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CONSTELLATIONS, MOONS, AND WATER

Karen Gunderson

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Constellations, Moons, and Water

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With an essay by Mark Daniel Cohen

Cratering the Light

The Luminous Lifting of the Soul in the Art of Karen Gunderson

by Mark Daniel Cohen

It would be well, after so long a departure from the considerations of maturity in our cultures, to give witness to the mark of the fully matured artist — for there is no other issue so pertinent to and revealing of the indispensable virtues of the art of Karen Gunderson.

The impress of the maturation of the artist's work is the ability to make the foundational component of the artist's medium as distinctively and indelibly as a fingerprint. That base component, that essential aspect of the artist's art, is the root of the principle upon which the work is conceived, it is the brick out of which the edifice of the artwork is constructed, and its laws are the laws of the work as a whole. Its nature is the nature of the art itself; it is the work in small. Or rather, the artwork is the single phrase, the individual gesture, writ large. For the writer, it is the sentence and the clause; for the sculptor, it is the surface texture; for the composer, it is the musical phrase; for the painter, it is the brush stroke.

However, it would be far more to the purpose to observe that the foundational component is not so much the most rudimentary physical element of the material work as it is the core principle of manipulation of the medium. For the writer, it is the manipulation of verbal thought; for the sculptor, the orchestration of tangible form; for the composer, the choreography of sound and with it, automatically, directly, emotion; and for the painter, the dispensation of light.

These are more the means by which the artist manipulates the responses of the witnesses of the work. These are the letters and terms, the inflections and colorations, the inclinations and configurations, by which the artist speaks, by which the artist is able to speak at all. They are the language of the art, for they are fractal. The variety of ways they can configure the field of the artwork are the sum total of its aspect. They compound and orchestrate the language of the work for they are — in the most literal sense of the nature of the artwork — all that it is. A work of art can say only what its component gestures do.

For the marks that compose, for all the gestures that make up and animate the anatomy of the work to be meaningful, they must be individual, they must be a language of the artist's own making, a language, a style, that is unique in its totality, distinctive in its overall outline, for in art as in all forms of thought and expression, in all manners of human exchange, it is profoundly difficult to mean anything at all. One of the primary laws of thought, one of the first truths of it that becomes evident to one devoting it serious attention, is that thought is continuously subject to suggestibility.

We are all given to it. Much of what we convey in all the ways in which we convey to each other is not truly rooted and is without serious intent. Our signal gestures are rarely signal. We contribute to each other a nearly continuous flow of expressions — verbal and otherwise — that are largely viral. We catch them like the symptoms of a disease and hardly are aware of what we spread. Our intentions are largely a function of inattention, our words repetitions of things we barely heard and hardly hear ourselves saying again. On the whole, expression is not communication — it is epidemic.

And that is why the tools of art — and of all forms of serious-minded reflection, communication, and feeling and thought — are only secondarily and as a by-product tools of expression. They are primarily the intellectual implements for digging. They are the mechanisms of the imagination, by which the artist explores the plummet deeps of the artist's own nature, to discover what can be said, what needs to be said, what is truly intended — what must be given its voice, and its voice is the language that is the

artist's very art. The tools of art are among the few means we have for eluding superficiality, for achieving the profundity that otherwise evades us, and for being ourselves individually, when we otherwise are only blended victims of the contagion of apparent meaning, paleness of purpose, and mere existence. Their primary work is committed and fully accomplished before the work is finalized and given to the world. That is why what they convey to others is only aftermath, side effect, the mere remains of a project whose truer purpose was the desperately imperative drive to discover, in the center of the artist's most essential self, what can be known in no other way.

Meaning is hard, almost unachievable, as we so often press down on a thought only to feel it slip out from under our mental fingers, and we discover that there was nothing supporting it other than something impossibly vague or merely overheard — the movement of the empty sleeve of a ghost. Meaning is hard; it must be probed in the foundations of the mind. And so it is the personality, the individual nature of the individual mind, that is its root. For meaning is also indispensable. One must be capable of meaning something — deliberate, clear, and precise in its intention — in order to have a meaning, personally and for oneself, in order to be meaningful. To be at all, one must be an individual. To exist is thus a function of determination, of deliberateness, of possessing the clarity of thought to know one's mind, distinct and apart from all others — to live is necessarily to live deliberately.

And thus art must be continuously remade in the artist's image. For the nullity is anonymity. Regardless of the subject at issue, regardless of the matter to which the attention of the artist is turned, the artist's identity must never be in doubt. The statement that could be made by anyone has been made by no one, and is the assertion of nothing whatever, for it is merely the trading in acquired phrasings, in information exchanged as commodity, whose significance grows fainter with every passage. The voice must be distinctive, unmistakable, thoroughly personal, for it to be a voice, and a principle of articulation. For it to be meaningful, the voice must be the origin of meaning — unique, unmistakable from that of anyone else, yet strangely, immediately, humanly understandable.

In the visual arts, there are few artists working today who forged so distinct an individual voice, few who have generated a style and a language of aesthetic conception and transformation of such innovation and renewal, as Karen Gunderson. It is a rare thing to see the work of an artist who creates as if everything about her medium were known to her — so well versed is she in the history of her craft — and at the same time as if everything about her medium new and previously unknown to her — so much is she unencumbered by it, uncaged by it, so far has she gone to rethink the very nature and practice of painting.

Gunderson paints as if she were reformulating the art form of painting from the ground up. Her style, her manner of execution and thus her imagination — her capability of dreaming, discovery, and inner sight — is thoroughly new, completely her own, literally something not seen before. Her work is not the next step in a line of innovation that constitutes one thread in a modern tradition. It is not a pastiche of influences arranged in a pattern and through a computation of proportions that are moderately different from all other contemporary compounds. Her work is *sui generis*. She has conjured a technical innovation entirely of her own making and she has welded it into a style that resembles no one else. She creates as if her work were its own tradition, and she does so even as she practices a craft so carefully executed, she pays homage with every brush stroke to the great work that has preceded her.

It is a rare thing to discover, and it should be missed by no one interested in the nature not just of painting or of visual art, but of art itself. Gunderson has shown her work internationally, on four continents, in numerous solo and group exhibitions, but one can never see her art enough, and her exhibition of nine new works at ClampArt, “Karen Gunderson: Constellations, Moons, and Water,” is an opportunity to see her extending her technical innovations into new ranges of effect and aesthetic insight.

However, what is primarily evident in this exhibition is what is always evident in Gunderson’s work, what is evident only when authentic and fully mature works of art are present: the very essence of the human spirit, vivified and renewed, as the very na-

ture of art is vivified and renewed by the discovery and practice of the unique, individual voice, by the renewal of meaning and intention that can be obtained only through access to the center of the human soul.

Art is the molten fusion of the hand and the soul. The impulse to create is something more than just the self-appointed engaging in invention — it is a hurtle at the hinge-point of an impossibility: to render as real and palpable the inward realm of an aromatic and shimmering existence, to build as hard fact the fleeting reflection of another region in which we also have our lives, and in which we all live a more lilting experience. To make art is to fashion the delicately braiding fire, it is to ignite a universally familiar light out of the dull materials of the duller earth — it is to call down to the soil a quiet and entrancing flame and to see that, as the Renaissance poet John Nashe wrote, “brightness falls from the air.” The accomplishment of true art is to bind the material of the body to the essential and immaterial matter of the spirit, to match the outer life to the inner, to make with the hand what only the inward senses can grasp. And the transparent, intangible, incarnadine blush of aesthetic bliss — which, for those with the necessary inflection of personal nature to know it, travels through the veins and filaments of the spirit with something like a religious ardor, something like an aimless and drifting moment of love — is always triggered by some artist making some aspect of the inner life somehow incarnate, by some artist breaking the laws of physics and fate, breaking the laws of the physics of the soul and merging across the chasm that splits our essence the facts of material existence and the energy of inspired life, to bring to the inertness of the mass that we are the brilliant swiftness of the thought that we are as well — the true meaning of achieving meaning, the reason it is precious, the purpose of knowing, of thinking, which ultimately is to feel — to achieve the experience of being fully alive.

At the heart of Gunderson’s unique artistic spirit is a technical innovation, a redefinition of painting that is entirely her own — the route by which, under her hand, the creativity of art itself has been re-created, as it must be, always, by any true artist. Gunderson’s innovation involves the painting of figurative works executed completely

in black paint. The artist has been developing her technique for the black paintings since the late 1980s. She employs a variety of black hues to obtain a range of differing values, of distinguishing darkesses — ranging from the soft and subtle, almost succulent suffusion of lamp black to the midnight absence and light-absorbing eclipse of peach black. Yet, their differences of value do not account for the visual evidence of the figures, for the sheer fact that — painted in black set against backgrounds of virtually identical black — they are clear to the eye, as clearly visible as if they had been illustrated with a full palette.

Rather than illuminate her subject matter through the use of a full spectrum of hues, Gunderson engraves her imagery in the air between the painted surface and the viewer. Rather than simulate the effects of light in full-color images whose tones are orchestrated to denote a shade of vicarious illumination striking a vicarious scene, she instead choreographs the projection of actual light off her monochrome works and focuses it, molds it into an image that coalesces in real space, not in the space that appears to recede behind the painting's surface, but in the literal space immediately before the viewer's eyes.

Having chosen black as the color that most effectively offsets the projection of pure white light, that most effectively clarifies the highlighted sheen of the painted veneer, Gunderson works as much like an engraver as a painter. She scores the black field of the painting using only her brush, covering it with patterns of lightly incised lines that determine the planes and surfaces of the image by their direction and apparent movement, by the way they reflect the light that strikes them. In essence, Gunderson directs the reflection of light, controlling the physics of illumination and transforming the painting's shimmer of glistening black into a visual ballet, creating the image out of pure light, carving the image out of the vibrations of pure illumination as if out of a vibrant block of living stone, as if out of the very substance of actuality itself, the raw material of the materially, and the immaterially, real.

For all the similarity of technique, the effect is entirely different from that of engraving. The engraver's line works upon the white of the paper; Gunderson's scoring of black paint opens only onto more black. The white one sees is of the light itself. The image arises from a background that seems to have the richness and density of black satin, a mysterious space of velvet texture. The image literally glows, lives as a white iridescence, and hovers in the atmosphere, existing literally as the brightness that falls from the air, as the inner illumination brought into the matter of the earth.

It can be argued that what Gunderson has done is to move the vanishing point — moving it so extremely, she has shifted it out of the painting. In normal perspective composition, the vanishing point is placed only seemingly in the volumetric, only apparently deep in the background — in fact, the vanishing point is positioned on the surface of the work, and all compositional lines are laid to point to it, to intersect where it lies, resulting in the visual conviction that space and all apparent objects in apparent space are receding. Instead, Gunderson's technique has the lines of reflected light intersect at a point in the air between the painting and the viewer — or rather, at a sweeping continuum of points, each one determined by where the viewer stands, and at each point, the image forms itself. Put differently, she has substituted a focal point for the vanishing point.

The effect of this technique — of “aiming” the intended image at the focal point of the reflected light, of positioning it in the air between the viewer and the surface of the work — the quality of the visual impression made on the viewer, is as different from that of the normally painted image as is her rendering technique itself from that of normative painting. Rather than accomplishing a flat visual display that simulates the appearance of a three-dimensional scene observed in realistic, volumetric space, Gunderson achieves an image that seems to function as fully three-dimensional, draped in the substancelessness of space, carved into the very air, and sculpted out of the light. It is rendered, for all intents and purposes, holographically. The image alters as you move around it, as you move around where it exists. As one crosses back and forth before one of her paintings, or moves up and down, intensities of light



Churning Grace - Out to Sea, 2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches



The Baltic Revisited, 2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches



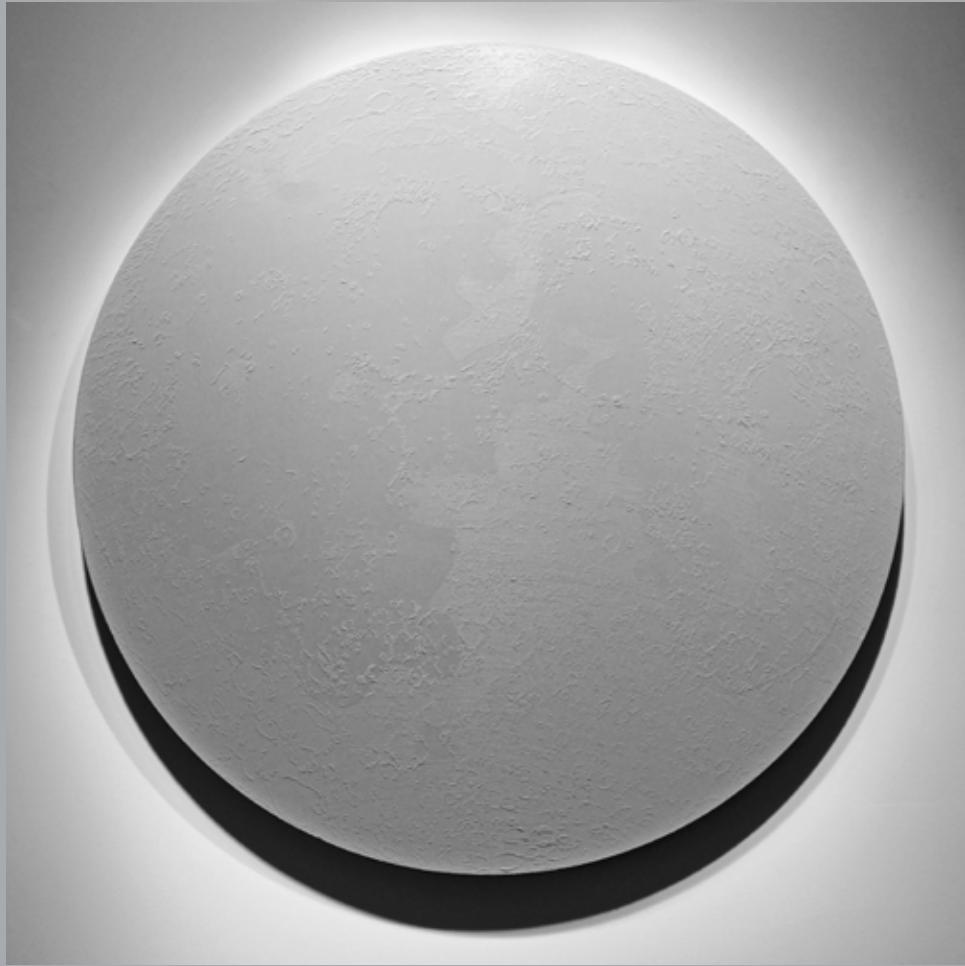
Bridge Into the Night, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches



Murphy's Moon, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches



Black Moon, 2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter



White Moon, 2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter





Apophis - Near Miss, 2009, triptych , oil on linen, 61 1/2 x 156 3/4 inches



Small White Matterhorn, 2011, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches