



Fractured Atlas Blog

Featured Member: Kira Lynn Harris

EmilyB | May 21, 2009 9:26 pm

New York-based visual artist **Kira Lynn Harris** uses drawings, light and reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and Mylar, to call attention to and even “destabilize” everyday space. Her work creates an intersection of fact and fiction, real and surreal, and asks the viewer to consider the question “what if?” A member of Fractured Atlas since 2006, Kira has been an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Center for Photography, Woodstock, New York; and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, among others. Her first solo show in Manhattan winds down soon — catch it at CUE Art Foundation through May 23rd.

Kira, I’m struck by the way in which your work — pieces such as *Falling Up*, the installation *Waterfall*, and the pieces in your current show at CUE — do a bit a of “toying around” with the viewer’s perception of reality. You’re presenting a “new” reality to the viewer. What do you hope your viewers experience, or even take away, from this interaction?

On a very basic level, I hope to have a viewer simply pay attention. We are so often hurrying from place to place, meeting to appointment, all the while plugged into our cell phones, mp3 players, etc, that we don’t notice the present moment(s) and immediate space(s) in which we exist. I hope that a viewer is re-oriented to his or her own subjectivity and to the specificity of place.



How do you work out how (or whether) an idea for a large-scale site-specific piece will “fly”? Do you work it out on a smaller scale, or life-size?

Whenever possible, I will visit a space several times before installing to check out the peculiarities of architecture and light that are specific to that space and to get a “feel” for

the place. Often I will complete a set of preliminary sketches and/or build a maquette, but the fact is, I won't know until I'm in the process of installing what will or won't fly. For me, if the work is too planned out the end result can feel a little stilted or closed off. It's a bit of a high wire act and working out an installation in real space and time is one of the beauties of site-specificity. The nerve racking side of this is that I succeed or fail in a very public way — but when it does succeed there's nothing like a truly transformative site-specific project that gives a viewer no choice but to experience the space in a completely new and different way.

How did moving from southern California in 1998 to New York City change your work?



I think moving to NYC has made me even more aware of how important light is in my work and how very much that probably has to do with my being from Southern California. One of the very important and exciting things about New York is sheer proximity and access to other visual artists as well as to creative people from other disciplines. At one point a few years ago, I was invited to collaborate with the dance company Elisa Monte Dance. I don't know if that would have happened in LA. Much as I love my hometown and even though I may know many other visual artists in LA, we're more spread out there and it can be harder to connect across disciplines.

Tell us more about creating sets for *Via Sacra*, the three-part ballet performed by Elisa Monte Dance in 2005... What sort of challenges and rewards did that opportunity present?

That was such a wonderful opportunity and so very scary! Designing for a traveling performance is a whole different animal than for a gallery or museum and there were logistical issues I'd never had to consider before. It was fun and a novelty to get a mention in the "Dance" section of the *New York Times*, but the best part of it for me was working with the fabulous Elisa Monte and her amazing dancers and a terrific lighting

designer, Clifton Taylor to whom I'd still like to apprentice myself! It's because of seeing Clifton's work, I now occasionally use colored gels in my own light installations.

You've cited many artists among those who have influenced you: James Turrell, Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, as well as the "cosmic" jazz musician and composer Sun Ra. He's a fascinating mix of artist and philosopher with a strong bend toward outer space and science fiction... Do we see this influence in your choice of Mylar as a medium?



I love this question, because it gives me a chance (and excuse?) to run on about my great, lifelong love of science fiction! I was that rare nerdy girl that absolutely loved science fiction and couldn't get into the romance novels my friends were into (honestly, I did try!). I started with Ray Bradbury, of course, but even before that there was Madeline L'Engle and John Christopher for juvenile sci-fi. And I have a brother who was DEEP into George Clinton and P-Funk: straight-up black sci-fi. I "discovered" Sun Ra later in college. Still later, I began reading the work of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler.

Then, my first year or two in New York, I was active in the Afro-Futurism online forum....

Silver Mylar is a material I've used for over a decade, primarily for its light reflecting qualities. The fact that it was developed in the 1950s and it was used by NASA in the "space race" of the '50s and '60s brings my inner nerd great satisfaction.

So, I'm not so much directly referencing Sun Ra as my love of all things outer space and science fiction, although I will say that in the show at CUE I make several overt references to science fiction, the most obvious one being the wall drawing, *2001, Mirror*, based on the penultimate scene in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The other is the light installation *Prism, Mirror, Lens*, titled after the first chapter of Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*.

How do you define success? What do you feel has been your greatest success to date?

Now there's a loaded question, especially these days, when the world's upended itself because of the economic downturn... It will sound Pollyanna-ish, but being happy is a big part of success for me, as is the respect of my (art) peers.

As far as the work itself goes, a successful piece is one which provides that aha moment for the viewer, not as in "I get it" but, in that there's a realization that something significant may be in a given piece. And it's most successful if that significance can't be fully articulated, but remains just beyond the reach of language. I feel that is happening with the body of work on show at CUE, but I haven't enough distance from the show yet to see it very objectively. I also felt that happened in a very real way with an installation I did at P.S.1 a few years ago, and another one at Smack Mellon in 2000.



What motivated you to become a member of Fractured Atlas?

I believe that [health insurance](#) and arts activism were the things that first drew me in. The former is always a concern no matter what one's profession, but for artists it can be a struggle.

What's next on your horizon?

This summer, I'll be in Los Angeles working on a project or series of works centered around the Bradbury Building there (I first visited the building on childhood field trips and it remains quite possibly my favorite space). I'm not yet sure what form(s) this work will take, nor do I have a venue yet, but completing some work based on this building has been on my mind for, literally, years and it's time to see it become reality.

How can we see more, and learn more about, your work?

At the moment, the best way is to check out the pages I have on various websites: CUE Art Foundation, Re-Title, Artslant, and Saatchi Gallery.

Images (top to bottom):

2001, Mirror, 2009. Installation view, CUE Art Foundation;

96 Degrees in the Shade (detail), 2001;

Waterfall (detail), 2005;

Prism, Mirror, Lens, 2009. Installation view and detail.