

# GLADSTONE

Sabrina Tarasoff, "The Last Days of Rococo: Karen Kilimnik," *Mousse*, September 12, 2019

## MOUSSE

The Last Days of Rococo: Karen Kilimnik  
by Sabrina Tarasoff



Karen Kilimnik, *perfumed cloud*, 2018

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Live from someplace high up in the sky, where I'm stuck wearing brand-new and hellishly painful Prada heels, currently filled to their pretty patent brim with blood, I'm thinking about self-consciousness as a gesture—about romantic faux pas, disappearing acts, projective displacement, and moments in the fragile boundary of life and art, which Jack Bankowsky once sweetly and vaguely called the slacker art generation's "lucid something." I am thinking about cloud castles, itineraries across time and history, cruising altitudes, loose associations, forest picnics, acid trips, and minor emotions. I'm thinking about beauty, error, and ambiguity. And, because Evelyn "Champagne" King's 1977 banger "Shame" is playing on my headphones straight off the soundtrack of *The Last Days of Disco*—that is, the last of Whit Stillman's *Doomed Bourgeois in Love* trilogy—I am thinking about disco-floor sadness and figuring one's shit out through choreographed escapes to glittering psychic basements.

I am—naturally—thinking about Karen Kilimnik.  
But first, apropos “Shame”:

“Shame  
Ooh, only love can be to blame  
If we lose our love it’s a  
Shame  
Ooh, I wouldn’t wanna live with the pain  
Shame”

Imagine that instead of making a value judgment about love’s loss, King was actually singing *Schein!* in Schiller’s sense, and so instilling in the lovelorn dance floor an instinct for appearances. Effectively, it would shift the focus of the song from being about one woman’s thirst to disobey her mother by way of sleeping with some hot boy in the heat of summer to dealing with the shape or semblance of feeling as it fucks you up by forfeiting dialectical reason. King would instead be shimmering her way through something similar to Theodor Adorno’s eternal plight on the “mood” of artworks as “that in which the effect and the internal constitution of artworks form a murky amalgam that goes beyond their individual elements,” which as Sianne Ngai further notes in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), “produces a ‘twilight’ that Adorno seems to find irritating even as he acknowledges its centrality to any encounter with art.”<sup>1</sup> This twilight illuminates a space of labile ambiguity wherein ‘meaning’ is a matter of surface refraction; in its haze nothing matters but the disco-ball *Schein* of the artwork. What we’re experiencing is emotional momentum, or on King’s tip, “where I wanna be, wan na be.” To moralize: where art is at its best.

Like moving from *shame* to *Schein* through some epistemological dance floor, which forces the blur between “what a shame” (to ignore one’s desires) and feeling “shameful” (due to disapproving mothers), Kilimnik’s work keeps close dibs on the shifting meanings and state changes of visual culture, with a particularly keen eye for context—and, duh, couture. Where the artist has formerly frolicked in images of Kate Moss, Penhaligon’s perfumes, cats in the Château de Malmaison, the Manson family, fairies, and faux-finishings in the Rococo style, considering the profoundly superficial for its ability to articulate social moods, her recent work deals more directly with the atmospheric blur of iconography.

Watercolor cloud castles glittered with star-shaped sequins hang alongside tufts of smoke that suffocate a canvas, equivocating between calm composition and its ominous double. Elsewhere, literal state changes are tracked in paintings of cartoonishly wrought maps, some charting historical trauma, and others cruise lines.

Feeling twisted by the uncanny, most will scramble toward reason and deductive logic, running to their copy of the *Tractatus* or their local Capricorn club for reassurance, but in doing so run the risk of missing out on its pleasure principles. Entering the twilight faux-real of the surface of an image can be a good way to condition oneself into a primarily emotionalized, open mode of thought—for example by contemplating one’s amorous escapes into imagery or affairs while grooving to disco tracks, dwelling in the libido’s affective modes of articulation, or elsewhere by making art in that vague lucidity that emerges from a cocktail of fragmentation, sentimentality, transparency, and angst. In the spirit of young puppies in love, maybe we could call it *jouissance*. (No objet petit a.)

“Schein!

Burning, you keep my whole body yearning

You got me so confused

It’s a Schein!”

One can only imagine Adorno tripping in the (twi)light of Kilimnik’s work, perhaps acknowledging its affective investments in dance, decor, and cultural clout while feeling his linguistic faculties falling apart or crumbling into the “significant feeling” of form. On par with *shame*’s projected *Schein*, Kilimnik creates within the atmospheric blur of happily dissociated signifiers floating around in search of common aesthetic experience. Where those doomed kids in Stilman’s film filled their nights engaged in high-minded confabulation on the logistics of falling in and out of love against the *Schein* of champagne socialism, Kilimnik’s work allows us to dwell in the asymmetry of aesthetic relations, surface tensions formed of excess and ornamentation, and some sort of stoner virtuosity, while nervously reflecting (or deflecting?) the self-regard of the one percent. No doubt Kilimnik reaches for almost neobaroque levels of repression, but only in order to insouciantly swing past cultural mores and to the core of art’s annoying moodiness—its brilliance. Let’s call this moment her *Last Days of Rococo*.