

ENERGY AND EXUBERANCE: THE RECENT WOODCUTS OF KAREN KUNC

The woodcuts of Karen Kunc not only delight the eye with a splashy array of vivid colors and exuberant shapes, but also compel the viewer to consider various evolutionary and ecological processes. In this manner, Kunc encourages us to think about the world around us, and, at the same time, illustrates the wide-ranging capabilities of the woodcut medium.

Kunc's woodcuts are composed of different organic shapes that, although initially perceived as abstract, suggest geomorphological forms or organic elements upon further inspection. The colored inks that Kunc utilizes range from soft, ethereal tints to intense, vibrant hues. The woodcuts are printed on Japanese paper and range in size from 29 x 42" to 37 x 52".

Like the evolutionary processes suggested by both the imagery and titles, these works are the result of an extended exploration into the capabilities of the woodcut medium that Kunc initiated when she began teaching. Kunc studied printmaking as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and pursued this interest while working on her MFA degree at Ohio State University; however, her education focused on etching, silkscreen, and lithography. Her first extensive utilization of the woodcut medium came when she was hired to teach relief processes. She became enamored by the limitless possibilities that woodcuts afforded her, and liked the fact that the woodcut process did not require extensive advance planning or proofing, as is the case with other printmaking methods such as etching. In addition, Kunc was attracted to making prints for the qualities of delicacy and illusion that were absent from paintings on canvas.

Over the years, Kunc developed a process for producing her woodcuts that is time-consuming and involved, resulting in prints of extraordinary complexity and resonance. After preparing a preliminary sketch, Kunc transfers the design to a

large 1/4" thick sheet of mahogany or birch veneer plywood. Rather than produce a separate block for each color (which may number up to forty in a single print), Kunc usually uses the same woodblock to print all of the colors with the aid of paper stencils. Each stencil enables her to apply the oil-based ink to a specific, well-defined area. After running the woodblock through a hand press, the area just printed on each sheet of paper in the edition is then cut or sanded away from the block and then the block is ready to be inked with another stencil and printed for other areas of color. Due to this lengthy process, an edition of twenty to twenty-five prints often takes Kunc two to four weeks to produce.

Despite the protracted nature of the printing process, Kunc considers it ideal because it allows her to cultivate the evolution of an artistic concept from a germinal idea to a complex and compelling image. States Kunc: "By doing it this way, I never know what is going to happen. That makes the print evolve from a very simple idea to something that I just can't expect to happen again."

Although the artist's responsiveness to the evolving image seems to suggest that these prints are unplanned (a suggestion perhaps reinforced by the lively spontaneity that the prints evince), Kunc emphasizes that all of her works have a formal, underlying structure. It is this organizational structure that gives each work its coherence despite the disparate shapes and colors, and it is this structure which compels viewers to extend their interaction with each print beyond their initial observation, when one is enchanted by the mesmerizing shapes and exuberant colors. Each subsequent viewing reveals new insights and uncovers more of the compositional infrastructure which holds all of the artistic elements in equilibrium. This careful construction allows individual prints to appear light-hearted and whimsical upon one viewing, and solemn and

mysterious upon another viewing.

The complexity and intrigue of Kunc's work bear witness to her understanding of the capabilities of her chosen medium and to her ability to orchestrate the numerous visual interactions that appear in each print. The intensity of colors provides the initial impact, enticing the viewer to examine the print with greater care. Upon deliberation, the subtle variations and unique juxtapositions assert themselves. In some areas, riotous hues clash dissonantly, while in other areas, colors dissolve fluidly into ethereal expanses.

The complexity of the image is enhanced by the resolution of space and depth. Kunc asserts that her imagery is primarily two dimensional. "I'm not interested in how things work in space.... I am more interested in flat shapes, in two dimensions," she states. However, it cannot be denied that there are suggestions of three-dimensional forms and spatial relationships in each print. In *Found/Made Mosaic* (1990), for example, the rectangular elements call to mind architectural structures. The ambiguity between two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional forms and spaces is exaggerated by the variety of shapes with which the viewer is confronted. Within each print, there are shapes with sharply delineated edges, as well as shapes that slide seamlessly into other areas or fade into airy nothingness.

Although at first glance, Kunc's prints may seem to be purely abstract, the shapes suggest biomorphic objects or geomorphological phenomena. The large circular forms that appear in works such as *Largely Looming* (1990) and *Garden Revelations* (1989) are suggestive of whirlpools or volcanic craters, while curvilinear shapes that meander through prints such as *Drama of Source* (1990) call to mind cascading rivers. These associations are reinforced by titles such as *Garden Revelations* (1989) and *Gems of the Web* (1991) that provide clues as to the content of the works. Kunc herself acknowledges that the images begin as shapes but in their final form are reminiscent of objects. She states that these works are not

abstract, but deal with broad, universal issues such as ecology and life processes.

The ambiguities that abound in the woodcuts of Karen Kunc engage both the eye and mind of the viewer. While the works are the result of careful deliberation on the part of the artist, she encourages the viewer to explore the images and arrive at individual conclusions. She provides clues along the way, but does not dictate. Kunc's ability to resolve the many challenges of the woodcut process in exciting and intriguing ways endows her prints with a unique power and energy.

Christin J. Mamiya

Assistant Professor of Art History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

MID-AMERICAN NEIGHBORS: ALICE ANDREWS AND KAREN KUNC

This exhibition is supported, in part, by the Arkansas Arts Council, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding was provided by the Donaghey Foundation of Little Rock.

Catalog printed by Capitol Off-Set Printing Co. of Little Rock on St. Lawrence matte cover and text recycled paper with soybean oil-based ink.

University Galleries:

Shannon Dillard Mitchell, Curator of Gallery Programs

Joan Crews, Gallery Coordinator

This exhibition was organized by the Department of Art.

Catalogue Design: Eric Mantle, Ariane Hopkins, and Melissa Ryan

Photographic reproductions of Alice Andrews' work: Wayne Norman.

Photographic reproductions of Karen Kunc's work: John Nollendorfs.

© Copyright 1991/University Galleries

Department of Art / Donald Van Horn, Chair

College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences / Lloyd W. Benjamin III,
Dean

University of Arkansas at Little Rock

U·A·L·R