

Just Beyond Reality's Edge:

Kira Lynn Harris

By Nicole J. Caruth

Kira Lynn Harris's attention to light and space dates back to her childhood. Raised in the sun-drenched landscape of Southern California, she recalls a poem that she penned at the age of twelve: "Sunlight shining through the tree leaves like stars twinkling in a green leafy night." The artist says, in a very matter-of-fact way, "Light has always been present for me."

Harris's school visit to the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles—a structure noted for its qualities of illumination—had a significant impact. This late 19th-century landmark, which was featured in the film *Blade Runner*, was designed by George Wyman. The architect is said to have been influenced by Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, which vividly described a commercial building in a future utopian society as a "vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides, but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above."¹ Harris describes the Bradbury Building's light-filled glass atrium as a space through which "you don't really walk. You feel like you're floating." The artist's Mylar and light installations, for which she is widely known, likewise concern how we feel and move through a space.

It was not until college and later in graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts (better known as Cal Arts) that she was introduced to the works of Robert Irwin and James Turrell, for which she felt an affinity. Since attending Cal Arts, Harris has developed an interdisciplinary practice that includes video, photography, drawing and painting, in addition to site-specific installation. Her process for the latter begins with the intricacies of the building and the geographic location in which she is working. Her keen attention to corners, passageways and recurring shapes that others might tend to ignore has become more pronounced since she relocated to New York City ten years ago.

In 2001, Harris participated in the group exhibition *White Hot* at Smack Mellon Studios. She covered an existing series of shallow steps, or brick platforms, with Mylar, shining artificial light on the material to cast a ghostly white shimmer against a flush brick wall. A trail of loosely piled rock and brick along the top of the installation made a direct reference to Robert Smithson. Harris considers this piece, titled *96 Degrees in the Shade*, to have been a breakthrough. Not only was this one of the artist's earliest installations of this type, but her Polaroid documentation of the work resulted in her first exhibition photographs. For *Waterfall*, a 2005 installation at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, she used Mylar to line the edge of a flight of steps and again employed controlled light to create a subtle glow in the stairwell. While the reflection along the wall gave the impression of water, the staircase conjured a geological formation. In this context, "water" and "fall" also suggest the viewer's perception of danger—the risk of slipping and falling.

Harris's work has been documented in various forms, but her installations only reach completion during the viewer's transient experience of them. Progressing from modest in size to monumental, in 2007, Harris installed *Untitled (Pyramid)* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she was inspired by pyramids, or triangular shapes, that she found in the area, most notably in the museum itself: the building is a parallelogram coated in ribbed stainless steel. It has the appearance of a triangle

¹ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, with a foreword by Erich Fromm, Signet, 1960, p. 103. (Originally published by William Ticknor in 1888).

near the front entrance where its sides converge. Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, with its pyramidal base, located at the entrance to the nearby Rothko Chapel, was also an inspiration. At the museum, Harris mounted an inverted plywood pyramid in the corner of a gallery. She covered the structure and parts of the floor with silver Mylar. The room was then lit with colored gels to create a fiery-orange atmosphere, a glowing landscape meant to evoke sunrise, though for some viewers the installation was disconcerting and evoked violence. Harris's early and ongoing passion for science fiction is an important thread in her work today. Here she combines sci fi's creation of strange, magnificent, or metaphysically stimulating situations with a sense of the boundless and sublime.

Playing with perceptions of space, especially subverting one's sense of orientation, is an important part of the artist's practice. In 1997, Harris, initially working on the floor, exercised chance in the piece *Interstices* by randomly throwing black eyed peas on a large sheet of Mylar. After covering the whole with black spray paint, she picked the beans off one by one to reveal a majestic constellation of silver flecks. This piece was shown at Rosamund Fesen Gallery, Los Angeles, and at Gale Gates et Al in New York. I can imagine that, when placed on a wall, *Interstices* produced the sensation of standing among the stars instead of looking up at them.

At the time of this writing, Harris's plans for her exhibition at CUE had not been fully developed; it is unclear how she will transform the space. It is certain, however, that Harris will attempt a new approach to perspective, a subject that is almost always implied in her installations, by rendering a wall drawing in situ. The idea for this piece began with the engravings of 16th-century Dutch painter, architect and engraver, Jan (or Hans) Vredeman de Vries, who, circa 1604, published *Perspective: Most Famous Art of Eyesight*. The lines, vanishing points and complex grids that comprise his drawings of buildings, courtyards, vaults and archways give not so much a *picture* as they do a *sense* of space. For instance, De Vries illustrates the view down a long shaft with such detail and depth as to produce a dreamlike effect; there is something both terrifying and thrilling about the illusion of falling into this black hole. His images seem to lie just beyond reality's edge. This is also the line on which Harris's works teeter.

To this point, Harris has seen her various interests—speculative fiction, the sublime, the Light and Space movement, J.M.W. Turner, the Hudson River School, the Luminists, Mark Rothko, Renaissance art and architecture, and the monumental projects of Smithsonian and other Land artists—as more tangential than directly observable or linked to her work. These ideas and individual artists have over time shifted our ways of seeing and experiencing light and space. In this exhibition, Harris's first solo show in Manhattan, I sense that she will do the same for viewers and that these interests, acquired piecemeal, will in this setting overlap and collide to create a surprising new whole.

—Nicole J. Caruth, Brooklyn, NY, February 2009

All quotes are from interviews with the artist unless otherwise specified. No part of this essay can be reproduced without prior consent from the author.

The writer, **NICOLE J. CARUTH**, is a freelance writer and curator based in Brooklyn. She holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and earned a Bachelor's in art history at San Francisco State University. Caruth frequently contributes to ...might be good, a contemporary art e-journal produced by Fluent~Collaborative, and the Art21 Blog. Her writing has been published by the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan; Archives and Museum Informatics, Toronto; NYFA Current, and Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture. Recent curatorial projects include Near Sighted—Far Out, a video art festival for Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center, New York; and Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection, Brooklyn Museum.

The mentor, **JANET KOPLOS**, is a contributing editor at Art in America magazine. She writes frequently on a wide range of contemporary art. She is the author of Contemporary Japanese Sculpture, (Abbeville Press, 1991), and, most recently, the co-author of Makers: A History of American Studio Craft, which will be published this year by the University of North Carolina Press.