

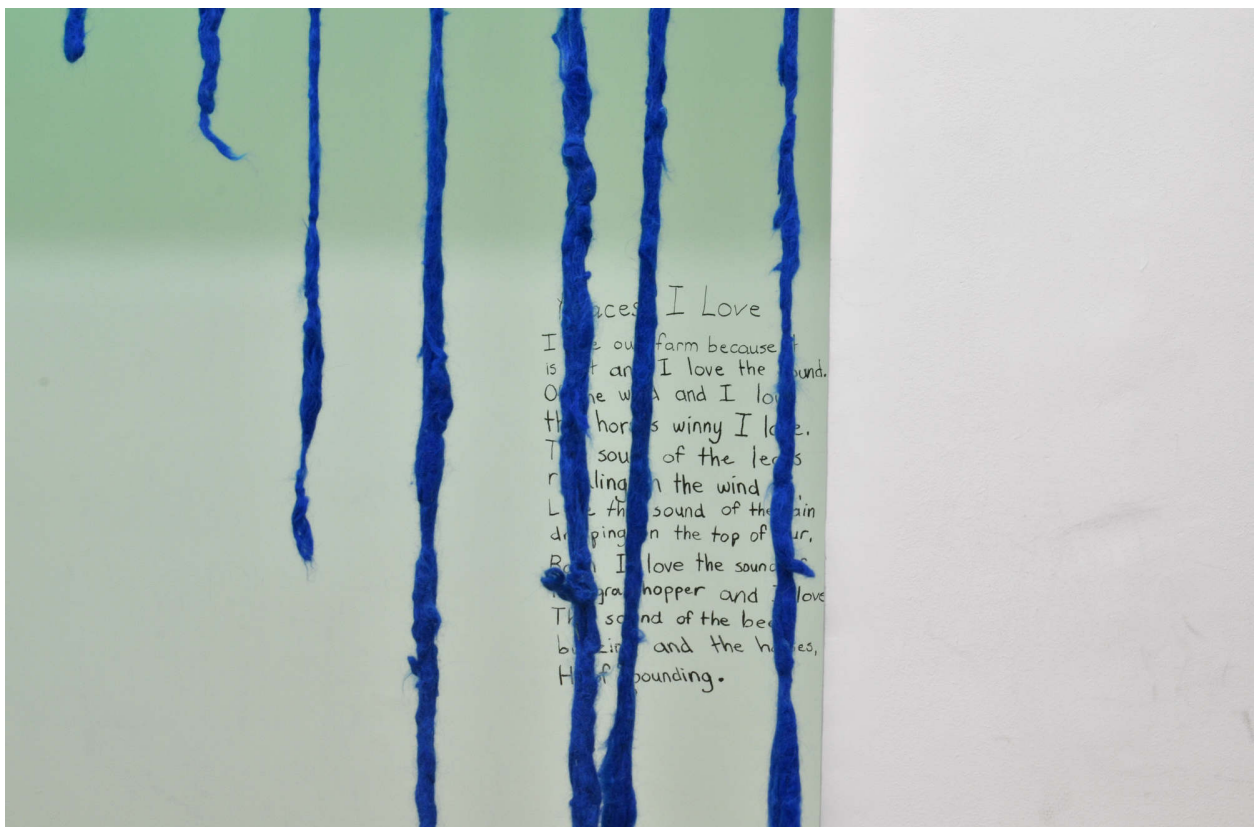


Left: Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson. *The Light Shines Through It*, 2019. oil and ink on dibond. 16 x 12 inches, Right: Brook Hsu and Maren Karlson. *And The Dark Enters It*, 2019. oil and ink on dibond. 16 x 12 inches.

Karlson's unmistakably whimsical and psychedelic figures look like the product of years of working with her natural doodling style and inner imagination, something that most of us abandon early on. These humanoid figures are like characters of a dreamy forest fairytale— with heart shaped bodies, starfish-like tentacles, and huge, adorable eyes. Karlson's work on the table was drawn in colored pencil and graphite, which added to its daydreamy style, but in the diptych (In *The Light Shines Through It* (2019) and *And The Dark Enters It* (2019)), the artist presented a more crisp rendition through oil paint and ink, showing range and adding credibility to her works with pencil.

Both artists' styles are naturally playful, but in comparison to other exhibitions by Hsu which typically feature large scale paintings and textiles curated in a highly organized fashion, *Finders' Lodge* envisioned a rawer side of the Yale MFA. Along the table, Hsu marked the vinyl with splashes of green ink in circles, squares, and long lines that dripped with gravity. Drawings that looked like Hsu's own version of a doodle decorated the table, along with honesties and confessions like "sometimes I feel angry" or simply "I love food." In a girlish, curly-q scrawl, she covered the walls with Le Guin's text, "The Initiation Song from the *Finders' Lodge*." It begins: "Please bring strange things/Please come bringing new things." In an alcove off to the side, behind a curtain made of alpaca wool dyed vivid primary blue veil a green glow looms. Inside, Hsu transcribed a passage from her childhood that listed the sounds of animals she loved hearing on the farm she grew up on. It is accompanied by Karlson's recording of frogs from a "sleepless night post-surgery."

The two-person show that was *Finders' Lodge* arose through strategies of collectivism and radical care by Hsu, Karlson, and the curatorial team. These tactics have been critical to survival in 2020, for example through COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter related mutual aid and housing security projects. With topics like the Post-Anthropocene and Posthumanism making their way through exhibitions like the season's hottest fashion trend, looking back in 2020 at *Finders' Lodge*, we are reminded that these topics are not hypothetical.



Brook Hsu. *Curtain (detail)*, 2019. wool, metal. 82 x 60 x 1 inches.



Maren Karlson. Stone Poem, 2019. colored pencil on clay. 12 x 14 x 1 inches.
