

The Trick of the Light

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Karen Gunderson: Black Paintings

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The difference between a sign and a symbol is that one of them moves. As things stand within the life of the mind, the sign is an inert mass—a lump of intellectual clay, a thing, which remains merely a thing regardless of whether it is housed in and houseled by the principle of pointing or the principle of resemblance, regardless of whether it makes its meaning plain by aiming a denotation at that which it claims or by simulating it. A word, an image, a gesture, may sound, look, or seem like what it calls or may call to it recognizably by generally assented convention. Either way, it is an item merely—something of a commodity.

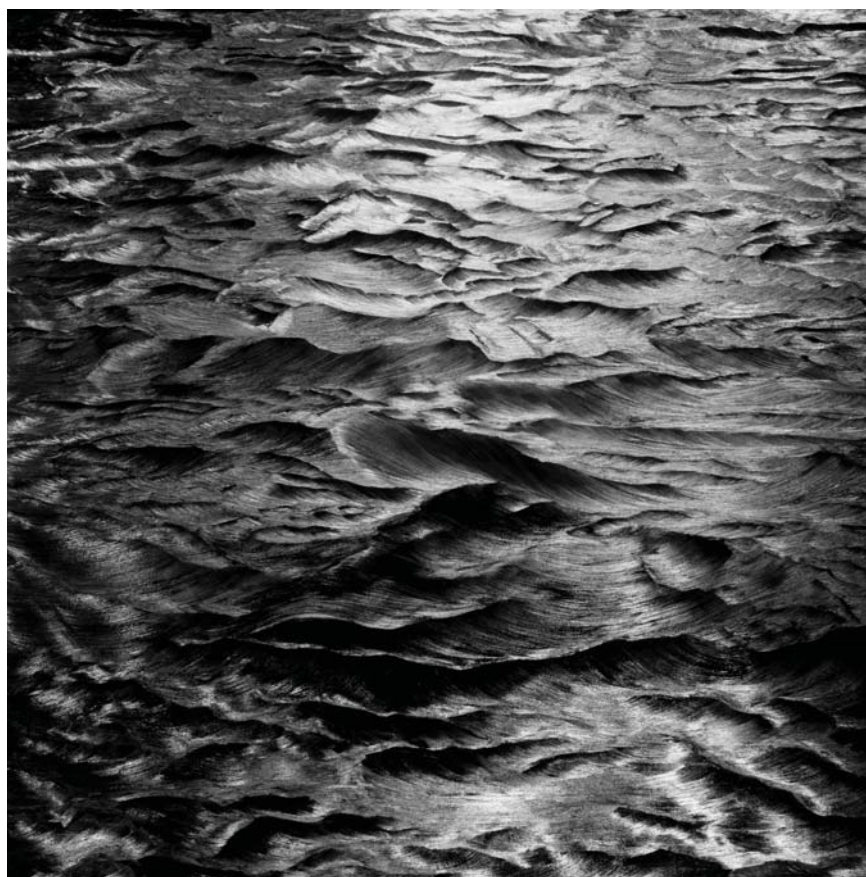
The issue here of course is representation, the standing for by proxy. But there is of necessity something intrinsically prosaic about the function of the stand-in, of the masque and shadow play of such forms of thought, of the moving of pieces around the board, and any good logician knows there is space for ingenuity, for surprise and astonishment, in what the less adept believe is nothing more than a game of predetermined necessities. There is a point at which the pieces unfold, open up into possibilities, and mere approximation is not the soul of the game—we grow distant from the mundane. We are missing here the magic.

When we think, denotation, unambiguous or otherwise, is far from all we do, from all we use. There are components of our thoughts, things we think about, think through, that are active. We possess them and are possessed by them in a dynamical relationship. There are moments the mind can turn to that are transformative. If this were not the case, then art itself would have to be an exercise in the semiotic, and we should know by now to throw in the towel. Were it so, then a work of art would be a matter for interpretation, and thus nothing more than an instigation for daydreaming, and the art nothing in itself—nothing better than a ridge of clouds that seems at times like a camel, or backed like a weasel, or very like a whale.

The sign is an object, and of its nature it objectifies the world. Nietzsche saw this as he accused the separation of the deed from the doer, the idea of something constant and enduring, something objectified, to have come into our thought of everything “after it had found a firm form in the functions of language and grammar.” “Root of the idea of substance in language, not in beings outside us!” However, the artistic image is something other. Art is more a spell than a language, more a chant than a declaration. It has nothing to say—it has work to do, on us, for its business is not representation but the reconfiguration of vision. The symbol is not a thought but a point of intrigued meditation. The sign objectifies the world, but the symbol vivifies the mind. It is a rumination point, an opening for the directed pensive, for the controlled brooding of the delving imagination, for the realization of that which the

mind has the power and, for we are not all artists, awaits the instigation to recognize—for unless we know more than we know, unless our minds hold secrets they keep from themselves until they are deposited under the spell, there is no chance for art, we are left with nothing more than statement, and mere communication. In the artistic image, as Nietzsche saw in the characters of Greek tragedy before Euripides, there is “something incommensurable in every feature and in every line, a certain deceptive distinctiveness and at the same time an enigmatic depth, indeed an infinitude, in the background. Even the clearest figure always had a comet’s tail attached to it which seemed to suggest the uncertain, that which could never be illuminated.”

There is illumination in the darkness and the protocol for deep rumination in the work of Karen Gunderson, an artist of whom this author has written before in reviews and catalogue essays. The current exhibition of her paintings—13 images, three of mountains and 10 of water surfaces, all from the last few years—have the same technical strength and vigor that typify all her mature work but demonstrate a new coherence of vision, and insight, in an advanced integration of style and subject.



The style, as always, is the salient issue and harbors the aesthetic potency of her work. Gunderson paints in pure black. She employs a subtle range of tonality in her hues, too subtle for the eye to catch and too subtle to account for the full evidence of the images she renders, which appear as clearly defined as they would had she illustrated them with a full palette. Rather, she scores the painting using only her brush, covering the black field with integrating patterns of lightly incised lines that determine the planes and surfaces of the image by their direction and movement. It is, in a sense, an engraving technique, but whereas the line work of an engraving nets the white of the paper,

Gunderson’s scoring of black paint opens onto only more black—darkness carved upon darkness.

The scoring does something more, something to the point of her work, something that makes the point of her art. The scored lines direct the reflection of light off the surface of the work. They manipulate the angle of the light—in essence, they choreograph the sheen of the paintings. Thus, the imagery is created as a function of pure white light and arises from a ground that seems to possess the richness and soft density of black satin, a mysterious space of velvet texture. The image literally glows, it exists as a shimmer hung in the air, suspended between the viewer and the work, in the sense that the material that composes the image does not lie on the surface of the painting. The image is formulated in the vacancy of space.

The technique, the style of execution, holds the implication—the cleanly incised presentation of the enigmatic depth. This is an Einsteinian vision, more precisely, form of vision, for it is the rendering of perception as a function of light—the objectification of the world as a product of interactions of light, existence as a network of intersecting light. It displays the toughness of the physical world as a constantly reinforced effect, a continuously rendered result of functionally instantaneous activity, of an unending and foundational dynamism. It evokes a world that is nothing other than that dynamic.

Thus, Gunderson's work sees a world of pure Becoming, and specifically Nietzsche's Becoming—the integrated contradiction of Being and Becoming—for it eludes the flaw in the very idea of choosing between Being and Becoming. There is a certain nonsensical quality to each term, in its normative use, taken in isolation. Becoming means nothing unless there is something that everything is becoming, change is undetectable unless there are recognizable and stable states that everything shifts between, states that serve as markers of change. And Being purified would permit not even a single tick of the clock, and so could not persist, and so could not *be*—if time did not change, Being wouldn't be, and if it did, then there is Becoming. The world as we know it, as we interpret it, is no more a world of Being than it is of Becoming—it is a logical inevitability of both braced together.

But an alternate vision is characterized as Becoming by Nietzsche as a trick of the terminology—something like a trick of the light: it seems to be Becoming in comparison to what it is alternative to, but that is not quite right. This vision is not so much Becoming as continuous, unbroken formulation, as if everything were constantly being filled in from behind, but there is nothing that everything is becoming, nothing that everything is coming to be. This vision is as much Being as it is anything, for everything is as it is and is not becoming anything else of necessity—it is becoming itself in order to be itself at all. It is being cut out of the light, sliced from an ether of pure illumination by the action of



Karen Gunderson, *First Steps, Shangri-La*, 2005
Oil on linen, 81 x 44 inches

illumination, and as such, it is stable, for the illumination is inevitable.

And we may observe that Nietzsche had to work the technique of asserting contradiction, of employing opposing terminology to qualify each other, because he was devising a conception of the world in advance of appropriate terminology, and he had to employ what he had available. But eventually there will come the appropriate terminology, or the appropriate model—being ahead of his time, and being right, eventually the time will catch up to him—and at that point the word games should be dropped and the model should be used for the sake of the new possibility of clarity, for the sake of elucidating what someone like Nietzsche could but hint at.

Often the model has yet to arrive—that is the case even now with the Eternal Recurrence of the Same. But Nietzsche's world of Becoming—or more precisely, “not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos*”—has found an operative model in the Einsteinian intersection of light, in the positivism of universally and objectively mediated information. And that is the model we see operative in Gunderson's work, most particularly, starkly, and effectively in her latest work. The images of water in motion, roiling in waves, in sculpted dynamic flow, is the ideal image to which to apply her technique: as one walks past each painting, the highlights shift and the waves take action and appear to undulate and roll in the atmosphere between you and the linen surface. They are the signs that suit the symbol of the action of the art, of the effect it creates rather than the meaning one can interpret, of the meaning that is the action of the effect the style has wrought—the meaning that is inherent, as much a part of the painting as is the direction of a brush stroke, and the reflection of the light.

But the image, the sign, is of no significance. The message, the meaning, the implication—the effect and the insight, the vision—is the same with the mountain paintings as with the water. The effect of the process is the symbol. The mountains seem to watch day pass across the faces of their escarpments as you walk past them. The hard matter of rock is as much of the light as is the boiling of moving water, all is sculpted of the bright, condensed to our eyes out of what our eyes absorb, and is put to activity by the effect of what makes it. The specifics are just representation, just subject matter. Matter is matter, and all is fluid. The material world is a suspended brilliancy.

In a significant sense, Gunderson has managed to combine abstraction and representation. She has broken down the elements of vision, the process of sight, and has turned the corner to reassemble the component parts into effective visuality. She has returned to the image—the image altered to convey the lessons of peering into the process. In short, through her work, we see ourselves seeing—we see the action of the light by which we see. In that same sense, she is positioned beyond both Modernism and Postmodernism in the current use of the terminology—her work comes “after” the breaking down of the image into planes by Cézanne and the arrangement of color fields into nonrepresentation by those who followed, and it is “after” the experiments in

visual perception, the testing of the limits of representation, that constitute the more interesting work of post-Modernism. Her art begins an assembling of the lessons learned to see if the image will re-emerge out of an application of the processes we have discovered underlie it—like a theory, finally, taken to the lab to see if its predictions actually bear out.

There is nothing of Goethe in this, for Goethe wanted a science of color rather than a Newtonian science of light, in order to retain a sense of, a comprehension of, a human presence in the universe—human beings see color; light is just a theory of theirs. With Gunderson, we see light, nothing but light, and the darkness out of which it and all it formulates emerge. Goethe, and Wordsworth, and Hegel, and Heidegger, and so many others had to place the human mind, human perception, in a God-like position, at the center of a universe that was perceived, in order for us to persist. It is the Phenomenological error—the confusion of perception with a world there to be perceived and which would be there even were it not—and it is pure sentimentality, a philosophy of sentimentality, of retaining as an assertion what is merely precious to the likes of us, merely because it is precious to the likes of us, and it is nothing more than Nietzsche thought of it, or Schopenhauer, in his remarks about the Hegelians in the universities. It results not in illumination, but in euphuism.

Rather, this is Beckett, and what Goethe suspected of Newton: we dissolve in the scientific vision, we blend into pure light, for we are as much phenomena, as much a function of the light, as are the churning waters and the shining precipices. Goethe was wrong. It is light we see, not color—it is just color we think we see, for the light is there, regardless of our receptivity to it. It is not of us; we are of it, carved out of the ether, as is all else. It is light that continuously formulates us, for us to persist at all.

This is what we see in Gunderson's work, and it is not a cold vision—not if we leave our sentimentalities behind us—it does not “murder to dissect.” It is simply a pure vision, which is always a dismay to the sentimental—a vision of pure light. It is itself pure illumination, what we should receive from a true artist.