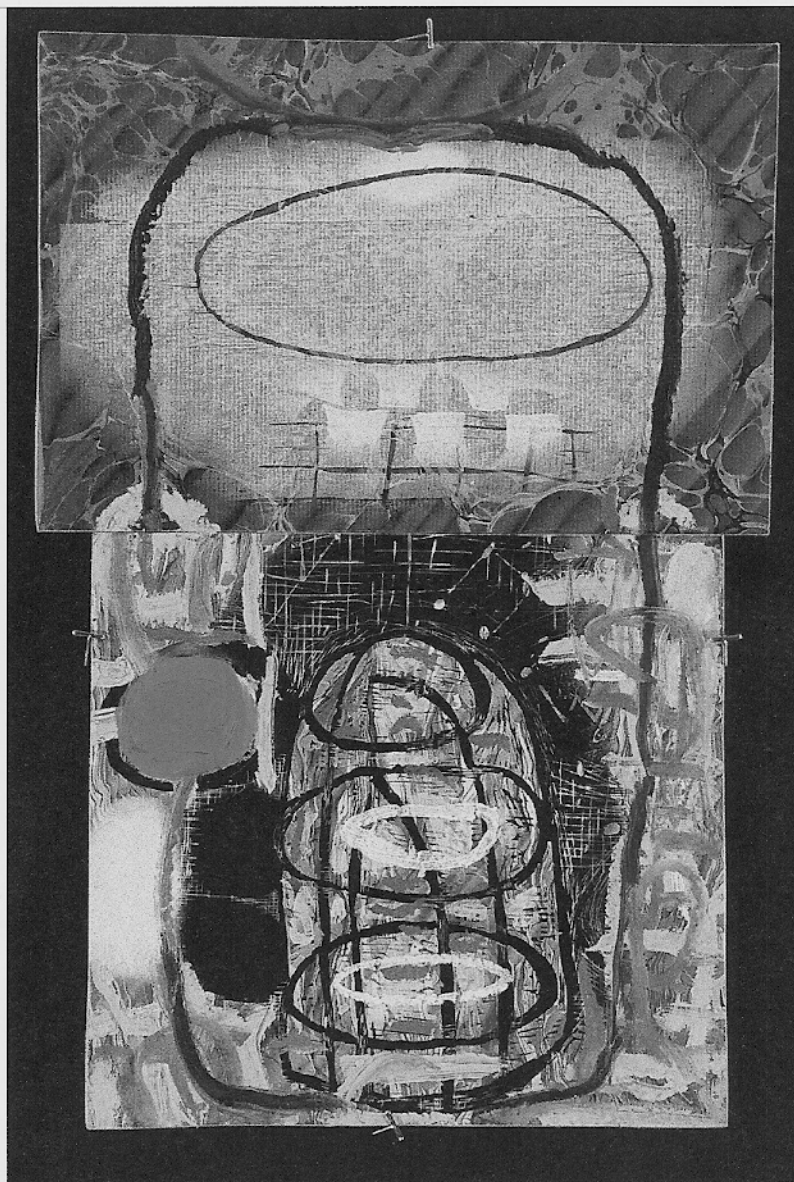


Karen Kunc is an artist of integrity, understanding, and delight. Her woodcuts are unusual among contemporary prints for their lush exuberance. At a time when printmaking is dominated by work that confronts the viewer with icy intellectuality or socio-political insolence, Kunc consistently provides pleasant, lyrical experiences. But her imagery is not superficial, and careful scrutiny is always rewarded with deeper appreciation and provocative ideas. The enthusiastic reception of Kunc's prints throughout the United States and Europe – from Iceland, to Italy, to the Czech Republic – pronounces their broad appeal, and the power of her voice to carry across cultural boundaries.

The artist works alone, and has developed her own distinctive manner of reductive printing from plywood blocks, stenciling and masking along the way. Along with a sensitivity for materials, the spirit of inquisitive experiment typifies her work. The irregularity of the wood and the delicacy of the artist's touch are always apparent. So is her remarkable colour sense. Kunc's early prints acquired a Japanese look, in her preference for long fibered mulberry bark papers, in her penchant for soft effects of tonal modulation, and in a vivid palette reminiscent of the saturated aniline colours of 19th-century *nishiki-e*. Although she briefly studied Japanese woodcuts, Kunc took what she wanted and quickly moved on. Indeed, her imagery derives not from other works of art, but from what she sees in everyday life and her feelings for those experiences.

In their technical innovation and their introspection, Kunc's prints are characteristically American. During the 20th century, colour relief printmaking has had an eventful history in the United States. In the first years of the century, Arthur Wesley Dow used woodcut to explore composition and the modal capacity of hue. In the 1910s the Provincetown Printmakers, B.J.O. Nordfeldt and Blanche Lazzell among them, developed a novel method for producing colour prints from a single woodblock, for images ranging from Arts and Crafts-style landscape to Modernist Abstraction. The printmakers who revived colour woodcut in New York during the 1940s—including Louis Schanker, Adja Yunkers, Anne Ryan, and many others—made larger prints with scores of colours, testing the physical and expressive limits of the process. Though their aims, imagery, and styles were diverse, these artists were all drawn to colour woodcut for its basic simplicity and its versatility. Each developed new ways of using the medium, and they all insisted on working alone. In the next American woodcut revival during the 1980s, a similar innovative soliloquy distinguished Kunc's work.

Another American quality of Kunc's activity is her reliance on intuition and chance. Like many descendants of the



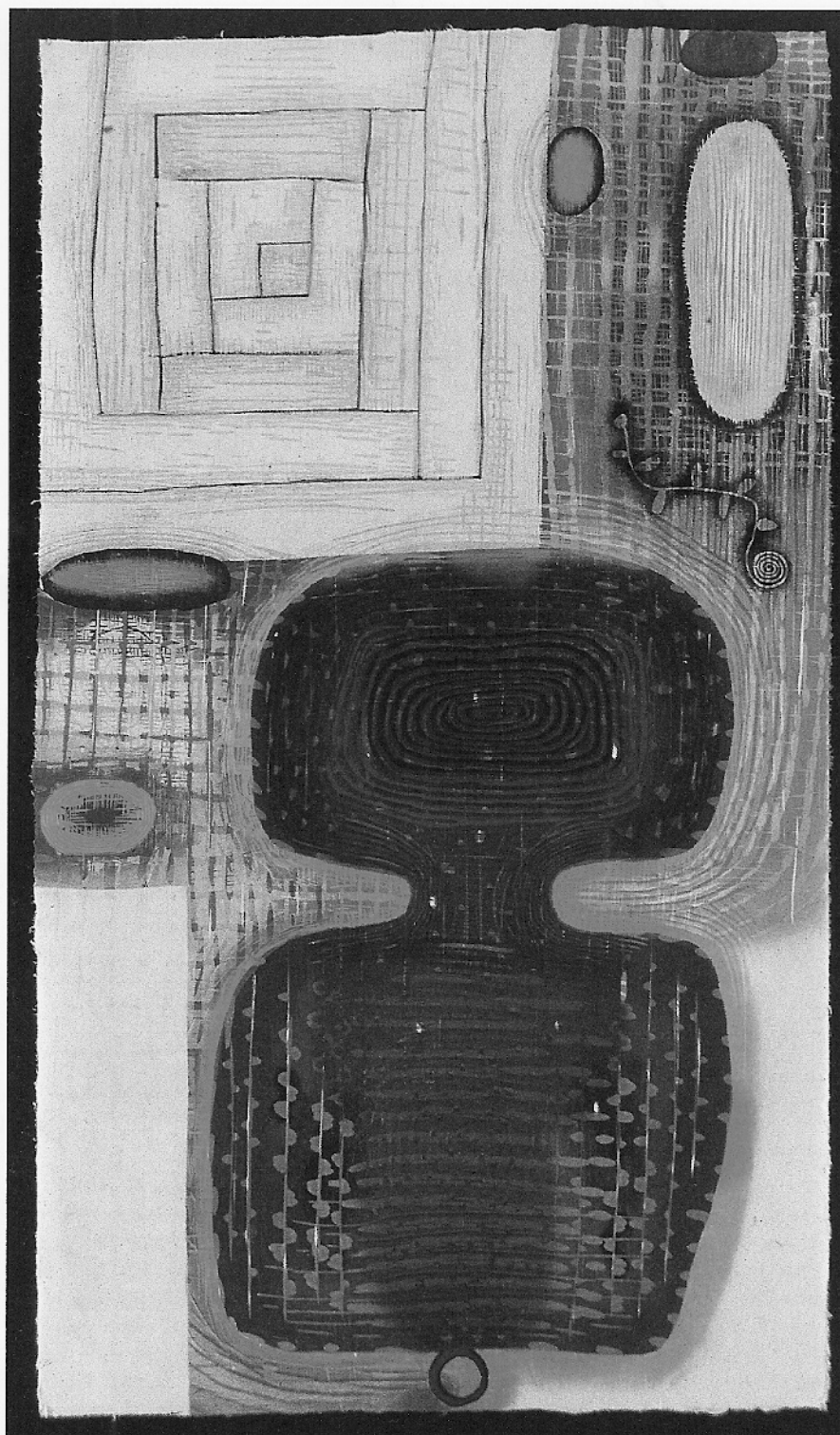
Karen Kunc, *Cage*, 1994, monoprint and mixed media on panel, 483 x 330

Abstract Expressionists, she relies on momentary inspiration and improvisation during the process of creation. The artist approaches the woodblock with only a simple black-and-white sketch. At the press, she encourages an image to develop through responsive activities of carving and printing. While working, Kunc remains sensitive to the peculiarities of each plank of wood. She makes immediate decisions about form and colour, always remaining open to fortuitous mistakes. It may seem to her that each print autonomously evolves its own character. In truth, however, her unpremeditated decisions allow her own psyche to manifest itself in every image.

Kunc's art is personal and introspective. Its poetry of colour and form reveal the artist's view and experiences in her own voice. Landscape, weather, and the energy of nature were the perennial subjects of Kunc's prints during the 1980s and early 1990s. She developed her own vocabulary of symbols to represent topographical elements. These meanders, whorls, and zigzags were placed together

in excited compositions, like graceful weather maps. Kunc's landscape symbols often carry formal analogies to biology and geology. Cyclone spirals and liquid eddies remind the viewer of the sculpture of bones, visceral organs, or shell forms; tumbling triangles and angular lightning flashes are reminiscent of crystalline minerals or glacial ice. Kunc's recent prints reveal a deeper contemplation of symbology. Her pictograms of natural objects and phenomena gather in sensible ranks on the sheet, arrayed in elegant balance. Parallels and grids have replaced volutes and chevrons.

This organization reflects the logic of mapping, recording and systematic communication instead of natural chance. Rather than depict the awed perception of nature, these prints seem to represent the human compulsion to observe and organize. They evoke scientific analysis, the quest to understand the world, and communicate that understanding. Expressed with the artist's delicate touch and exquisite colour sense, these images stand for the zenith of human ingenuity. They speak



Karen Kunc, *Shaping Sounds*, 1997, woodcut, 1067 x 610

*"Though difficult to generalize, perhaps there is innate visual attraction to graphic contrast, a mind-set for the requisite self-discipline, tolerance for repetition, patience for obsessive minutiae, and a willingness to collaborate."*

of fractile geometry as well as taxonomy, and magical places where mathematics meet poetry in the realm of cosmic order. There is an admirable consistency of technique and appearance throughout Kunc's oeuvre of colour woodcuts. For 20 years she has remained dedicated to her process, through scores of editions, the circumspect evolution of imagery and capricious print world fashion. She has cleverly avoided inertia and repetition, and has developed a technical fluency to match her imagination. Now she begins to approach true mastery of her medium. It is exciting to see.

*David Acton, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, Worcester Art Museum*