

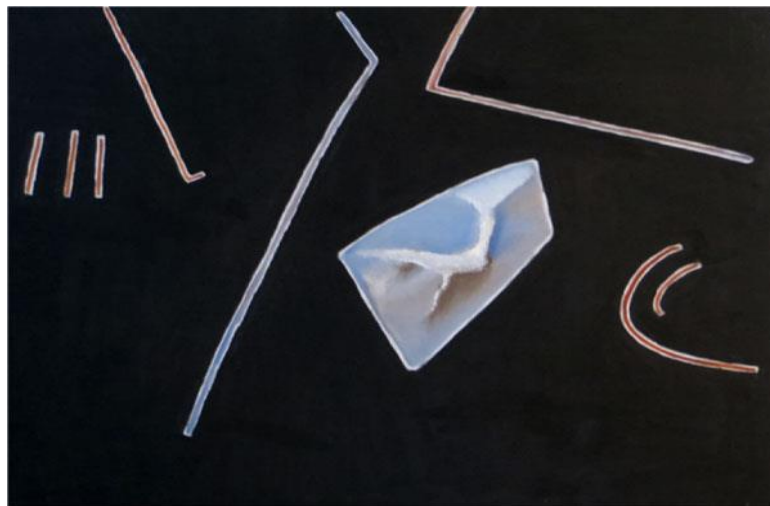
## SARAH PLIMPTON *Black Light: New Works*

by Mary Ann Caws

JUNE KELLY GALLERY | JANUARY 7 – FEBRUARY 9, 2016

Sarah Plimpton's new work, *Black Light*, at the June Kelly Gallery is, like her other paintings and books, instantly recognizable. Never would you say: "Oh, isn't this like...?" Not possible to confuse it, or the artist, with anything or anyone else. In its linear strength, this darkness radiates both out and in. The oxymoron in the title brings into the scene at once a kind of baroque poetry by its apparent opposites and a host of references. The dark is light enough, indeed. It shines.

We are to imagine ourselves  
looking up, not down.  
Although the title of  
the cover  
art reads *Falling  
Through*,  
and the bluish/whitish  
shape  
piercing through the  
black is placed  
low on the linen, look  
again: in order  
to see it beneath you,  
you would be  
very high up indeed.  
An enabling  
conceit of the highest  
order.



Sarah Plimpton, *Falling Through*, 2014. Oil on linen, 30 × 40 inches.

Looking at this extraordinary work, thinking of the weave of the linen it is couched on and in, I was standing with the artist in our accustomed silence—I guess you could call it reserve—and

thinking of Elizabeth Bishop's talk of "that strange kind of modesty that I think one feels in almost everything contemporary one really likes [...] Modesty, care, space...." And I was suddenly remembering how, on a North Carolina beach I lived my summers on, the intensity of such shapes as these felt hard underfoot—the bare bones of the beach. It was less about sand than about structure. That's it: there is nothing easy about Plimpton's work or vision.

All of this new work reaches toward the future. Take the titles, for example, of the four equally-sized works (17 × 25 inches) on the wall that faces you when you enter, all on Tyvek, the sheets used in building construction, which Plimpton would roll up and bring home from France, then paint in black to make shiny. The titles are all temporally charged—Second Try, Just a Minute, Now and Again—or marked with a kind of exhilarating ambiguity: Maybe. Nothing draggy or slow about them. The largest, called Hurry By, signals that quite certainly, with its door, opening towards a greenness, slanting to the side. Then on the opposite wall, more future titles: I Will Be There, Future Time, and I Shall See. Nothing weighing down toward any past.

We could posit a reach: the openings in the dark allow, encourage, a personal passage under a night sky towards somewhere else, as in Plimpton's poem on the invitation, itself inviting us somewhere:

we would walk to the end  
counting in the dark  
the left over stars

In each of these works, the vigorous lines (poles, branches) shaping the scene anchor us to where we are, quite exactly, to keep our balance. Those windows show us through to something less "outside" than beyond. Landscapes, skyscapes, however you would term them—they elicit their echoes in smaller shapes elsewhere in the dark surrounding, holding accents of a thicker white line somewhere in them. Plimpton reminds me of the accents in John Constable's paintings, and I am thinking of the way my painter grandmother showed me the tiny patches of red in a Corot landscape.

How does it work, then, with poetry, I wonder aloud: Whatever shows through to illuminate the rest, to point up and at something, how do we learn to see it first and then, if we are lucky, to locate it in our own creations?

What is certain about these paintings is the way each of them solicits a different reaction from the onlooker: you cannot help but feel involved in the space, in its dark surrounding, and in what makes its way through. And, no less, your way, if you commit yourself to this black light. "I will be there," says the artist. Yes, she will.

Contributor

Mary Ann Caws

MARY ANN CAWS is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and French at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Her many areas of interest in twentieth-century avant-garde literature and art include Surrealism, poets René Char and André Breton, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, and artists Robert Motherwell, Joseph Cornell, and Pablo Picasso. Conceptually, one of her primary themes has been the relationship between image and text.