

# Karen Gunderson, Artist/Interview



©2010 Karen Gunderson

*Ramadan, 2010 / oil on canvas | 52 1/4 " x 61 1/2 "*

## **“All Black: Paintings That Have To Do With How The Light Works”**

**An interview with Karen Gunderson**

**by Mike Foldes**

*The following interview took place by e-mail exchanges from September 2010 thru April 2011, during which time Gunderson had shows in Santa Fe and Bahrain ...*

*Q: Karen, let's start with the basics? Can you tell us where you're from and what life was like growing up there?*

**Karen Gunderson:** I was raised in Racine, Wisconsin. My father was a World War II veteran/hero and damaged by it. He earned the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Croix de Guerre and citations from all over Europe. He was in the Battle of the Bulge and was one of 20 men to come back from a company of 200. I guess he had a reason to drink. He was brilliant mechanically. My mother was kind of high strung. A really hard worker, very smart and she wanted to be loved and have fun and be appreciated. My dad was very stoic and my mom very verbal. I work hard like my mom, but I think I am more stoic like my dad. I was an only child, so my friends became my family. In fact, I am still very close to a number of my childhood friends.

We moved when I was seven to Blaine Avenue and had some girlfriends as well as boyfriends and a front yard and a back yard.

*Q: What are the first things you remember that gave you the impetus to make art? What visual experience? Or, was it the first set of watercolors your parents got you when you were 5?*

**KG:** I think I was around 10 or 12 when I had a heightened perceptual experience that probably made me the artist I am today. My parents had been fighting and I felt out of control... or as I perceived it... crazy. So I went outside and thought what would a crazy person do? I proceeded to touch the ground, the grey cement. I brushed my hand across the top of the grass. I traced the lid of the garbage lid. I took the branches and leaves of the weeping willow tree in the back in both my hands and moved with them, back and forth, then I touched the begonia petals on the plants on the north side of the house. All this and more happened while walking around the house many times. On the last trip, I knelt on the grass in the front and peered under the bushes that were up against the house. The dirt was black and crystal like. There was a leaf of clover and then suddenly a shiny black ant climbed up the stalk and across the green petal. The ant was so big. Then I turned, holding the ant in my mind and imagined him on the huge maple tree near the street. The scale shift was visceral and intense, as was the experience of getting up from the ground and being aware how everything changed each time I got higher or moved my head. Each change was a different perspective. I never told anyone until a few years ago about that day of experiences. I kept it a secret, but I knew then that it had made me become different or maybe I was already different to have experienced it.

*Q: OK, so what was it like being a "different" kid in the neighborhood? Were you a closet artist? Did you start drawing or painting right away, or was it evolutionary.... Jr. high, high school, college? Were your first subjects some of the things you saw during this epiphany?*

**KG:** Actually, I wasn't a "different" kid. That's the thing. It was my secret. I rode bikes, wrestled with the boys, played with my girl friends... all quite normal. I became a public person... one that was about being popular, and involved with school and cheerleading and later the local theatre guild, and stuff that was involved with achieving and being social and making my father and mother proud of me. I kind of knew that that was what I could give them, because the part of me that was different I couldn't give to them. And all along, when I went to the feeling place of the loneliness of an only child I had my secret. And also secretly and a part of that place, I was very shy.

The art started in high school a bit. And I went to Wustum Art Museum summer classes on the lawn to learn to draw. There was a good instructor whose name escapes me. I think that is where my confidence to be able to draw started. But my friends Linda Winchester and Joe Wilfer were the artists in high school. I was more involved with the public stuff. Images with changing perspectives which were part of my epiphany didn't come into being in my work until Graduate School.

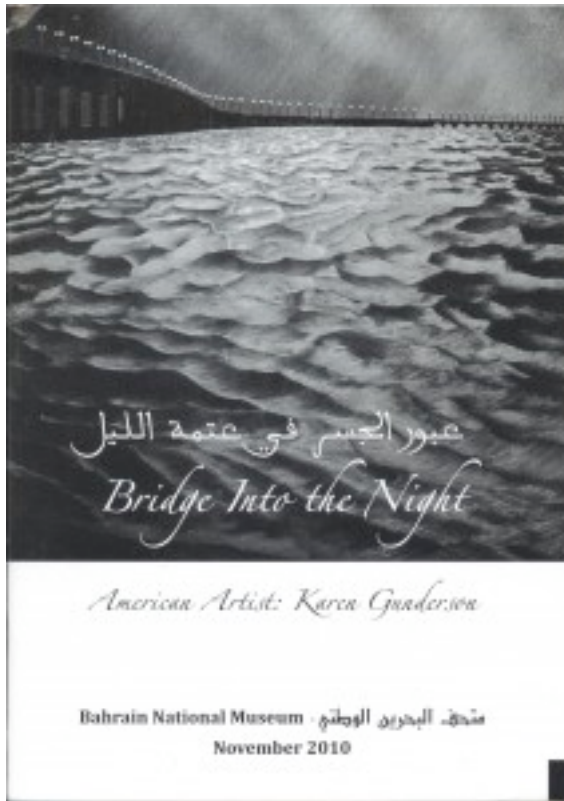
**Q:** *Was anyone in your family involved with art?*

**KG:** My Grandpa Gunderson whose father came from Norway was a housepainter in Wisconsin. I remember his hands were hard and gnarled and I learned later that they were totally arthritic due to working in the cold a lot of the time. As a hobby, he used to paint furniture in the "Norwegian marbling" style. I never realized he was marbling until I went to Norway and saw the same painting on pillars in churches and walls. Apparently the Norwegians had no marble, so they made their own! When he retired, he took all his old leftover paint from the houses and began painting on pieces of cardboard. He used a lot of invention in the way he painted the images of trees or mountains or sky and when he wanted to put something in that his arthritic hands couldn't do, he would cut something out of a magazine and paste it on the painting and then kind of paint on it a bit to integrate it. I have two of them and they are prized possessions to me.

**Q:** *Where did you study?*

**KG:** College, I went to Wisconsin State University, Whitewater... a very small school at the time. I was majoring in Elementary Education. I think I got a D in piano and got the sophomore blues, so I quit in the middle of my sophomore year. My English teacher Ben Collins told me that I was too smart for Whitewater and should be in a better school like Santa Barbara. I got a job at Johnson's Wax and worked in the Frank Lloyd Wright building's great workroom. It was wonderful being in the space of that building. The spaces alone were constantly changing, as were the vantage points from every step. I had intended to save money and go to a great school, but soon I got involved with the local Theatre Guild again and kind of blew everything on clothes and eating out in restaurants. But I hated working 9 to 5 and so I decided to go back to Whitewater and I was determined to get a great education there if I had to pull it out of the teachers. I never got below a B from then on. I took a drawing class which was required for my major and one day, Tom Parker and Francis Coelho and John Stevenson stopped me in the hall and said they had seen my drawings and that I should major in art. What they said connected for me and I called my mother to ask her if I could change majors and she said yes if I would still get a degree to teach because she didn't want me to be a starving artist. Considering my family background, I would need a job. Also, being an artist meant that I was going to do something that was not an approved or normal profession for someone from my family. By becoming an artist I was cutting a big part of myself off from my family. They were always supportive of me as a person, but I think they thought I was becoming a stranger to them by being an artist...something that they didn't know about.

I went to Graduate School at the University of Iowa. I received a MA in Painting, followed by an MFA in Intermedia. I believe it was the first degree of Intermedia in the United States.



**Q:** *Who were your most influential teachers?*

**KG:** Clayton Bailey, Tom Parker, John Stevenson, Francis Coelho and Ben Collins were my most influential teachers during college. And then there were Stuart Edie and Hans Breder during graduate school.

Actually, it was an amazing time to be in college at Whitewater. Clayton Bailey, Tom Parker, Francis Coelho, John Stevenson and Stanley Huber were all my teachers in the Art Department and each one was serious about what they were teaching and what they expected in terms of hard work and dedication. Ben, who taught English, gave me an intellectual confidence I didn't know I could have.

The students in the art department were very industrious. We would be in the studios painting or drawing or doing sculpture or clay or prints or art history beginning at 8 am and working until about 10 every night. Following our intense day, we would all go out drinking and playing pool at the local downtown dive. We were a fortunate group. Twenty-one of us graduated in art and art education and eleven of us got assistantships to graduate schools. Something clicked in me during that time about making art. My art was something I could be in charge of... not necessarily control because I was still learning that. And it was the first time my secret way of looking at the world could live in my everyday world that included other people. It also increased my secret shyness and made me more afraid because what I was doing meant so much to me and I was suddenly vulnerable to the world's view of something that was all mine.

Graduate School was an interesting time, as well. It was the late '60s. As a student, I was at the end of Stuart Edie's teaching career and he was kind, perceptive and very honest. And then I started getting inventive and worked with Hans Breder. He was a great teacher/artist and has remained a good friend.

**Q:** *What are your earliest memories of making art, or wanting to be an artist?*

**KG:** I remember drawing a fish when I was about 4 that I was delighted with and my mother loved.

**Q:** *When did you know this is what you would be doing for the rest of your life?*

**KG:** I had conflicting feelings when I was in college. On the one hand, I wanted to learn to be a Montessori schoolteacher and take the knowledge to someplace poor and teach the children like Maria Montessori had. On the other hand, I wanted to be an artist, which wasn't all that respected in my family. After all it didn't put a roof over anyone's head, but being an artist won out. Especially because I got an assistantship at the University of Iowa and I knew I could teach college somewhere and do my art.

Those days you could get a job.

**Q:** *When we met in the late '60s, you were teaching art at The Ohio State University. How did the environment there differ from what you had at Iowa?*

**KG:** I went to graduate school at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City and the environment is one of calm and patience. Very different than Wisconsin and very different from Ohio State. Upon graduating with an MA in Painting... working with Stuart Edie and an MFA in Intermedia... working with Hans Breder, I went up the road to teach at Cornell College. I was 25 years old, had really long hair, drove a 1964 356C red Porsche and my boyfriend's 350cc Yamaha motorcycle. I wore mini skirts and over-the-knee yellow vinyl boots. I also had had a 90cc Honda for all of graduate school that I drove in all kinds of weather.

I was very welcomed into the Art Department, but until I actually had conversations with other faculty members, I was clearly left out of the community. After I got to know people, I got included more. But although it was a nourishing environment, I was definitely on my own again. The good thing was that everyone in the art department, including students, was excited about what they were doing, but it still had that feeling of calm and patience.

Ohio State was very different. I met some great people there including you and Cheri and Larry Camp, but the feeling in the Art Department was more impersonal. That might have been because it was so big. There were forty men and me and another woman who I think taught weaving part time. I got patted on the top of my head or my tush almost every day. I don't think they took me very seriously and there was a real passive aggressive streak there.

**Q:** *You had a long working relationship with Sol Lewitt. How did that influence the way you approach your art and the style that you have?*

**KG:** One really great thing that happened when I taught at Ohio State was that I met and became close to Sol Lewitt. He had come out to do a wall drawing... a real beauty. His influence on my art has been great. When I hold him in my consciousness, he demands that everything about the piece is in the piece. I eliminate anything that doesn't get to the point. Maybe that is the most important thing I have said in this

whole interview. His personal integrity to focus on the art and not get caught up in the exclusivity of the art world is also really important to me. I really admire and care for his widow Carol and their two daughters Eva and Sophia. What they are doing with his estate is important and it feels like they are doing things the way he would want them to be done.

**Q:** *I loved the cloud paintings and cloud pieces you were doing at the time. How did these come about?*

**KG:** The clouds all began in Iowa. They were a new experience in a way. The clouds in Wisconsin change very fast. A whole weather system can change in about ten minutes...very dangerous for those sailing on Lake Michigan. When I was in graduate school in Iowa, the same clouds would hang around for days. And you could see the weather coming a week ahead of time.

Again, there was a sense calm and patience... and looking up, which came to mean hope.

**Q:** *You seemed at the time to have a great interest in poetry and literature. Are you still a 'fan'?*

**KG:** I used to go to poetry readings all the time at Iowa. The poetry workshop brought some amazing poets. I still love to go to poetry readings and to read poetry. Besides your poetry from so many years ago, which I have saved, I feel connected to a number of poets...that I read all the time. I really respect and admire John Yau, Hanford Yang, Gerrit Henry, Tod Thilleman, John Ashberry, Mark Daniel Cohen and Donald Kuspit. Mark is writing my catalog essay for the exhibition. So much gets said in less words and it is so much more than that. For me, poetry is a distillation of experience or thought and a relationship with the sound of the words. It is actually more than I can say. So yes, I am still a 'fan'.

**Q:** *You moved to New York in the early '70s. How did that affect your work?*

**KG:** When I moved to New York in 1973, I had to start using acrylic paint because I was living in a loft that I shared with my graduate school friend, Suzanne McConnell, and my studio opened up to the platform I had constructed for my bed. I invented a way to paint with sponges and kind of drawing the paint on by squeezing the sponge. I was continuing the cloud series and including images in the clouds.

**Q:** *Your circle of friends and business associates in the art world?*

**KG:** I kept my old friends from Ohio and Iowa and Wisconsin... in fact they happily used the opportunity of my living in New York City to visit the City. But before I moved to New York, I went there and met Mark Richard and Lucy Feller who were introduced to me by Steve Fox from Iowa. The Fellers were wonderful people and they liked my art and to help me, they had a brunch for their collector friends where they introduced me and my work. I had come back, bringing a number of pieces... one to replace theirs which they had purchased and had been broken in transit. Among the collectors was Paul Schupf. I still count Paul as one of my best friends. We had the same eye for art and similar principles and I can to this day, trust Paul to be honest and to care. I met lots of famous people through Paul...Leo Castelli, Irving Blum, Henry Geldzahler, Alex & Ada Katz, to name a few. I remember one evening that Paul took me to dinner and we were with some lovely people from the Tisch family and it was really interesting and I was talking so much that I didn't eat much. They insisted I take home my dinner along with some extra cookies, all of which I am sure cost more than my rent for the month. I always felt the need to touch base with my own reality, so after that magnificent evening, I went to Magoo's where I saw my friend, Julian Weissman. I asked him if he liked leftovers and he said yes. I didn't at the time, so I gave him mine and he walked me half way home. We've been married now for 31 years, and have a great son, David Weissman.

**Q:** What do you regard as your 'big break' as a working artist?

**KG:** In terms of importance, first there is Julian and also David. Without his support, and David's understanding and care, I wouldn't have been able to do what I have done. Julian has helped me at every crossroad and been my spiritual as well as physical support throughout our life together. Let's just assume that Julian permeates everything...as does David. Chronologically, the first break was the opportunity to come to New York City with a job. I taught a class called Perception with a composer and a dancer, (I was the visual part) at NYU School of the Arts for three years. The knowledge was amazing, as were the students. The students were actors, dancers and cinematographers and they were brilliant. It allowed me to move to New York and get a loft and also gave me the time to paint. Break #2, I had my first one person show at Gloria Cortella in the Fuller Building. It got reviewed in Art News by poet/critic Gerrit Henry and Margaret Pomfret in Arts.

But when I met Elaine deKooning through Julian, Break #3 and she suggested me to Aladar Marberger at Fischbach Gallery, that really began things. Lots of reviews and lots of sales and the experience with Aladar was great. He really believed and promoted his artists.

A lot of times my big breaks are meeting and just knowing people. They are supportive guides in a way. From being in the Florence Biennale and winning second prize in painting, I got to know the amazing scholar and writer John Spike and his also amazing wife/writer Michele. Meeting and knowing Jonathan Silver and his wife Barbara, Michael Brenson and Sharon O'Connell, Kocot and Hatton, Lars and Bente Strandh, James Young and Lisa Ades, Sanford Hirsch and Debbie Beblo, Ellen and Sam Newhouse... these are all important people to me. I look to them for their example of hard work, talents and invincible spirits.

**Q:** *What's it like to be an artist, a mom, a wife and a businesswoman?*

**KG:** Being an artist is my addiction to life. If I can't paint, I get cranky. On the other hand, being a Mom gives me some perspective on life. It is something even more important than my art. Not that I would ever stop making art, but the day to day of being David's Mom takes precedence over the art. As a wife, Julian's and my careers are not the same, but related and so it is not exactly easy, but understandable. In years past when Julian was running public art galleries, we had dinner parties for the artists. It was fun because I learned to cook and I loved the artists he showed. To answer your question about being a businesswoman... I am not a good businesswoman. I think I have a problem with that because it involves dealing with the world outside of my art. I love sending emails to friends when I have a show or something coming up, but I don't think about promotion as in "careerism" because it doesn't feel right.

**Q:** *Do you think women have a tougher time than men these days making it in the art world?*

**KG:** As always, I think the toughest part of being a woman today has to do with money. (Maybe it is true for men too.) When someone has some success, there is a competitive feeling that comes out in a lot of people. People can get mean. Also, there is still the reality that people feel women shouldn't get paid as much as men. I personally love it when rich women stand tough and make people pay top price for their work. That makes them even richer and more powerful. That will in turn make it easier for the rest of us in the future.

**Q:** *Who in the contemporary art world have been your strongest influences?*

**KG:** Sol Lewitt, David Hockney, Grace Hartigan are the most contemporary influences. You didn't ask what art I liked. Actually, I like the work of a lot of living artists...G.H. Hovagimyan, Meg Abbott, Kocot & Hatton, Lars Strandh, Deborah Kass, William Beckman, William Richards, Hans Breder, Brenda Zlamany, Robert Mangold, Yvonne Jacquet, Robert Gober, Clayton Bailey, Tom Parker, Donald Sultan, Cindy Sherman, Alex Katz, Eric Fischl, April Gornik, John Torreano, Vija Celmins, Tim Hawkinson, Scott Daniel Ellison, Frank Stella, Odd Nerdrum, Mark Tansey, Jess, Janet Passehl, Fredericka Foster, Jack Ox, Daisy Craddock, Catherine Behrnt, Dennis Farber, Jaroslaw Flicinski, Gary Kuehn, John Walker, Susan

Ebersole, Michael and Carol Venezia, Kim Keever, Maciej Swieszewski, Andy Goldsworthy, Becca Smith, Michael Torlen, John Walker, Alex Frances, Paul Zelevansky, Nancy Hagin, Mary Miss, Barnaby Furnas, Ana Mendiata, Linda Benglis, Omar Rashid, Rahim Sharif, Esther Senor/Carmen Cifrian, Kareem Al Bosta, Rocio Garriga Hinare, Ali Al Mahmeed, Samia Engineer, Balquees Falkro... those are artists I like and admire... for influences other than contemporary, Jonathan Silver was really important to my painting, and I really liked Jack Smith, and then we have to go to Art History including Chinese Northern and Southern T'Sung paintings of landscapes...especially the vertical mountains.

**Q:** *I understand you recently moved your studio into a portion of your loft. Will your paintings get smaller?*

**KG:** I doubt it.

**Q:** *How do you work? At night? With music?*

**KG:** Being a mother, I learned early on that I can work at any time.

These days it is preferable in the morning because I am more rested.

I put on old movies while I paint. Since I have seen them all, I don't have to watch them. I can imagine what is happening on one of the sides of my brain and that becomes kind of a white noise and on the other side of my brain I can look at what I am doing and think about that. Also, if I get interrupted, I can stop the movie, then when I go back, I am in the same place, so to speak.

**Q:** *What is the evolution of your 'black' paintings? Do they come from a dark space inside, or are you simply exploring another way to manipulate light?*

**KG:** They began as underpaintings of my last show of cloud paintings with Fischbach Gallery in 1988. Three things were going on. One, my dealer Aladar Marberger was dying of AIDS and I wanted to do something great for him. So I made the entire gallery a sunset with a cloudless painting with varying shades of blue to the gold magic time of the day on one side and the far end an almost all black painting of clouds that were overpainted with cerise red. All the paintings had secondary images in them, and most of them were presented in different ways. Some went into corners, some went around corners and one went onto the ceiling. These are installation shots of the exhibition.( <http://www.karengunderson.com/fischbach.htm> )

The other thing is, I needed to change the way I was painting the clouds... invent a new way to show the light and the forms, so I painted the cloud forms with black paint, let the paint dry and then painted against the grain of the brushmarks with color. That takes us to the third thing. I had quit drinking. I found I had a lot of energy and I was not afraid of my dark side anymore. Before I had painted my cloud paintings almost as a way to escape... to leave earth behind. Now I was feeling grounded and connected to the paint and the painting in a new way.

After the show, with Aladar's permission, I left the gallery. He hadn't been there for at least three years and he said he was never going back because he was collecting disability. He was my champion, so without him there, I didn't feel like I belonged. I continued to work with the images of kind of cloud-like forms in black and then painting color over the strokes as in the exhibition at Fischbach. Then one day I painted an all black painting and left it that way. My great collector Blaine Roberts saw it and wanted it, so it left my studio. I went back to the black and color and then a couple months later, I had two paintings of entirely black paintings in my studio, drying, waiting for me to paint on them and my friend Jonathan Silver came over. He said, "Leave those paintings alone. Just give them a couple of weeks Karen." I always trusted Jonathan and that was the true beginning of the black paintings. It isn't just manipulating light. It is a different way to paint images. Black paint has always been used abstractly. Using black paint to paint the images and using the light to show the forms becomes an experience. It includes the viewer,

the body of the viewer and the movement of the body of the viewer. I want my painting to be an experience... a physical experience as well as an emotional and intellectual one. The paintings change as the viewer moves up/down or right/left. The images I choose have to do with how the light works. With the images of water, we see the light reflected off the surface of the water. It is the same thing with my paintings, we see the water because of the light reflected off the surface of the painting.



Churning Sea, 2006 | Oil on linen | 60" x 60"

And the experience of water is that it is always moving and as the viewer is always moving it reinforces that experience. The moon painting changes just a little from left to right... only to show us the volume of the moon, but the most important thing about the moon is that it is glowing and that you can see craters and shadows and it connects with all the myths of the moon — for me, anyway.



Murphy's Moon, 2010 | Oil on linen | 60" x 60"

The landscape paintings to date are of the mountains seen from Tibet. I have never been there, but I think Tibet is really fascinating and important and I want people to hold it in their minds to protect it from destruction. Because the paintings are monochrome, it helps us to focus on the varying forms and shapes and spaces... which change as we pass by them.



Everest from Kala Patar, 2005 | 52 1/4" x 61 1/2"

The constellations are my way of fighting cynicism. There is always the negative in the news. I guess it is the nature of news. I personally think people like the adrenalin rush that one gets from fear. I probably do too because I like action films, but for things that last... like Art, I want to remind people of events that I think are revolutionarily positive, like when the Berlin Wall came down, or the passage of the Abolition of Slavery. The constellation paintings are harder to see because they need absolutely perfect light to be seen to the full effect. By painting exact days and locations of the constellations, I also want to remind us that things happen at different moments everywhere and what we do individually and collectively is important and also to try to pay attention to what is happening... or will happen... in the case of [Apophis Near Miss](#).



Aphophis Near Miss, 2009 | Oil on Linen | 61 1/2" x 156 3/4" | Triptych

The Portraits are reminders of powerful people who each accomplished things in the world for their countries. In those paintings, black is a metaphor for history and the people are stepping into the light for including them in our lives today.

**Q:** *What advice would you give a young person about becoming a working artist in this political and economic climate?*

**KG:** Well Mike, I would tell a young person or anyone who is becoming an artist that they should first figure out how they are going to make a living other than from their art...they say on Broadway "Keep your day job" which holds true for artists as well. Then I would tell them to make art that is relevant to themselves and/or their time...no matter what anyone else says. I have always believed artists are shamen. Their art in the world is like pebbles thrown into a pond and they have ripple effects. So they also need to take responsibility for the importance of what they make. I would love it if people would look at the world and think of what would make it better and then make that thing that helps or heals or just makes people think. I would tell them to locate themselves in a place where they feel comfortable to live their lives, and a place where they will push themselves to struggle in the context of their art. I would tell them to socialize with people and friends who are interested in their art and who they are interested in. One good reason to go to Graduate School is to meet a community of friends that they will bond with for the rest of their lives. I would suggest that if they are fortunate enough to exhibit in a good gallery in NYC, they should trust their dealer to price and promote their work...but to keep a good eye on it and to help wherever it is appropriate. And finally, I would tell this same person to feel really lucky because they get to get up each day and see the world from their special, perceptual, intelligent and sensitive eyes. They get to live that day looking at the world from their unique experience of themselves...it's a great way to live.

.....  
**View larger photos from the gallery please enter the FS button.**  
.....