

GLADSTONE

Nico Marsico-Morea, "Karen Kilimnik: Early Drawings 1976-1998," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2022

 BROOKLYN RAIL

Karen Kilimnik: *Early Drawings 1976 – 1998*

By Nick Marsico-Morea



Karen Kilimnik, *cat burglars club meeting*, 1977. Ink and watercolor on paper, Sheet 11 x 8 1/2 inches, frame 52 x 45.5 x 4 cm / 20 1/2 x 18 x 1 5/8 inches. © Karen Kilimnik. Courtesy the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber.

Stepping into the main space at Eva Presenhuber, the viewer is instantly invited into Kilimnik's carefully constructed, whimsical world. 120 of Kilimnik's early works on paper selected by the artist and split between Presenhuber and Sprüth Magers in London reference everything from European mythology and aristocracy to luxury advertisements, pop culture icons Sharon Tate and Keith Richards, and mass media. The artist's dynamic, diverse universe forms a cultural document that spans various eras and explores the feelings of comfort and familiarity that both high and common culture can generate.

Kilimnik calls attention to the relationship between high culture and comfort through her drawings of grandiose advertisements for sports cars, cognac, backgammon, and *Vogue* editorials. Subjects sport relaxed grins, luxuriating in Palm Beach vacations. In *cat burglars club meeting* (1977), three women sit in front of a fireplace, one with her legs draped over an armchair and the other two on the ground, wine in hand, in an Upper East Side home. In work depicting past eras, Europeans are seen with hunting dogs, horses, and jewelry, emanating the same air of ease present in the modern epoch. The relaxed state of Kilimnik's subjects is indicated by the possession of elegant commodities as Kilimnik constructs a critique of how marketing and an idealized lifestyle work together in the quintessential form of American consumerism. For Kilimnik, advertising acts as a middle ground, a form of culture that soothes the masses, despite the fact that the goods on offer are inaccessible for the majority.

Arrangements of early works form a historical presentation of cultural eras, including selections that appear to worship European society through the ages. The veneration of various European golden ages is a dreamlike state of serenity for Kilimnik. There is an abundance of white space in the drawings, a pared down aesthetic compared to her later paintings portraying pop culture greats such as Paris Hilton and Leonardo DiCaprio. There are a few exceptions, the most notable being the untitled 1988 pastel on paper that greets visitors entering the gallery. Possibly the most deliberate work in the exhibition and easily the richest in both palette and subject matter, the work depicts a hunting dog having caught a duck and a rabbit on an elite estate. This work directly references Chardin's *Game Still Life with Hunting Dog* (1730), harkening back to the recurring motif of domestic, pastoral moments that aristocratic life has the potential to invoke.

Representations of mass media and pop culture in the artist's universe function similarly to aristocratic lifestyle, creating a sense of nostalgic softness. A wall downstairs displaying drawings of Mallomars and a cartoon reindeer radiates the same aura of peacefulness, combined with a childlike innocence. Despite the seeming lightness of Kilimnik's subject matter, there is an underlying sense of darkness and the macabre that works to satirize differences of high and mass culture. A tiger ready to devour its meal and a delirious race car driver on the verge of crashing elicit a sense of danger. In *The Great Charles Addams* (1982), the morbid, upper-class Addams Family is satirized as Morticia Addams laments her unhappiness.

This set of drawings merges Kilimnik's massive historical and cultural knowledge, with not only references, but her interpretations of how these references have affected our ability to feel at home. Through recognizable artifacts, Kilimnik fabricates an idyllic fantastical universe that emits a sense of romanticized collective pleasure. Although advertisements, culture kept behind gates, and pop culture are fundamentally different, Kilimnik posits that these forms affect societal norms and influence our cultural landscape in interchangeable ways, giving a unifying sense of warm relief.

Nick Marsico-Morea writes and works in contemporary art in Brooklyn.



Karen Kilimnik, *Untitled*, 1988. Pastel on paper, sheet 25 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches, frame 33 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 2 inches. © Karen Kilimnik. Courtesy the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber.



Karen Kilimnik, *The Great Charles Addams*, 1982. Ink on paper, sheet 22 x 16 3/4 inches, frame 30 3/8 x 25 x 15/8 inches. © Karen Kilimnik. Courtesy the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber.