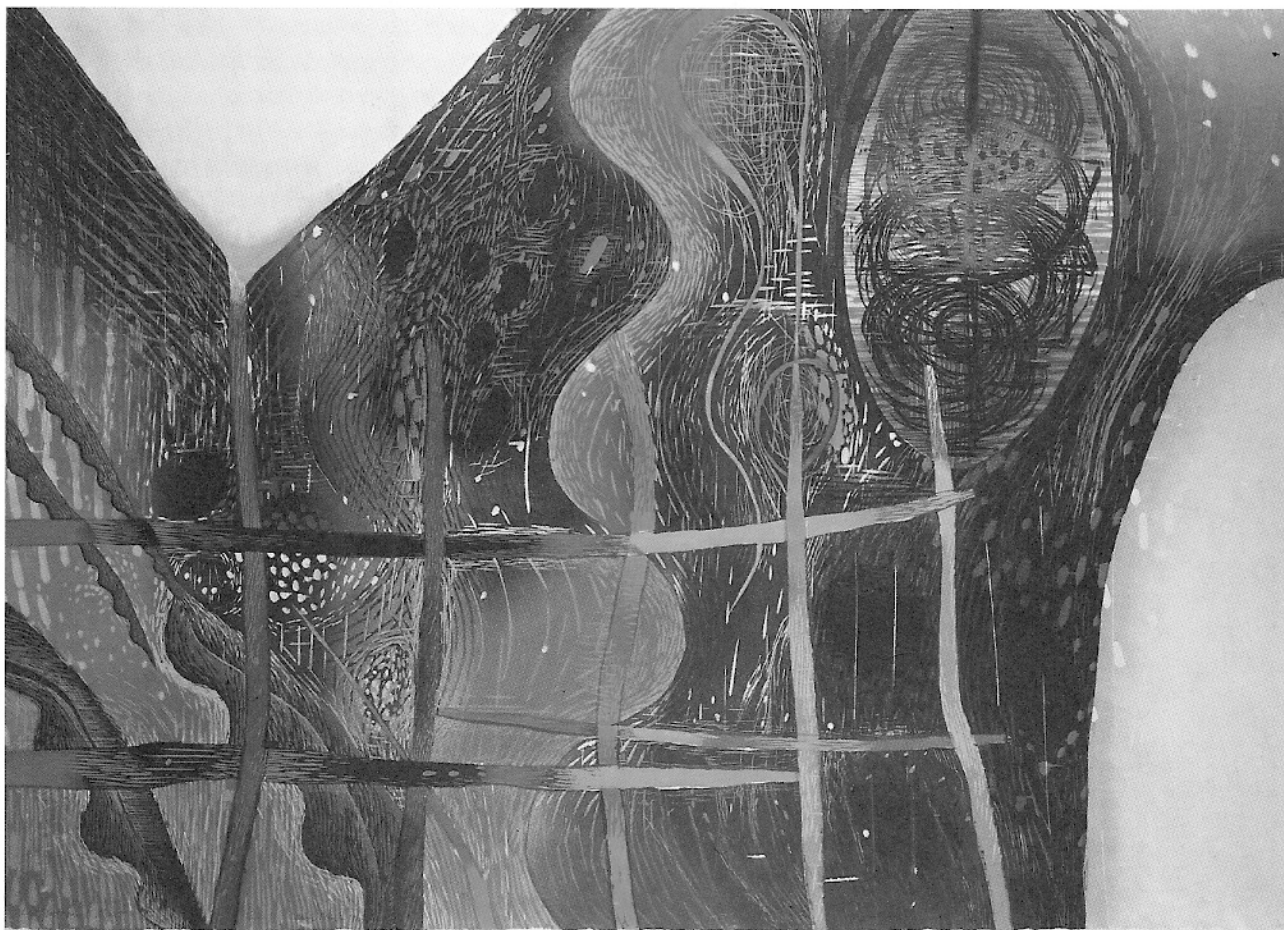


2021

Karen Kunc



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Throughout her work, Karen Kunc has sought to expand the expressive range of the woodcut, her primary medium. She takes advantage of the traditional dual nature of the blockprint, combining the robust and the delicate — qualities that are both related to the organic character of its very materials. Energetic rhythms and seductive color provide a groundwork for her abstracted, lyrical landscapes. Carved forms hint at the forces of nature, its currents, repetitions, and unpredictable variances. Sublime beauty veils the challenges on the journey of their creation.

Submerged in Kunc's web of image and activity is evidence of her adaptation of the color reduction woodcut. Instead of requiring a separate block for each color to be printed — the conventional way to make a color woodcut — a reduction print usually employs just one block of wood. Having decided upon a basic design, an artist carves selected portions of it, rolls the panel with one color of ink, and runs the woodblock with a sheet of paper through the press. These actions — cutting lines and shapes, inking with different colors, and making impressions — are then repeated in successive steps until the artist has finished the composition. By this time, the surface of the block will show only a fraction of the complete design, as much of the relief area has been eliminated or, as the name of the method indicates, reduced. Furthermore, due to the impossibility of reprinting a solid area once any part of it has been cut out, the block must be rerolled with ink and every sheet of paper in the edition (the total number of impressions the artist wishes to make of a particular image) imprinted during each of these production stages.

To this arguably demanding process, Kunc adds another level of innovative complexity. Borrowing a technique from screenprinting, she also uses stencils to create many of the shapes that she adds to the block. To fabricate a stencil, Kunc cuts an open area into a piece of kraft paper in a desired

figuration. She then tapes this template to her block (usually a piece of birch plywood) and fills in the shape with color from an inked roller. So long as they do not overlap, Kunc can position more than one stencil on the block and use a different color of ink for each. Removing the paper, she usually feathers out the hard edges of these inked forms by tapping them with the heel of her hand. Kunc then commences printing, a process lengthened by the necessity of reregistering the stencils before each inking.



Fig. 1
By the Falls,
1985

The art of color reduction woodcut yields Kunc tremendous freedoms, huge rewards coupled with one — albeit large — element of risk. At its most basic level, this method conserves her resources: by requiring just one or two blocks per print, Kunc has to buy and store fewer of them (a point of great significance early in her career!). Next, it relieves her from the discrete and sometimes unhelpful divisions of labor in printmaking among composing, carving, and producing impressions. Furthermore, Kunc's use of stencils enables her to achieve her characteristically expansive range of hues with an admirable economy of presswork, having to run it perhaps but fifteen times to make a finished print of more than fifty colors. For this artist, however, the most important advantage of the reduction method rests in its nearly evolutionary stages of image development. Its creation cycles allow the time and space for Kunc to continue inventing during the process of making the print, and for her ideas to take her in different directions from her initial concept, which takes the form of a small black-and-white preliminary sketch. She is then able to



Fig. 2
*Spinning Out
the Storm*,
1988

respond to changes occurring on the paper and in the block. Kunc's woodcuts thus come about through metamorphosis, which is, in fact, an excellent analogy for all aspects of her work, extending from her production process to the conceptual underpinning of her imagery: the flux inherent in nature. The big tradeoff for the artist with her chosen technique is the uncertainty that an alteration in course will end in a satisfying result, as it is impossible to change a mark once it is committed to paper.

Kunc began as an artist in woodcut in the late 1970s, having trained as both a painter and printmaker. She pursued the latter discipline because it satisfied her strong sense of two-dimensional design, an intuitive decision to concentrate solely on printmaking that was validated, in many ways, by the phenomenon of the so-called "print renaissance." This spirited revival overturned stagnant notions about the intellectual and aesthetic primacy of painting and sculpture through tremendous creativity in all areas of printmaking. By this time, there was a definite self-consciousness about the creation of multiples; conditioned by the previous "medium is the message" generation, artists made prints whose subject matter included the fact that prints are not one-of-a-kind and are made in a particular way. Warhol's presentations of consumer items in slick lithographs or silkscreens flaunted the overlapping methods of fine art and industrial production. Conceptual artists such as Joseph Beuys extended this idea, using the print for its distinct ability to dispense information. Even the Postmodern return to realism of Richard Estes or Jane Freilicher masked an undercurrent of abstraction: artists were using representation as a way to speak about the fact that they were really constructing images through a repeated process of accumulating flat passages of color and abstract shapes on a surface.

A rising interest in the 1980s in the nature of personal or subjective expression in the Postmodern era contributed to the reinvigoration of the art of the woodcut, the oldest known print technique. With a more than passing regard for the historical Expressionism of the early twentieth century, artists such as Georg Baselitz in Germany, Mimmo Paladino in Italy, and Louisa Chase in the U.S. translated the gestures of emotion and spirit through the irregular and forceful marks made by carving and gouging the woodblock. An alternative direction in this medium was derived from the aesthetic of the Japanese *ukiyo-e*, those blockprints dating from the seventeenth century depicting images from daily life, legend, and theatre that are characterized by elegant qualities of line, design, and subtle aqueous color. In this vein, Helen Frankenthaler created sheer, lyrical abstract woodcuts. Kunc's work has increasingly explored the dualism of these two traditions — the power and poetry, the dynamism and rest — by encouraging and then resolving their tensions.

Kunc's earliest professional woodcuts, such as *At Ursa* (1982), were pure, formal play in the studio. Vertical compositions with arrangements of large, open shapes contrasted areas of unprinted paper with passages of solid color, showing clearly her interest not only in forms themselves, but in the way they created edges and spaces around them. Airy pastel hues, often revealed in beautiful fades of ink, silhouetted shapes, and asymmetric and linear elements show Kunc's affinity for Japanese design. She also began using gossamer Japanese papers. Tough but with the drape of fabric, these handmade papers absorbed her oil-based inks, incorporating her images into their fibers and revealing the fine grain of the woodblock, unlike machinemade papers, where the ink sits on top of the surface creating hard layers.

Although Kunc returned from Ohio in 1983 to teach at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, it was her change of residence two years later to rural Avoca, Nebraska, that precipitated a clear transformation in her work. Suddenly, she lived in and traveled through wide open spaces. The 45-minute commute between

campus and home provided a new visual feast — shifting shapes, moving images, peripheral visions, and unexpected views. Daily travel also emphasized repetition, a source of information that she already valued in the studio, gleaned from the process of making prints.

2021

Elemental nature became the focus of Kunc's queries and the source of her abstractions, exploring harmonies and frictions between earth and air, growth and decay, rising and falling, ebb and flow. The orientation of such new prints as *By the Falls* (1985) [Fig. 1] became predominantly horizontal and the images within them more referential to the land — hills and valleys, lakes and rivers. She teased her spaces into motion with spiral and diagonally cutting forms; more aggressive gouging and carving of the woodblock enhanced this immediacy. A distinctive contrast between two-dimensional patterns and the illusion of depth complements the expansion and contraction inherent in Kunc's subjects.

In 1987, a visiting residency in California changed her palette and Kunc was soon creating such vivid new prints as *Spinning Out the Storm* (1988) [Fig. 2], saturated with bright hues of orange, purple, red, and blue, the intensity of which was matched by the sudden energy of her intertwined images. Pushing both herself and the medium, she now created dynamic compositions of thrusting forms and swirling currents with a nervous calligraphic line; no longer satisfied with a limited amount of layering of texture and color, Kunc added a second reduction block to the creation of each print. The increased give and take in the metamorphosis of her work as well as the added risk was counterbalanced by greater density, reverberation, and complexity in the end result. By the time she created *Dagger Plume* in 1991, Kunc had even removed all traces of the white of the paper, lending a sense of foreboding to such prints that suggests the harsh forces implicit in nature's regenerative processes.

New Elemental Dawn and *Last Entranced Night* [Cover], a pair of prints from 1991, reveal Kunc's well established glossary of signs. Patterns of clouds, eddying pools, mirrors of reflected light, meandering rivers, patches of fence, masses of air: their presence and interconnections suggest, never tell, a story about the relationship between nature and humankind. Joined with poetic titles (an endeavor into which Kunc pours the same creative energy she applies to printmaking), she leaves her meanings purposefully ambiguous. These prints allude to a dawn and dusk of planetary life, the fascinating creation of strange new evolutionary forms, the beautiful but darkly colored prospect of cataclysm.

During 1992, Kunc took a break from the woodcut to produce a flurry of monotypes as well as drawings in oil paintstick. Occasioned by a residency in an unequipped studio at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts at Sweet Briar College, she explored her imaging, returning to a vertical format due in part to the opportunity to draw with her paper hanging on the wall. Using this chance invitation to see familiar things in a new orientation, she produced bright, layered designs that, in contrast to previous work, vibrate with animation rather than fly across the page. She has also lavished in them greater emphasis on fewer bold forms. Monotypes provided Kunc a fun diversion, working out her compositional concerns in a medium that affords the inky qualities of printmaking and the brushiness of painting, revealing both the translucency of inks and the textural quality of the transfer from the Plexiglas plate to paper.

As a consequence, nature in Kunc's most recent work seems more contemplative and balanced. It considers more openly differences between the wild and cultivated, the bounded and open, between sharp



Fig. 3 *Backwater Clearing*, 1993

and curved. As in *Backwater Clearing* (1993) [Fig. 3], the motif of the branch or log appears often; a tall figure, it also operates as a kind of surrogate for a human presence. Kunc has returned to a greater distinction between the delicate calligraphic line and the edgy expressionistic gesture of woodcut. She is experimenting now with a sunnier palette, with lighter hues and greater overprinting of white to get effects through printing that otherwise would have to be achieved with a tremendous amount of carving. It is, perhaps, possible to link this calming sensibility to Kunc's recent residency in Japan. Working in Kyoto presented a chance for the artist to test her understanding of and relationship to *ukiyo-e* printmaking. She affirmed links to Japanese pictorial design in her practice of abstraction from nature, sophisticated play of color, and complex integration of line, pattern, and rhythmic motion within a composition. Technically, however, she found that the labored methods of producing prints in this traditional manner neither supported the intensity nor had the "folk craft honesty" that she seeks through her essentially solitary artmaking in the studio.

Finally, there is an important group that seemingly stands apart from Kunc's main body of woodcuts, but actually represents her deeper investigations into the meaning of the way she works in the medium. All along, Kunc has produced artist's books. In her estimation, books bear a "weight of authority" as part of the world of the printed word, a certain quality that printmaking also holds for her. Her first books were made of paper, bound and printed in editions using a combination of old and new print matrices. The added text not only mirrored the importance that suggestive titles present for her individual prints, it also satisfied her pure aesthetic response to the tight relief of words in letterpress. In 1991, Kunc produced *O &*, a book in a shaped format that led to the subsequent creation of books, such as *Prayer Book* (1992) [Fig. 4], which are unique, sculptural objects made of wooden pages, carved and often combined with found objects. Together the books emphasize the physical act of looking, of relating to an object that you can hold and touch, an arena in which ideas can be explored serially, one in relation to another over a passage of time. *Exotica* (1994), her first portfolio of prints, represents Kunc's further desire to interrelate motifs both within and across artworks.

Kunc's experiments with artist's books and their material qualities have, in turn, contributed to the creation of shaped prints. Beginning in 1991, Kunc made woodcuts such as *True Ring at Tempest Time* on shaped paper, allowing her to construct new relationships between the forms inside a composition and a more insistent framing edge. In *Presence of Chance* (1992), Kunc introduced both a carved element (a reference to the living tree) and decorative Japanese papers with preprinted patterns. These papers, with their assertive physical presence, enhance the substantive fact of the print, as well as provide the artist with a challenge of harmonizing with, clashing with, or covering up this strong graphic structure.

It is the achievement of Kunc's works that they are so fully yet effortlessly engaged in the interlocking relationship of the image to the artmaking. Her questions about human interaction with nature fuel a changing dialogue about both internal and external forces — from the "push me-pull you" of the wood and stylistic considerations, to personal emotional tides, as well as the observation of such forces as shifting weather patterns or underlying geologic pressures. Tension and release, quest and discovery, are among the rewards that the artist offers the viewer.

Janet L. Farber
Associate Curator of 20th-Century Art

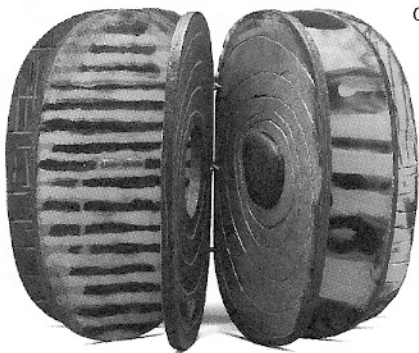


Fig. 4 *Prayer Book*, 1992