

Art in America

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Karen Gunderson: *Everest from Kala Patar*, 2005, oil on linen, 52½ by 61½ inches; at Artists Space.

Karen Gunderson at Artists Space

This modest exhibition, titled "Mountains and Constellations," featured four large all-black paintings by Karen Gunderson that conjure vast landscapes and celestial vistas through the deft working of surface texture alone. Over the past 18 years the Wisconsin-born New York artist has perfected a technique whereby pictorial illusions result from white light reflected off the raised edges of varied brushstrokes. Contrasting brushstrokes appear as fine white lines combed into the black. The recent oil-on-linen works were installed on three walls painted dark gray. Above each painting a single spotlight illuminated shifts in direction of meticulously arranged wide and narrow brushstrokes; they form intricate lines capable of conveying refined imagery.

Following her earlier series of black monochromes of sunflowers and portraits of kings,

Gunderson's recent images are difficult to discern at first. The constellation painting, *Danish Rescue: Copenhagen, Denmark, North 10/1/1943* (2004) features small circular patches in which the raised lines formed by tiny brushstrokes reflect brilliant light. A pale nebula is thus visible surrounding the larger, dense patches, while a band of soft light traversing the lower half of the composition lends a sense of curvature to this seemingly infinite space. The high horizon lines in the mountain scenes are particularly helpful in leading the viewer into the vast spaces of the compositions. Over 6 feet high, *First Steps—Shangri La* (2005) is a bird's-eye view of a series of Himalayan valleys. Mountain peaks shine in the distance. At the center of the canvas, diagonal ridges of paint coalesce in a highly reflective triangular shape that hints at the glassy surface of a lake. Glistening brushstrokes above this area indicate a trail snaking through the valleys.

In *Everest from Kala Patar* (2005), the eye is drawn into the space of a panoramic mountain scene. Overlapping groups of curved lines rising above the horizon effectively denote a bulbous mass of clouds. As the viewer moves, the shadows shift and the climatic conditions of the pictured scene change while highlights are muted and light fills previously shadowed nooks. This painting and all of Gunderson's evocative works on view here demand the interaction of the viewer in recognizing the images. The surprising effects of the raised lines and shallow furrows serve as reminders that as much as light illuminates the world, it is shadow that gives it form.

—Gerard McCarthy