



**Karla Kaplun, Escena: Acto II (Scene: Act II), 2020, oil on canvas, wooden frame, 92 1/4 x 73 5/8 x 2".**

**Karla Kaplun**  
HOUSE OF GAGA | MEXICO CITY

I had a lot of curiosity coming into this exhibition. It had been three years since Gaga had shown a local artist; Karla Kaplun is young, and “La Compañía” (The Company) was her first solo show in an established gallery. Intriguing, too, was the traditional sensibility of her pieces: figurative oil paintings, a couple of them large-format and encased in ornate wooden frames.

Kaplun puts a fresh twist on eighteenth-century academicism and seventeenth-century Baroque. Her subjects are sometimes biblical—they include a Madonna in one painting, a figure with stigmata in a pose that recalls the Lamentation of Christ in another—but the show’s recurrent theme was the circus, with scenes of harlequins and a tightrope walker.

Escena: Acto II (Scene: Act II) (all works 2020), one of the two large paintings, is a danse macabre with a spectral skeleton on the left pulling the diaphanous soul out of a fallen nude male figure at the center; to the right, a harlequin decked out in a checkered top and red-and-turquoise tights clutches the dying body of another unclothed figure. The composition is fluid, well-balanced, dynamic. The pose of the moribund character on the right is reminiscent of that of the main figure in Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, 1793. A smiling sun shines over the darkened scene, in part carved into the heavy wooden frame, like the bones that ornament the left and the shooting stars that appear on the right.

The other large painting, *El sueño de Bruno* (*Bruno's Dream*), similarly shows a harlequin in distress, falling into a black background in a contorted pose as an angel with pixie-cut red hair pulls him up by his right arm. The upper-left side of the image is a warped version of the Mexican coat of arms: An eagle wraps its claws around an albino python that seems to be trying to steal the harlequin's opalescent soul, which pours out of him through a cone on his ribs. Another mythical Mexican animal shows up in *Nuestra señora* (*Our Lady*), a smaller piece in which a shadowy Virgin Mary holds a candle up to her face as she peers into the viewer's eyes. She is surrounded by jewel-toned flowers, painted in beautiful detail, as a green-and-red quetzal floats by her gaze.

Most of the figures in these paintings share similarly angular, slightly bug-eyed features and melancholic expressions; only the rescuing angel in *El sueño de Bruno* seemed capable of stronger emotion. Despite their historical influences, the works flaunt a few touches of the now. They court a deliberate inconsistency: Some sections of the paintings are richly detailed, while others are fuzzy, slightly unfinished; the weirdness of the circus is expressed in strident colors. And a couple of the works were installed unconventionally: the two panels of *Anochecida orquesta* (*Nightfall Orchestra*), with its five-person musical ensemble, abutted one another in a corner, while the show's highlight, *Equilibrista* (*Tightrope Walker*), was mounted on the ceiling. Centered in a perfectly round black canvas, its funambulist is shown in foreshortened perspective, the sole of his left foot close to the viewer, his colorful tights opened like scissors as he looks forward.

But these touches only made me long for an even more elaborate *mise-en-scène*—not to mention lighting other than the ubiquitous fluorescents, inimical as they are to Kaplun's darker oil paintings. Behind *El sueño de Bruno* hung a floor-length off-white curtain. Perhaps draping the entire room with curtains and a more theatrical lighting design would have bolstered the baroque flamboyance of the images. The white cube seemed too uncommitted, impervious to the works' emotions; one felt that the surroundings should have been bending to the will and the eager commitment of the painter.

— Gaby Cepeda