

PRESS RELEASE

Karen Kilimnik

June 12 – July 24, 2026

Vernissage and exhibition walkthrough with Dr. Raphael Gygax, Saturday, June 13, 6 pm

Waldmannstrasse 6, Zurich

Extended opening hours during Zurich Art Weekend:

Friday, June 12, 11 am – 9 pm; Saturday, June 13, 11 am – 8 pm; Sunday, June 14, 11 am – 6 pm

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present its ninth solo exhibition with the US-American artist Karen Kilimnik.

Interiors, Flowers, and the Return of Images

On Karen Kilimnik's Exhibition at Galerie Eva Presenhuber

by Dr. Raphael Gygax

"The Nachleben (,afterlife/survival') of images is revealed in their capacity to re-emerge in new contexts."

Aby Warburg

Since the late 1970s, Karen Kilimnik has consistently incorporated a wide variety of media into her work—from drawing and painting to collage, and *mise-en-scène*-sculpture to photography and video. Despite this openness to different media, her work follows a conceptual precision. Kilimnik operates with an iconographic archive that spans several centuries: from 17th- and 18th-century court painting to romantic landscapes and history painting to references to popular culture, fashion, television, and movies. However, these diverse image sources do not appear as linear art-historical quotations. Rather, they appear in Kilimnik's works as cultural recurring forms—as pictorial formulas that have sedimented over the course of history and are becoming visible again in the present. Her images therefore often appear as multi-layered pictorial spaces: layers of art history, decor, popular culture, and fantasy overlap to form a peculiar pictorial world that seems both familiar and unsettling.

One possible approach to Karen Kilimnik's work is to examine the concept of glamour, which is repeatedly used as a descriptive category in the reception of her work. In her work, glamour does not appear as mere glitz or luxurious surface but unfolds its meaning in the depth of its etymological origin. The word "glamour" dates to the Scottish *glamer* of the early 18th century and originally referred to a spell that deceives the eye and makes the world appear more beautiful than it is. This meaning, in turn, is derived from "grammar," a term associated in the Middle Ages with scholarly, sometimes occult knowledge. In this sense, glamour refers less to beauty than to a form of knowledge and power over appearance—an artificially created, dazzling visibility.

The bouquet: flowers, still life, and spatial staging

A lush bouquet of flowers in a glass vase on an oval Sheraton-style satinwood side table marks the beginning of the exhibition. The *mise-en-scène*-sculpture *flower Bouquet Mt Olympus* (2026) is reminiscent of both the representative function of flower arrangements in public interiors and the long tradition of European floral still lifes – from 17th-century Dutch painters such as Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) and Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606–1684) to later representatives of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the history of painting, floral still lifes have always been characterized by a particular ambivalence. On the one hand, they served as a demonstration of painterly virtuosity and decorative beauty; on the other, they developed into a classic *vanitas* motif, referring to the transience of all life. In these paintings, flowers appear both as signs of wealth and cultivated mastery over nature, and as symbols of decay and temporality. Kilimnik's "Bouquet," however, eludes precisely this moment of transience. Upon closer inspection, the bouquet turns out to be an arrangement of artificial flowers. The seemingly natural abundance thus becomes visible as an artificial construction. Beauty no

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

longer appears as an expression of organic abundance, but as a staging—a form of aesthetic camouflage that deceives the eye.

This brings another aspect of floral arrangements to the fore: their representative function within spaces of social encounter. Bouquets of flowers traditionally appear in transitional spaces—in entrance halls, salons, or hotel lobbies—where they mark the moment of welcome. They create an atmosphere of cultivated hospitality and at the same time serve as a sign of attention, prosperity, and aesthetic care. In the architecture of representative interiors, floral arrangements thus play an important role in the spatial staging: they structure perception, accentuate transitions, and contribute to the symbolic charge of the space—and they serve to distinguish, clearly indicating that the space can afford constant renewal.

This discourse is continued in several paintings in the same room. In *Hotel de Paris, the royal suite foyer – 1940s the Riviera or 1830s France* (2015), *world of perfection, the hotel de Paris, Monte Carlo* (2015) or *The Egerton House hotel, London – tea time* (2007), luxurious interiors appear that are reminiscent of decorative interiors of the 19th and early 20th centuries and – as the titles suggest – at the same time refer to the specific architecture of hotel rooms. Flower vases, stucco work, and Louis XVI armchairs form a scene of grand representation in which floral arrangements once again play a central role in the staging of the room. The rooms depicted appear less like concrete locations and more like carefully composed stage sets in which different historical periods merge. In art history, such interiors refer to the tradition of interior painting, which was particularly widespread in the Netherlands since the 17th century. Artists such as Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684) and Gerard ter Borch (1617–1681) developed pictorial spaces in which bourgeois interiors were staged as places of social order and cultural discipline. Kilimnik takes up this tradition but shifts it into a hybrid present in which courtly aesthetics, hotel architecture, and tourist fantasy merge.

The painting *the mirror of the Indian Ocean* (2015) shows an ornamentally framed mirror against a blue sea background. Here, the mirror functions as a classic symbol of painting itself—as a metaphor for reflection, illusion, and projection. Through the connecting element of the sea, this image also enters a visual dialogue with *island of the flower rulers* (2025), a dreamlike depiction of an island. From the perspective of a beach, the view falls on an island in the distance; in the foreground, flowers grow, including a tulip—a deliberately incongruous, non-tropical motif—which underscores the fictional quality of the pictorial space. At the same time, the scene evokes a motif that runs through the exhibition: the idea of a possible place of escape. Like the luxurious hotel interiors, these island scenes in also refer to cultural fantasies of travel, distance, and exoticism—to those aesthetic promises of seduction and escapism that have been closely associated with tourist imagery since the 19th century.

The Landscape: History Painting, Ornament, and Fairy Tale

The main room displays the central body of work in the exhibition. Here, new canvas works and framed collages are brought together. The works on canvas are based on a multi-stage working process: a collaged image is first transferred to canvas and then retouched with paint. Some of these canvases also feature applied crystals and gold paint. In her early works, she already developed collaging techniques in which different image sources are intertwined. Kilimnik uses images of landscapes, historical paintings, and sometimes military battle scenes as source material. However, these motifs do not appear as direct quotations, but are transformed, overlaid with floral and fairy-tale-like ornaments, and transferred into new pictorial contexts.

In *fairy valley* (2026), a dramatic mountain landscape appears, reminiscent of the imagery of romantic landscape painting. The composition is based on the painting *Dovedale in Derbyshire* (1784) by Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), an artist whose landscape depictions are often interpreted as a transition between classical landscape painting and the Romantic conception of nature. Although his landscapes are based on real places, they are also staged as atmospherically charged theatrical spaces. Kilimnik contrasts this style by placing floral forms in the foreground. Their colors and two-dimensional appearance stand out interrupting the traditional scenery.

This becomes even clearer in *the procession, Flower rulers village, the city* (2026). The work references the historical painting *The Entry of the Ambassador Adriaen Pauw into Münster* (1646) by Gerard ter Borch (1616–1681). The painting

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

shows the Dutch diplomat Adriaen Pauw on his way to the peace negotiations in Münster, which culminated in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and thus in the end of the Thirty Years' War. As a classic history painting, the original visualizes a moment of political stabilization. In Kilimnik's version, however, this order is complemented by oversized floral forms and ornamental vegetation. This creates a productive ambiguity: are these floral figures to be read as a utopian vision of "flower power."

In the work *The Battle of Flower Lane* (2026), Kilimnik draws on the equestrian portrait *William III at the Battle of the Boyne* (1690) by Jan Wyck (1652–1702) – a motif she had already taken up in her early, iconic *mise-en-scène*-sculpture *Battles or the Art of War* (1991). In the current work, however, this heroic pictorial tradition is modified: the victorious portrait of the monarch is interspersed with floral ornaments that contrast with the logic of the historical image. A similar shift also characterizes the work *The Field Marshall* (2026), which is based on the tapestry *The March* (ca. 1718–24) from the studio of Judocus de Vos (1661–1734) and Philippe De Hondt (1683–1741). The original tapestry belongs to *The Art of War* series, a cycle of military depictions from the early 18th century that stages scenes of battles, military formations, and troop movements. While the historical model visualizes military order and strategic control, Kilimnik transforms the scene into an ornamental composition in which the horsemen are embedded in a network of flowers. The military hierarchy appears here as a reconfiguration—a playful collage of meanings where the Field Marshal is repositioned within a Field of Flowers. By marshaling these floral ornaments into the composition, Kilimnik creates a decorative overlay that softens the image's original claim to power and seriousness.

Another level of meaning emerges through the titles of the works. Titles such as *The Field Marshall* (2026) or *advanced field camouflage* (2026) charge the seemingly idyllic pictorial spaces with military meanings. Camouflage appears here not only as a military technique, but also as an aesthetic principle: beauty functions as visual camouflage that simultaneously conceals and reveals meanings.

The interior: architecture, seriality, and staging

In the third and final room of the exhibition, the focus shifts from the exterior space of landscape and history paintings to interiors, thus dramatically closing the circle to the beginning of the exhibition. A selection of paintings from the late 1990s to the late 2010s focuses on interiors and architectural spaces, a theme that has long been a part of Kilimnik's work. Kilimnik studied architecture for two years, and her work continues to show a keen interest in spatial staging, historical architectural forms, and the cultural resonance of interiors. Works such as *the Swedish workroom* (2010) or *the cozy living room, the Cotswolds* (2017) depict intimate salon rooms with fireplaces, furniture, and decorative elements. Such scenes are reminiscent of 18th- and 19th-century English interior painting and depictions of refined living spaces. At the same time, these rooms appear like carefully staged sets—spaces in which historical atmosphere and painterly construction are inextricably intertwined.

A group of works from 2002 is also paradigmatic of this approach, including titles such as the *Antichamber* (2002), *the reading room overlooking the park*, *December* (2002), *the reading room overlooking the park*, *the study* (2002), or *my reading desk overlooking the park* (2002). These works are based on the same motif of an elegant interior with a view of a park landscape. However, they differ in color, degree of elaboration, brushwork, and degree of abstraction. These variations point to a form of seriality in Kilimnik's work: motifs recur, change slightly, and are reframed by their respective titles. Repetition here appears not as reproduction, but as ongoing transformation—as another form of collaging.

This theme is given an additional shift by works such as *Elton John's London home* (2010) and *Elton John's London Living Room* (2010). These paintings also depict interiors that are formally hardly distinguishable from historical representations of rooms. It is only through the titles that a connection to contemporary culture is established. The rooms thus appear both timeless and specifically located—as pictorial spaces in which interior-decorator interiors, celebrity culture, and art-historical references merge. The interiors thus appear as pictorial spaces in which historical references, glamour, and fantasy combine to create a multi-layered *mise-en-scène*-sculpture.

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

Even more than four decades after the beginning of her artistic career, Kilimnik's works remain peculiarly resistant to unambiguous interpretations. This ambiguity is further reinforced by the artist's deliberate restraint. Kilimnik rarely comments on her works – an openness that is not a lack of intent, but key part of her approach. Her works operate less through explanation or unambiguous attribution than the viewer's own imagination. It is precisely this tension that gives her work its enduring relevance: historical motifs appear not as nostalgic retrospectives, but as cultural ghosts that continue to haunt the present. It is in this in-between space that the works unfold their effectiveness. Karen Kilimnik thus continuously works on an oeuvre that does not reassure but unsettles; that does not explain but seduces—and in doing so opens a discussion about the mechanisms of iconic imagery.

Dr. Raphael Gygax

Karen Kilimnik is an American artist working across painting, drawing, photography, and mise-en-scène-sculpture. Her work has been presented in numerous international exhibitions, including NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale (2023), Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver (2013), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2008), Aspen Art Museum (2007), Serpentine Gallery, London (2007), and Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (2006). Works by Kilimnik are held in major public collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. In fall 2026, Karen Kilimnik will be the subject of major solo exhibitions at Centro Pecci in Prato, Italy, and at the Kunstverein in Hamburg.

Dr. Raphael Gygax is a Swiss art historian, curator, and writer. Following many years as curator and head of publications at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich (2003–19), he served as Deputy Director of the Department of Fine Arts at Zurich University of the Arts and as Head of the Bachelor Fine Arts program (2019–23). Since 2023, Gygax has been working internationally as an independent curator, with projects in Chicago, Locarno, Berlin, Vienna, and Luxembourg. In 2024, he was appointed Curator-at-Large at Kunsthau Zürich, and in 2026, Curator for Special Projects at Kunstmuseum Bern.

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