

**Karen  
Gunderson:  
Reflective**

**Barbara  
Sorensen:  
Elemental**



**Racine Art Museum**  
441 Main Street  
Downtown Racine  
262.638.8300  
[www.ramart.org](http://www.ramart.org)

**Karen Gunderson**  
*Bridge into the Night*, 2010  
Oil on linen  
80 x 80 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

**Barbara Sorensen**  
*Speleothem X (detail)*, 2011  
Aluminum, polyurethane, and resin  
Dimensions vary  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Marcus Johannes



This year, the Racine Art Museum celebrates its 10th anniversary. Looking back on the decade-long journey and the nature of the arts in Racine, RAM is hosting a series of exhibitions exploring the themes of heritage, heirlooms, and artistic traditions.

The first shows of this series are solo exhibitions for two artists, Karen Gunderson and Barbara Sorensen, who were raised in Racine before moving on to establish careers of national importance in other parts of the country. Both artists connect to the natural environment in intensely personal ways. While one prefers to create paintings and the other sculpture, both Gunderson and Sorensen present insightful and poetic reflections of the natural world. Their responses to their chosen subjects are different but also create a vivid dialogue as their works in different media are presented intermingled in one gallery space, allowing for a “conversation” between the individual objects.

**Karen Gunderson: Reflective**

Karen Gunderson creates large-scale paintings of constellations, moons, mountains, and water that encourage viewers to look at nature in a different way. *Reflective* includes works that depict elements of the natural environment on canvases that are monochromatic in color. These all-black paintings—created through the application of sure, but delicate brushstrokes and almost imperceptibly different tones of paint—are the keys to understanding an elemental nature. The paintings are part intellectual exercise, part optical illusion, and intensely crafted. Gunderson’s process is somewhat exploratory as she uses the brush filled with paint to manipulate through and define spaces.

Gunderson’s work requires engagement—similar to the way in which we experience the natural world with more of our senses when we are out in it, rather than looking at it through mediated sources such as photographs, telescopes, or windows. Earlier in her career, she gained fame for her large-scale paintings depicting clouds in their myriad number of forms. These representational works looked straight at their subject at “eye level” rather than from below. They are luminous depictions of ethereal, natural phenomena that she instilled with a sense of substance and personality. Her more recent black paintings have a similar interest in nature and a few of its somewhat ephemeral denizens, such as water and celestial objects, but they also display a solidity that is well-served by her dark surfaces. The sheen picked up by gallery lighting reflecting off her brushwork suggests the glint of water in starlight, the flint in the rock making up the sides of the mountains, and the ebbing of light emanating from celestial bodies far removed from us.



(above left)  
**Karen Gunderson**  
*First Steps: Shangri-La*, 2005  
 Oil on linen  
 81 x 44 inches  
 Collection of the Artist  
 Photo: Kim Keever

(right)  
**Karen Gunderson**  
*Arcadia*, 2009  
 Oil on board  
 24 x 36 inches  
 Collection of John Kopulos  
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Using a palette of all black to create portraits and flowers, Gunderson began working on the black paintings almost two decades ago. While the history of painting is filled with portraits, still lifes, and natural world imagery, it is not filled with monochromatic canvases that depict representational images.

Gunderson's manipulations with paint align her in some respects with modern artists—such as Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Camille Pissarro—who played with perception. Rather than urban or rural landscapes, Gunderson presents the world in macro terms with subjects that are global and, in some ways, epic. Water, constellations, mountains, the moon—these are grand themes.

Karen Gunderson has built a distinguished resume that includes degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and the University of Iowa, teaching engagements, international solo and group exhibitions, publications, and awards, such as the Second Prize in Painting from the *Florence Biennale*, Florence, Italy. Her work is included in numerous public and private collections.



### **Barbara Sorensen: Elemental**

Barbara Sorensen, who made her name with ceramic sculpture, has extended her interest in the topographical landscape by expanding her material base and aesthetic composition. *Elemental* includes sculptural forms constructed from rope, wire, resin, aluminum and mixed media. While she offers three-dimensional portrayals of the environment as metaphor, her work is not descriptive. Tide pools, sand dunes, and topographical formations are evoked without being strictly represented. Sorensen connects the landscape to the human, organic body—offering responses that are felt as much as seen.

Sorensen has long been manipulating material to echo the natural landscape. In their surface textures and glazes, her ceramic sculptures often suggested the varied textures of this planet's crust. There is sense that these works not only depict features of the earth's surface and the artist's response to them, but they were also created out of the same fundamental material.



Her glazes suggest cooled lava flows, fissures in the landscape, and striations in rock outcroppings. Although Sorensen's work in ceramics has provided her with a solid understanding of working

(above right)  
**Karen Gunderson**  
*Murphy's Moon*, 2010  
Oil on linen  
60 x 60 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(left)  
**Barbara Sorensen**  
*Dwellings (detail)*, 2011  
Powder-coated aluminum  
Dimensions vary  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Randal Smith

in three dimensions, her more recent work incorporates materials that allow her even more “room” to maneuver since the physical weight of the earlier ceramic sculpture has been minimized. Whether powder-coated aluminum constructed into net or web-like forms, or rope and resin in concave shapes, these works convey a sense of organic phenomenon on both a microscopic and macroscopic level.

While her ceramics seemed uniformly tied to the earth because of their material and visual references to the land, Sorensen’s recent pieces are reminiscent of more ethereal objects and occurrences, such as vortexes and whirlpools of air, water, and earth. Her use of new media allows for simultaneous exploration of the interior and exterior space of her structures demonstrating a lightness not seen before in her ceramics. The sense of openness is not just on visual terms, for these works also are open to more varied interpretations. A sculpture whose metal lines could be tracing the unseen, but felt, movement of air in a vortex may also suggest a hive for an insect colony. Her swirling vessel-like structures could be the embodiment of whirlpools of water at low tide or a home burrowed in the ground by some small creature.

Sorensen makes distinctive connections between the body, the topography of the land, and vessels—playing off of the symbolic potential of each. For example, with her *Dwellings* series of open structures made of metal, she does not dictate how the pieces should be understood, but rather shares that the large-scale offers people the opportunity to imagine them as places to “crouch and remain inside.” They become vessels, of sorts, that could protect as well as isolate someone. Evoking the natural world in form, not just image, the artist engages the senses.



Barbara Sorensen studied at the University of Wisconsin and with sculptors—such as Rudy Autio, Don Reitz, and Peter Voukos—who were pushing the field of ceramics in new directions. In addition to being included in many public and private collections,

her work is featured in numerous publications and has been exhibited internationally.



(above right)  
**Barbara Sorensen**, *Installation of Speleothems*, 2011  
Aluminum, polyurethane, and resin  
Dimensions vary  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Steve Allen

(left)  
**Barbara Sorensen**, *Pools (detail)*, 2010  
Rope, resin, and wood  
108 x 144 x 24 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Randal Smith