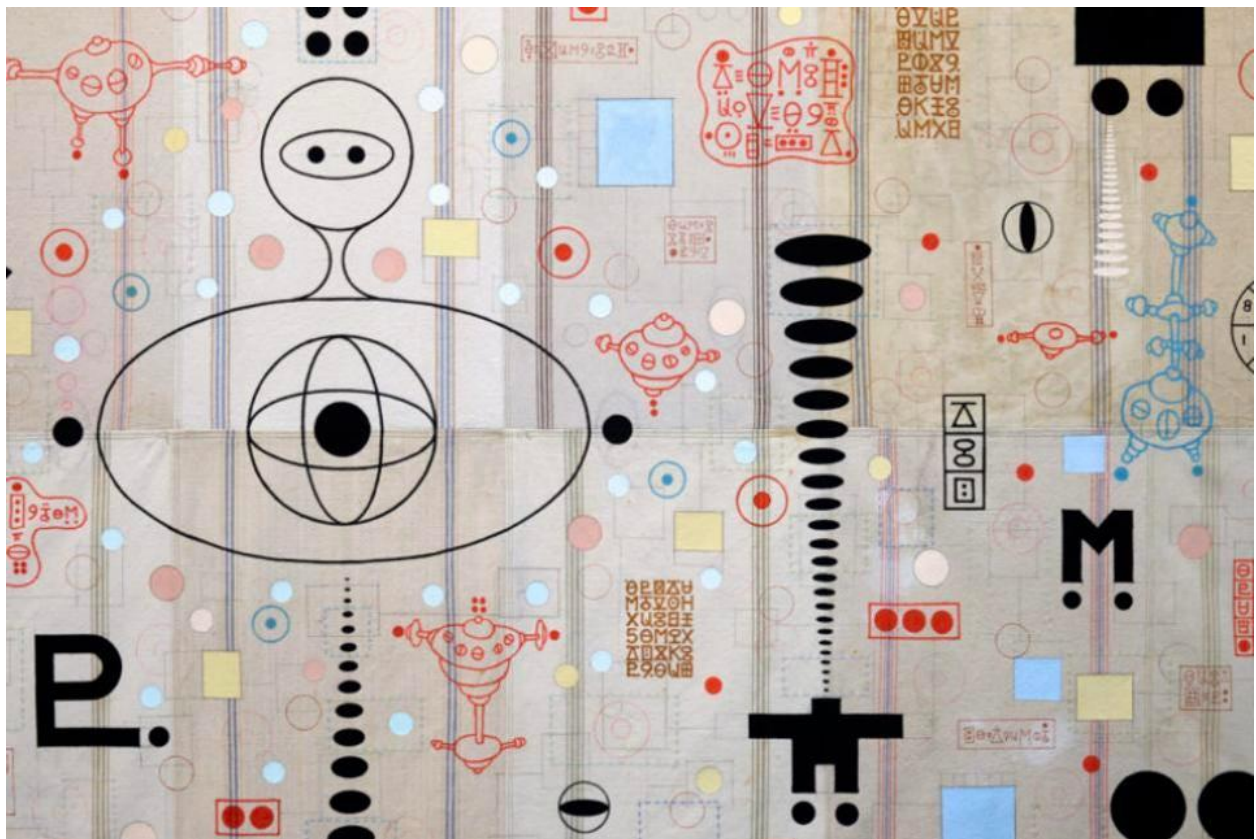


# Forbes

## Better Than The X-Files: Artist Karla Knight Probes Alien Worlds In Order To Observe Our Own

Jonathon Keats  
January 11, 2022



Karla Knight. *Fantastic Universe (More Than You Know)*, 2020-21. Flashe, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton. 73 ½ x 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. KARLA KNIGHT.

As a child growing up in New Jersey, Karla Knight refused to learn the German spoken at home by her family. However the foreignness of their language could hardly compare to the enigmas her father was probing as a ufologist, let alone the riddles uttered by the

dead at séances organized by her grandparents. Knight later trained as a painter at the Rhode Island School of Design, but it was these formative experiences that made her the otherworldly artist she is today.

An alluring survey at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum puts viewers into a position akin to what Knight experienced as a child. In dozens of arresting paintings and drawings, Knight presents landscapes occupied by mysterious floating orbs, portraits of beings unlike any seen on Earth, and charts marked with inscrutable pictographic symbols recording unspecified cosmic events.

Knight provides no explanation for her art, other than to say that she is inspired by “the mystery (and absurdity) of life”. The museum also declines to provide insight. “Karla Knight has spent the last forty years channeling the unknown into a far-seeing visual language that defies explanation,” writes the curator, Amy Smith-Stewart, in the exhibition catalogue. “Her enigmatic lexicon cannot be learned or retaught, and she offers no clues or methods to its decoding.”

Not that the work is gratuitous or detached. In a way, the exhibition couldn’t be more timely, coinciding with the launch of a new Pentagon office devoted to studying unidentified aerial phenomena. The subject matter is simultaneously timeless, given the persistence of the conundra that Knight seems to be exploring. (One of her father’s books is aptly titled *UFOs: A Pictorial History from Antiquity to the Present*.) Yet neither of these perspectives does the work justice, because they take flying saucers as her primary focus. Knight’s art is more deeply concerned with epistemology. Her paintings investigate the spectrum of certainty.

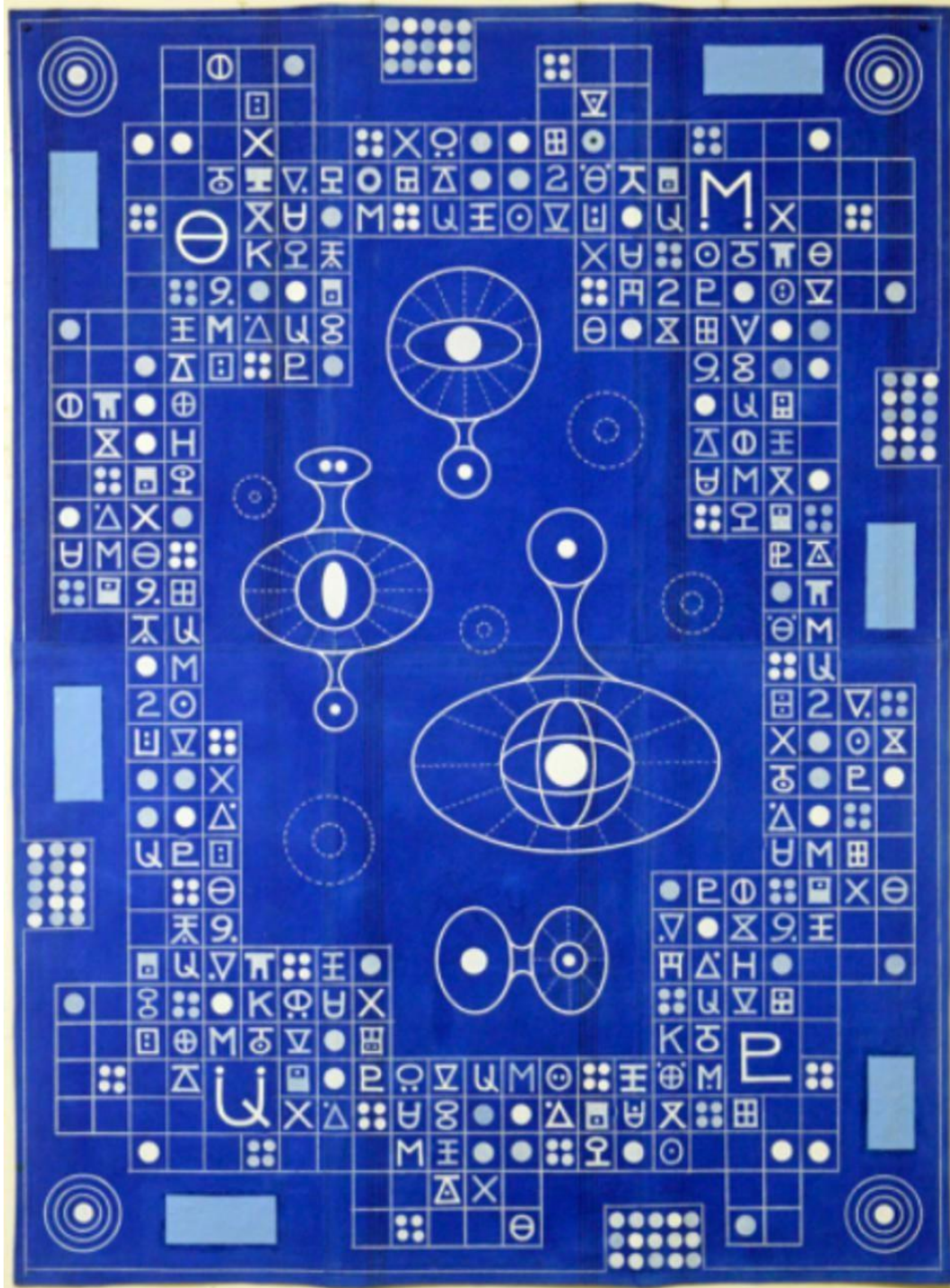
From that vantage, the timeliness is far more notable than the Pentagon coincidence (while also being more timeless than a mere multi-millennium history of unidentified flying objects). Certainty is arguably the single greatest problem facing society, leading to political intolerance, social unrest, and environmental devastation. Unwarranted confidence is the cause of needless violence and suffering. People's inability to cope with ambiguity, on the other hand, leads to mental strain and paralysis.

The psychological impact is readily understood. The ever-increasing complexity of social structures is destabilizing, especially when combined with the inscrutability of technological platforms such as social media. Climate change adds environmental unpredictability, directly experienced in unprecedented weather, correlated with an existential threat to civilization that remains undefined in all particulars.

These tensions have put a premium on espoused truths, regardless of their verifiability or actual truth value. The psychological comfort of confidence, combined with the temptation to believe that ambiguity is intentional obfuscation, makes people susceptible to conspiracy theories and manipulation. Lies are readily weaponized, as witnessed on January 6, 2021. Those who are not swept up are left feeling lost and powerless.

Within this context, society desperately needs enhanced capacity for uncertainty. People need to recognize that knowledge gaps are not necessarily secrets held by others, to appreciate expertise tempered with humility, to recognize the fallibility of beliefs, and to cultivate fortitude in the face of predictably unpredictable change. That's a lot of responsibility to put on Karla Knight, but societal transformation depends on artwork

such as hers, and the experience of not knowing that is cultivated by its unresolvable mystery.



Karla Knight. Blue Navigator 2, 2021. Flashe, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton. 68 x 50 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. KARLA KNIGHT.

We have no way of ascertaining whether Knight has special knowledge about extraterrestrial intelligence. What is plain is that she knows a lot about how to be uncertain. She describes visionaries not as mages, but rather as “good listeners”. This receptiveness is most readily apparent in a body of work she created with her four-year-old son. In *Aliens & Objects*, his unprompted drawings of extraterrestrials provide a foundation for her own visual explorations, which respond to what he sees without presuming to know what he might know.

Knight works iteratively, and her new *Navigator* series includes a vast store of symbols from her past work, as well as UFO iconography that at first appears trite, but that she wields with the deftness that great Pop artists have applied to corporate logos. By pictographically recombining visual clichés in a sort of cypher, the paintings seem to acknowledge the unsavory history of pseudoscience while suggesting the possibility that pseudoscientific smugness has obscured phenomena that may be real and unknowable.

With these works, Knight definitively separates the act of not knowing from know-nothing conspiracy-mongering and lazy naïvité, evoking the wisdom underlying true uncertainty. *Navigator* charts the way for everyone to become a visionary.