THE DO LIST

Karla Knight Tunes In to the Great Unknown

The Connecticut-based artist makes compelling use of invented language in her show at Gallery Wendi Norris.

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By Sarah Hotchkiss



Installation view of Karla Knight, 'Fine Tuner' at Gallery Wendi Norris. *(Chris Grunder)*

In 1972, the Italian musician Adriano Celentano released a 4-minute single that sounds almost like English, but isn't quite fully there. "Prisencolinensinainciusol" was sung in improvised gibberish, meant to mimic how American English sounds to non-English speakers. With Celentano's confident phrasing, listeners were entranced: the song reached the Top 10 in three different countries.

Karla Knight's artwork creates a similar feeling, a slipperiness between information and incomprehension. Her paintings, tapestries and works on paper, now on view in *Fine Tuner* at Gallery Wendi Norris, look like missives from an alien source. And instead of translating, Knight welcomes audiences into an exuberant, freeing world of her own invention.

In diagrammic, geometric arrangements of shapes and symbols, Knight's work seems like it *should* be explaining something. Some pieces resemble the annotated pages of a space-age user manual. Others, the blueprints for a telepathic communication system. Her compositions are orderly, square, pleasingly spaced. She works in eye-catching blues and reds, layering mediums and textures that reward in-person viewing. If her art *did* contain vital information, we would definitely pay attention.



Karla Knight, 'Little Orbit Drawing 4,' 2026; Graphite and colored pencil on paper. *(Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery)*



Karla Knight, 'A Strange Orbit,' 2024–2026; Oil, flashe, and pencil on paper mounted on linen. *(Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery)*

And yet in each of her pieces, Knight includes grids of nonsense glyphs — an imaginary alphabet that entered her work after she first watched her son grapple with letters. Knight is adamant that she does not have a translation for her symbols. There is no secret message, there is no decoder ring. What she describes is a process of automatic writing with no fixed alphabet.

When she does include the English language, Knight borrows, often from science books. She's less interested in understanding the universe than she is in referencing the language and look of these materials to create something else entirely.

In her works on paper, she adorns images of comets and moonscapes with graphite and colored pencil marginalia, typed lists and luminous spheres. The mix of mark-making looks like decipherment without a clear destination — ideas spin out in multiple directions. Playfully, on *Little Orbit Drawing 4*, she has typed “Now what do you want to do?”

Knight’s use of language is poetic and delightful. Numbered lists dot the works on paper with goofy phrases like “ooze dweller,” “normal nothing” and “void voice.” How serious and definitive could this science thing be, with “shy teeth” somewhere in the mix?



Installation view of Karla Knight, ‘Fine Tuner’ at Gallery Wendi Norris. *(Chris Grunder)*

Knight was primed from an early age to be open to more than one reality. Her father, the author David C. Knight, published both mainstream science books and more fringe texts, including *Those Mysterious UFOs* and *The ESP Reader*. (Meanwhile, as *this* reality grows increasingly surreal, Knight’s work begins to seem like a useful training regimen for our present.)

If her work is predictive, I look forward to the physicality it represents. Knight's strategic use of thick brushstrokes, slight wobbles and hand-sewn embroidery drive home its tangibility. This art may have technological influences, but it springs from Knight's mind, and is made by her own hands.

When we have so many tools at our fingertips — AI translators and chatty little agents and summarized search results — it's tempting to strip the mystery from everything, to explain everything away into an archived file. Knight's work, conversely, creates new mysteries. With invented language and novel ways of presenting information, she pushes back against oversimplification.

Despite the neatness of her art, Knight complicates things. She pulls us, willingly, into the unknown.

'Fine Tuner' is on view at Gallery Wendi Norris (436 Jackson St., San Francisco) through Dec. 23, 2026.