

CLOSER LOOK

Night Light: Karen Gunderson Paints It Black. By John T Spike

Willem de Kooning once compared the life of a creative artist to a man he had seen at a circus, off by himself, trying to stand on a single finger. The point was this: No one asked him to do it. So too artists often change and seek new inspirations without prompting.

Ten years ago Karen Gunderson put aside her signature motif of sun-drenched clouds and turned to making paintings in a single colorless color—black. It was another approach to infinity, perhaps, only there is a great deal of difference between a soaring sky and a bottomless pit.

Black is the absence of light, which is why it's synonymous with long-legged beasts "that go bump in the night." The definition of black in my Funk & Wagnalls dictionary runs: "having no brightness or color, reflecting no light, total darkness"; "gloomy, dismal, forbidding: a black future." Around 1820, Francisco de Goya fell into a mood and covered the walls of his farmhouse with the now-famous pinturas negras, some of the blackest paintings ever conceived. Closer to home, Ad Reinhardt worked obsessively in the early '60s on square paintings colored with imperceptible brushstrokes of indistinguishable shades of (what else?) black. Very, very gradually, as our eyes adjust, three rows of three squares loom into view. It was this surprise factor that made the Reinhardt in New York's Museum of Modern Art a childhood favorite. Trying to make an "invisible" art, Reinhardt discovered by accident that even "nothingness" has unseen depths.

Now, along comes Gunderson, not as mysterious as Reinhardt nor as gloomy as Goya, but down-to-earth and practical like her pioneering Wisconsin forefathers. When asked about her conversion to black, Gunderson replied that she enjoys "pulling images out of the darkness into the light." So far her subjects have included portraits of the monarchs of Denmark and Bulgaria, who rescued thousands of their subjects from the Holocaust; sunflowers; and a "First Crucifixion" in honor of her uncle, a Danish Lutheran minister. As unlikely as it seems, Gunderson is trying to make black paintings into beacons of rescue, hope and redemption.

To do so, she first had to invent a painting technique that would defy the optical truth that black is non-reflective. Take a closer look at "Small Sunflower." Its grays represent a photographer's best attempt to render a monochrome painting his light meter thinks is an oil slick. What we see as light and tone, in fact, are the faint but shiny reflections of light across the slender ridges of Gunderson's brushstrokes. To give them shape, she has to lay down strokes as delicately as if she were painting the actual petals and leaves instead of a canvas. The volumes are simplified, almost naïve, modeled in parallel lines like a satin-stitch crewel. No slips of the hand are allowed—or else, scrape out and start over. The result is eerily luminous, like an X-ray hologram.

The question, to repeat, is why? "I wanted a chance to revisit images...to experience them anew," Gunderson says in explanation. Sunflowers were a provocative choice, the poster child of Impressionism, the school that banished black. Van Gogh claimed them as his special theme, fellow creatures fatally attracted to the sun. To paint a sunflower



stalk glimmering in a lightless abyss takes conviction, an unwavering eye and the kind of courage particular to artists and acrobats.

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