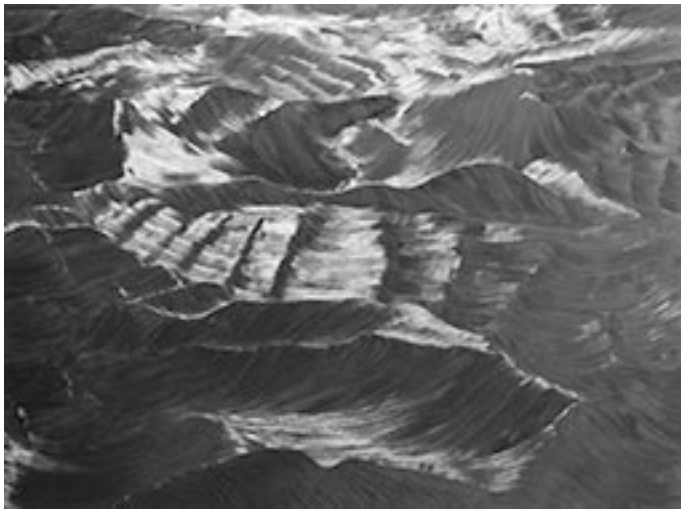


FROM DARKNESS: LIGHT GUNDERSON PULLS VISUAL TACTILITY FROM PURE BLACK

By: [Zane Fischer](#) 11/05/2008



Singular pigmentation: Karen Gunderson's haptic brush work confounds at William Siegal.

“Black is the color of objects that do not emit or reflect light in any part of the visible spectrum; they absorb all such frequencies of light. Mixing paints, inks or other pigments of all colors in theory eventually forms a mixture which absorbs all light and so appears black.” I’m unable to attribute this assertion to an individual, as it comes from Wikipedia, the world’s self-defining phenomenon comprised of a morass of both authoritative and ridiculous texts. It is fairly redundant, however, with a consensus composed of a range of sources that try to define “black.” But talk of pigments that absorb all light is ridiculous when one stands in the vicinity of one of **Karen Gunderson’s** paintings. Done only in black oil paint on linen, these works not only manage to radiate light but to exert enormous amounts of volume and motion. Gunderson’s work is part of a group exhibition called **New Artists, New Work**. An ambiguous and bland title, it must refer to the artists and their work being new to the gallery, since most of the artists, including Gunderson, have established careers. Additionally, a fair amount of the work is at least some years old. Relative to the pre-Columbian textiles in which the [William Siegal Gallery](#) specializes, however, new is a pretty flexible term. These ancient treasures and the gallery’s practice of interspersing them with contemporary work is a

provocative and surprising experience. The chief risk, though, is living painters sometimes struggle to make work as fine, as undulant and as timelessly evocative as an Aymara textile. **Willy Bo Richardson** struggles in this regard. His soft-hued, vertically striped paintings are inoffensive, well executed and well behaved among the gallery's many objects, but such politeness rarely makes for enduring paintings. Richardson sometimes makes deeper, more carnally colored paintings, but the wispy work included here simply makes one wonder why such a young, capable artist would bother to paint smallish echoes of Morris Louis' works. There is a long row of **Patrick McFarlin**'s sweet, blues-y riffs on Americana in the form of small landscapes and roadside glimpses. But, for all their musicality, the paintings are hung at differing levels and with armatures that push them away from the wall with a dizzying staccato that distracts from easy appreciation. Using carbon fiber and fiber glass to enshroud forms originally conceived with computer software, **David Henderson** creates relatively original sculpture with an engineering precision offset perfectly by the hand-worked overlay of the fiber sheets—a kind of backyard aerospace aesthetic that relies on improbable bulbs supported by thin tendrils as its final allure. There are other artists and other works but none so stirring and confounding as Gunderson's. Homer was the first to invoke the image of a "wine dark sea" in the Iliad as a physical reflection of Achilles' grief at the death of Patroclus. It is commonly believed to imply an impossibly rich redness that can work its way into the Mediterranean in certain weather conditions, but it throbs against the skull while looking at Gunderson's "**Rounding the Cape.**" It is a horizonless image of the roiling ocean with a clear sense of deep-water waves crashing, the glistening break of thinner wave edges and the dizzying moment of a pocked sea in freeze-frame before one plunges toward it. Every inch of the canvas is covered. It is saved from being a singular, dark plane only by Gunderson's haptic—which is to say tactile—brush technique, in which a stiff-bristled brush sways the brushstrokes with enough texture and direction to create volume and form. When light—rather than being absorbed—reflects from the minute ridges in the strokes, the individually abstract forms come together as a perfectly drafted image, rather than a stagnant one. Gunderson's works shift as one moves around them and the angle of the light churns the sea and deepens the sense of the painting beyond its flat truth. They are epic and mesmerizing accomplishments that manage to hold ground both as unconventional abstractions and painstakingly representational romanticisms. Years ago, Gunderson used the haptic technique to create a black background for voluptuous cloud paintings, in which the texture would be covered with the predictable whites, grays, pinks and oranges of clouds. But she became increasingly interested in the ground as a singular technique and has now achieved a kind of contradictory brilliance in her methodology. Gunderson poked some fun at Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt, famous for his "ultimate" abstractions in delicate, powdery, precise blacks, allegedly killed painting by proving it could go no further. That was an obviously erroneous conceit, but Gunderson has gone ahead and pulled light—and confounding structure—from pure black anyhow.

New Artists, New Work Through Nov. 21 **William Siegal Gallery** 540 S. Guadalupe St. 505-820-3300