

# BELIEVE IT OR NOT

By John Haber in New York City

*Allow me again to devote some of this sad, slow, crazy week to shows that had planned to close soon, but now already have.*

Karla Knight does not believe in UFOs, but you may by the time she is done with you. Her “Notes from the Lightship” compel belief thanks to their bright colors, plain shapes, and cryptic alphabets.

They ask you to linger long enough to decipher them all, at [Andrew Edlin](#) through April 11, even after you know that you never will. They may well be about looking and lingering to judge by their schematic eyes, or they may be looking back at you. Some recurring symbols turn the nested ovals into atoms, while others might be planets in a dark interstellar space or merely abstract. And then there are the spaceships, believe it or not.

Knight must know better than to mock belief. Her father wrote entire books about UFOs and the paranormal, and why start another family fight? She got the idea of invented alphabets from her son, and who would discourage a child from creating and exploring? Still, she also knows better than to obsess over such things. She is not out to fill every last square inch. Her work could pass for [outsider art](#), at a gallery that specializes in [just that](#), but the cartoon stylings have a winning simplicity.



She has halfway respectable influences as well.

They number [Buckminster Fuller](#), who can [strain credibility](#) himself, and [Native American calendars](#), but also artists. The gallery mentions enough to invite disbelief at that—including [Francis Picabia](#), [Max Ernst](#), [Adolph Gottlieb](#), and Alfred Jensen. Knight falls somewhere between Gottlieb’s “pictograms,” with their Abstract Expressionist insistence on leaving their mark, and Jensen’s denser patterns akin to Lego sets. Her materials also bridge painting and drawing. She works in paint and pencil on paper, later mounted on canvas.

If Knight builds on outsider art, the back room has the real thing. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein considered himself more than just a baker in Milwaukee, as he was by day—or even just an artist. He was, he wrote, “Freelance artist Poet and Sculptor Inovator Arrow Maker and Plant Man Bone artifacts constructor Photographer and

Architect Philosopher.” (He seems to have been a self-taught grammarian and speller as well.) He meant it, too, enough to make sculpture out of chicken bones. In drawings from his mid-fifties, his ambitions only grew.

As Renaissance men go, he belonged to the America of his time—enough to have found his bones in TV dinners. Still, these ink drawings from the 1960s hardly lack sophistication. Their density and symmetry suggest not an obsessive compulsive, but a craftsman. They also move easily between biomorphic and pure abstraction. Some approach spider webs or intricate machines. Others could pass for botanical drawings from more than a century ago.

Ink gathers into thicker highlights or curves while fanning out to either side, as if of its own accord. It can seem to fold over itself, like crossword puzzles in linear perspective—or plant life. Folk art has served science before, with **Eugen Gabritschewsky**, and Modernism, with **Art Brut**. Von Bruenchenhein cannot claim the same exuberance or precision. The drawings lack Knight’s fascination with the unknowable or sense of humor. They might compel belief all the same.