ESSAY

On Claude Karfiol's NOBODY'S GHOST

(The Clown) 2026

An essay by **Alexandra Steinacker-Clark**



Claude Karfiol, *NOBODY'S GHOST (The Clown)*, 2026.

Theatrical, haunting, and provocative are some ways to describe NOBODY'S GHOST (The Clown) by Swiss artist Claude Karfiol. With artistic roots in theater, and the avant-garde Swiss performance scene of the 1980s, Karfiol interweaves theater, technology, questions of identity, and the role of the artist into this work. The clown figure, originating from medieval court jesters and the Italian comedia del' arte tradition, faces the viewer, hauntingly unidentifiable, obscured by slashes of blues, yellows, and greys swarming the figure's head. A joyful, comedic figure becomes a reminder and an intruder, interfering in our contented everyday lives.

Even more, is the way in which this image has come to be. The isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic's mandated quarantines meant to Karfiol, having transitioned from the performance to the visual arts for years, that he no longer had access to his studio and materials for painting. Although a complete novice to the digital, a creative outlet for his practice was found - through the very same program with which I am writing this text, Office Word. The word-processing program, originally designed to type, edit, and save text documents, is not the software one would expect a visual artist to gravitate towards. Through this experimentation,

using his mouse to essentially hand-draw sketches and transform them into a final composition, Karfiol developed a unique technique.



Claude Karfiol, *[Les Fleurs du Mal]*, 2024–2026.

The implementation of technology within artistic practice has deep modern art historical roots. In 1986, Palestinian-American abstract artist Samia Halaby bought a Commodore Amiga 1000 computer. She taught herself BASIC and C programming to create her first digital "kinetic paintings", which were abstract, geometric animations where keyboard strokes triggered moving shapes and synchronized sounds. She is known as an early pioneer of “Computer Art”. Nearly half a century later, in the age of artificial intelligence, Canadian-Chinese artist Sougwen Chung uses machine vision and robotics to collaborate with AI on ethereal works encompassing drawing, painting, and performance. Karfiol’s adoption of software in his work functions as a halting of time, as a specific nod to a point in time in technological production - neither the primitive programs Halaby used, nor the advanced machine vision implemented by Chung. Microsoft Word as a program was released around the same time as Halaby began making work on computers, and Karfiol began using the program in his practice at a time when AI began seeping into our everyday lives.

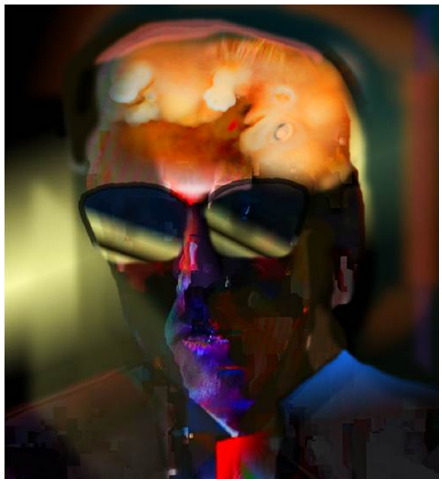
Karfiol‘s method of making gives us a sense of time, being frozen in a moment where technological innovation seemed at its peak. Throughout the last decades, technology felt novel as it began to change the world around us. Microsoft Word is a relatively new technology and yet it is also legacy software, needed for writing and editing text, thus not in need of complex updates or large changes in its base function. It is a modern fossil of a time before technology began to eat away at society, a time before it began to chip away at the next generation’s psychological wellbeing, before it began convincing us we need to be everything and do everything all in the name of efficiency and never ending to-do lists. Karfiol‘s practice, and this series in particular, suspends us in that moment, not least with the enigmatic figure staring out at us through this surprising, slightly befuddling medium.

The body of work to which NOBODY’S GHOST (The Clown) belongs consists of 180 fictional portraits, all made between 2024-2026. Within the entire series the picture is unique. While all the other works show figures in profile or facing away from the viewer, here the clown-like figure confronts the viewer directly in what the artist describes as “a brutal frontal view - The image confronts us in the truest sense of the word, working like a mirror and a calling to our true self.”

“The image confronts us in the truest sense of the word, working like a mirror and a calling to our true self.”

CLAUDE KARFIOL

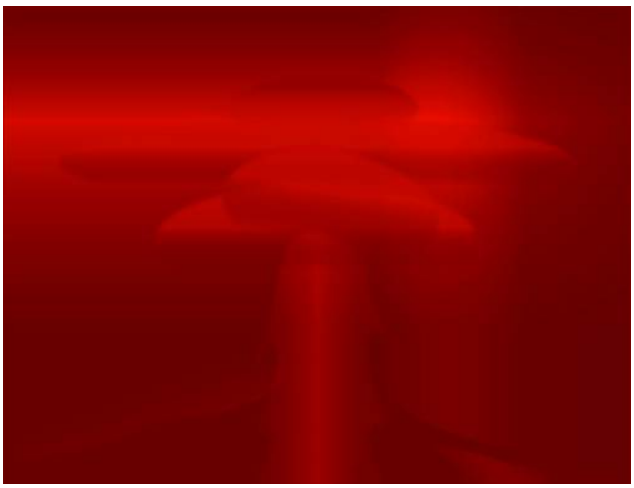
The ability to render one's likeness on a canvas has historically been one of the most important skills a painter could possess, with portraiture being a main source of income and a sign of status for painters in the 17th and 18th centuries. The invention of photography in the early 19th century completely transformed what we know today of portraiture, as it evolved from a slow, experimental chemical process into a massive commercial industry in the 20th century. With photography mastering realistic replication, artists working in the medium of paint began to experiment with form, line, light, and perspective. The art historical movements of Impressionism, Expressionism, and Cubism developed, abandoning form for feeling, and as these movements progressed, Surrealism evolved out of the desire to explore the subconscious mind, dreams, and psychoanalysis.



Claude Karfiol, *[Trump and abortion]*, 2024–2026.



Claude Karfiol, *[The plague)*, 2024–2026.



Claude Karfiol, *[Putin threatens with nuclear weapons]*, 2024–2026.

This series makes reference to both the traditional art historical method of portraiture, and its importance in the development of an artist's career. It further underlines the powerful position an artist has in depicting a person, representing their identity - or the powerful notion of creating a self-portrait, a vulnerable show of oneself to the world. A kind of self-portrait the clown becomes the artist's archetype, inescapable and confrontational. Yet, when we continue to look, the figure appears vulnerable, almost wounded, concealing the face behind a quasi-mask. As relentlessly as we are confronted, the clown itself seems to be in need of recognition and healing. NOBODY'S GHOST becomes anybody's - or everybody's - ghost, igniting a profound and ongoing dialogue in the quest to answer ultimate questions of life, death, art and meaning.



Photo: [Ines Wurm Photography]

ABOUT ALEXANDRA STEINACKER-CLARK

Alexandra Steinacker-Clark is an American-Austrian art historian, art advisor, presenter, and author. She is the founder and host of All About Art, a podcast dedicated to demystifying the professional art sector, and co-director of NXT GEN: AWITA x All About Art, a platform for emerging arts professionals. She regularly appears on the BBC Art Hour as a cultural critic and is a TEDx speaker with her talk on "Can consuming art increase empathy?" She has a decade of art market experience and advises emerging and next generation art collectors to help them build collections that reflect their values. She is the author of *Working in Art: How to Build A Career in the Art World* (Octopus, 2026).