

KAREN KUNC

Prints



Galerie
Dumont 18
Art et Editions

Rue Etienne Dumont 18
CH-1204 Genève, Suisse
Geneva, Switzerland

September 21 - November 12, 2000

LANDMARKS: THE ART OF KAREN KUNC

by Catherine Clader

Much has been said and written about the color reduction woodcut technique used by the artist Karen Kunc. About the uncommon beauty of her evocative images. About themes of landscape, ecology, and nature. Karen and I have known each other for over twenty years. We are friends. Indeed, for me as well, three simple words come to mind in considering her work: woodcut, beauty, and Nebraska. Three keywords each suggesting a cluster of concepts that offer pathways to a fuller understanding of the complex and interrelated issues that have informed and shaped Karen Kunc as an artist and as a person.

These three words function for me as touchstones. "Woodcut" signifies process and the relation of working method to content. "Beauty" points to aesthetics and Postmodernist theory. "Nebraska" symbolizes notions of home, place, heritage, isolation, and particularity.

WOODCUT

Color reduction woodcut is a complex printing technique that involves carving, inking and printing in successive stages off a single piece of wood. As the work evolves, the block is gradually destroyed and therefore cannot be reprinted. The resulting images are not preconceived, but rather take shape in the process of making them.

Karen Kunc brings to the basic reduction woodcut method certain technical innovations and modifications that dramatically extend the range of possibilities for image making, color orchestration, and complexity of composition generally associated with this process. Through her use of stencils, selective inking, and one or two additional reduction blocks, Kunc has tested the parameters and expanded the potential of this otherwise relatively narrow and defined working method.

Kunc begins with a simple rough sketch as a guideline, but otherwise does not preplan the work. Hers is a free and open approach, full of possibility, that allows for and depends upon intuitive responses, invention, improvisation, and exploration along the way. It is a method in which the element of chance plays a major role. Fortune, accident, discovery and surprise go with the territory. It is also, therefore, risky. Once you have begun, there is no going back. It requires conviction, clarity, focus, confidence. Trust in one's instincts. Faith in one's self. In one's skill and one's vision. Kunc thrives on the energy, the vulnerability, the challenge, and the uncertainty of not knowing where she is going until she gets there.

Because there is no going back with color reduction woodcut, technical and creative decision making are closely connected. As the image evolves and becomes more defined, choices grow more limited and a course of action becomes more clear. This method can be seen therefore as a decision making strategy on Kunc's part, a system for reducing options that facilitates clarity and the development of an idea. At the same time it is a creative game of chance that keeps Kunc on the edge and the outcome withheld until the work is complete.

Karen Kunc is an artist who does her own printing, an artist who even likes to print, an artist for whom the press and roller function as a handful of brushes or as a chisel and hammer. Print is her primary medium, an appropriate arena for artistic engagement in and of itself, rather than a secondary activity for generating multiple equivalents of images previously realized in another medium. Even the editioning process is not routine, repetitive or boring for her; not a postscript but rather integral to the creating of the work. This combination of technical skill and creative vision in a single artist gives Kunc—and others like her—the freedom and luxury to produce images that would otherwise be impossible to contemplate. Knowledge of technique becomes a source of empowerment, fostering independence and self-sufficiency. Allowing for ways of working, access to areas of investigation and inquiry, entry into territory as an artist not possible in a collaborative situation where the technical expertise and artistic vision reside with separate individuals. The making of the work is, in itself, rich with conceptual implications. The matrix is destroyed; the art remains. There can be no plan, nor can the block be reprinted. The artist becomes immersed in the activity of making, the doing. Even the time it takes Kunc to create a work can be seen as important and becomes, by implication, part of the piece. Conceptually, process is content and the making of the work an idea, an action, a performance, an event. With an edition of woodcuts as documentation, evidence, residue.

In the work and working method of Karen Kunc process and content are inextricably bound. Her images evolve in part through the process of their making. The idea develops as the woodcut is made. Technical exploration and creative investigation go hand in hand. The ability for Kunc to be in a position as an artist to find the image in the process of making it is fundamentally tied to her knowledge of process, technique and materials. She is completely at home with her medium, confident in her skill and therefore free to explore, to tap her subconscious, to take chances and push limits, to "up the ante" for the sake of possibility, which keeps the work fresh and always changing, yet unmistakably her own.

BEAUTY

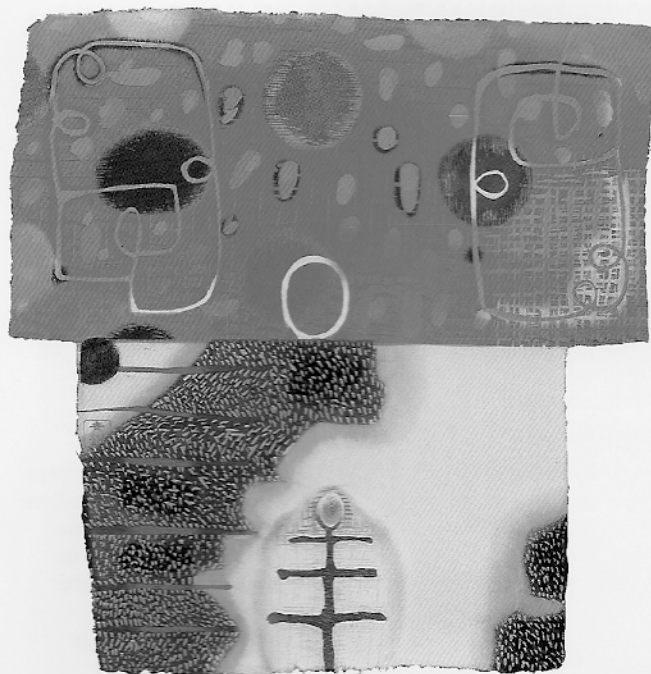
Karen Kunc was fortunate enough to have begun making woodcuts in 1978, thereby riding the crest of an opportune wave of renewed critical interest in the medium that occurred in the United States during the early 1980s. Such fortuitous timing allowed her work to be considered in a receptive and favorably disposed climate, with significant national and international attention coming at a critical time in her early career. In contrast, Kunc has seemed to go decidedly against the tide this past decade, in light of the prevailing dominance of Postmodernist ideas and more cognitive approaches to art making, by her tenacious and solitary pursuit of a unique personal vision manifesting itself in colorful expressionistic hand-printed woodcuts of compelling beauty.

Postmodernism has encouraged us to question, reconsider, reassess, and revise our thinking in order to expand our understanding of what art making is, has always been, and can be. We have been challenged to reexamine our assumptions about what was heretofore regarded as absolute, to rethink concepts like Beauty, Originality, and Truth. We have learned to embrace new models and new media, as cultural diversity and digital technology have opened our minds to new realities and new possibilities. There has been much lively discussion and debate.

Print artists as a group have found themselves and their media refreshingly in sync with and even central to Postmodernist inquiry. Notions of original versus copy, unique versus multiple, ideas about appropriation and authorship, the importance or non-importance of the artist's hand and touch, text-driven content, and referencing culture are all familiar territory. Indeed the pressure has been there for some print artists to find Postmodern connections in their work, no matter how far-fetched. While it may appear at first glance that there are no longer absolutes, that anything goes, it seems clear that the search for truth is alive and well. There is simply a more open, inclusive, expanded sense of what truth is. A healthy pluralistic art making environment now exists for Print, fostering renewed vitality and relevance for artists' work and inviting all to discover and examine the innate theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of their practice.

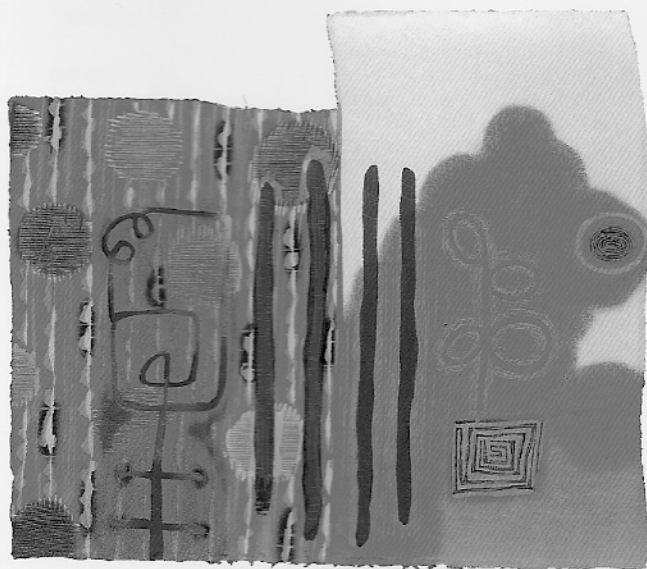
Meanwhile, in the midst of high profile shifting paradigms and critical discourse, Karen Kunc has quietly and persistently continued to make prints in the old manner with focus and resolve. While well aware of contemporary theory and related issues through her ongoing involvement with the print community at large and her role as an educator, Kunc has followed her own inclinations and basically a Modernist model. Notions of authorship and the artist as sole creator, of body knowledge and becoming one with the materials, of uniqueness and the autographic mark, of individuality and personal expression are central to her working method and key to understanding her as an artist.

The art of Karen Kunc speaks with conviction and eloquence. Over the past two decades, Kunc has developed an evolving formal vocabulary of shapes, marks, patterns, and color combinations. A visual language, a personal iconography with which to articulate her vision. The work has become increasingly complex over these years, paralleling her growing command of the medium, with the images more expressive and idiosyncratic, and taking on symbolic and metaphoric overtones and implications. Kunc knows what she is talking about. She draws from a rich reservoir of sensory and emotional experience, observation, feeling, aesthetic bias and preference, memory, and personal history that fuels her imagination and infuses the work with authority and resonance. This conscious and subconscious source material combines with an astute aesthetic sensibility, a kind of visual intelligence, an innate sense of design and composition, a natural instinct for orchestration, juxtaposition, balance, harmony and arrangement. The work makes sense.



'Thread Story'

woodcut on shaped paper, 1999, 38 x 35cm, (14.5x14 inches)



'Dye Bloom'

woodcut on shaped paper, 1999, 39 x 43cm, (14.5x16.5 inches)

The art of Karen Kunc operates on a plane that is essentially non-verbal, both for the artist and the viewer. It is driven by imagination and guided by an intuitive knowing, a subjective rather than cognitive understanding of and response to the world. Its meaning is tied to source information that is primal and sensory, not didactic or literal or literary. The mode of communication is indirect. The work does not declare or explain. Rather it suggests, implies, alludes, evokes, and reveals. It asks us to infer, interpret, intuit, read, and associate. To experience. There is dialogue, soliloquy, poetry, and song here, but of a visual kind. We are in the realm of music, logic, and magic. Of enigma, ambiguity, and paradox.

NEBRASKA

Karen Kunc has always felt connected to the land, the place where she has spent most of her life, the place where her ancestors chose to live. She has always paid attention and been responsive to the natural world, to her physical surroundings. She observes, experiences, assimilates, and stores visual information which is synthesized and converted through her creative process into images of a convincing parallel world. A world both familiar and strange.

This imagery is often associated with themes relating to nature like landscape, natural phenomena, and ecology. Indeed symbolic references to plant forms and the elements of nature abound. One can readily identify leaf, grove, limb, trunk, stream, fall, pool, cloud, bolt, and ray. Metaphoric allusions to life forces, the power of nature, and man's relation to the environment speak covertly to more complicated issues. Spirals signal the power in wind and water, concentric circles imply the growth rings of a tree or the energy of the sun, branch forms could be trees or tributaries. Passages of parallel lines recall the furrows of a tilled farm field. More descriptive references to fences and ladders and bridges suggest efforts to control. Wooden logs, no longer trees and not yet lumber, speak of balance and transformation. Clusters and chains imply fundamental laws of creation, growth, and change.

The message here is not so much about landscape or images of nature as about basic underlying forces and principles that govern the natural world. About creation, process, metamorphosis and evolution. About dynamics and dichotomy: power and limitation, energy and inertia, freedom and restraint, order and chaos, conflict and resolution, continuity and disruption, harmony and discord, control and surrender. About struggle, tension, chance and synchrony. All concepts that have parallels in artistic enterprise, and indeed in our daily and inner lives. About rhythms and cycles and the passage of time. About current and source and confluence.

For Karen Kunc, Nebraska is more than landscape. It is home. She was born in Omaha and lived there until 1975, leaving for almost a decade to attend graduate school and later teach in Ohio. Kunc missed Nebraska, however, and in 1983 returned to accept a teaching position at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, her alma mater, where she is now a tenured professor. Kunc lives in rural Avoca, about equidistant from Omaha and Lincoln, with her husband glass artist Kenny Walton. The house and adjacent studio are located in the middle of farmland. This summer the surrounding fields are planted in wheat; some years it is corn. Kunc commutes through the countryside four days a week to Lincoln to teach and use a small second studio, thirty-three miles one way. Forty-five minutes. Exactly. Before the Avoca studio was built, she made the trip nearly every day.

Though Kunc has spent most of her life based in eastern Nebraska near the level and fertile farmland of the Missouri River valley, family driving trips west to Colorado as a child acquainted her with the expansive terrain of the state: the broad vistas and big sky; grasslands, buttes, lakes and the meandering Platte River; the occasional detail of isolated groupings of farmstead and trees. She has remarked somewhat wryly that the repetitive presence of telephone poles and fences against the spare Nebraska landscape contributed to the early development of her graphic sensibility.

Wilber, Nebraska is located about 40 miles south of Lincoln. It is the site of the largest Czech settlement in the state, home of the Czech Museum and the annual Czech Festival, a town of about 1500 people. When Frank Kunc and his family left the Czech lands to emigrate to America in 1891, they chose Nebraska, coming directly to Wilber at the urging of a sister who was already living there and with the dream of a better life. This dream included the opportunity to own land both for them and for their descendants, including great great granddaughter Karen, a legacy that is not lost on Kunc. She remembers always having an awareness of and pride in her heritage, a sense of her connection to this particular place:

"As kids my four sisters and I took singing lessons together. One year we learned some Czech songs from an old book my grandmother had and we sang in the Wilber Czech Festival in cute authentic costumes Grandma and Mom made. We won first place. We didn't even know it was a competition. I think I was ten years old. In 1996 my sister and I visited Sedlec pre Zbrak, the village where my great grandfather Joseph Kunc had lived and immigrated from. We had addresses for his father and mother's homes in nearby villages and visited these little towns all within five to eight miles of each other overlooked by a hilltop castle which we recognized from family objects my great grandfather had—an inlaid wooden box with the castle on it, a painted ashtray. We kept imagining the family dialogue about the major decision to leave in 1891. And we could still sing the Czech songs."

Karen Kunc is the second oldest of six children, positioned between two loquacious and outgoing sisters. She assumed early on the role of observer. In fact, Kunc has always been a very shy person, a quiet presence overshadowed even now by her more assertive siblings in family contexts. While her father is Czech, her mother is "all German." This has made for a much discussed blend in their offspring of Teutonic traits of organization and discipline with the more romantic and "sensitive" Czech nature.

Nebraska is located in the middle of the United States. Dead center. About as far as you can get from both coasts and acknowledged centers of culture like New York and Los Angeles. "Nowheresville." This geographic positioning has been for Kunc an ongoing source of consternation as well as pride. How to counter her sense of the prevailing perception that there is no art being made in the provinces of Middle America, of Nebraska as a cultural wasteland where corn grows and cattle graze but no artist would live? How to reconcile the need to be based in Nebraska—source of continuity and connection—with an equal need to be a player? How to make one's presence known in the international arena, while at the same time maintaining these Nebraska roots?

Karen Kunc has the ambition and determination to face this challenge head on. From the beginning of her career, she has had remarkable clarity of purpose, as centered and directed a person as I have ever known. She has always actively sought out opportunity rather than waiting for it to come knocking. She has made it her business to stay tuned in to the national and international conversation, and to be part of it. On the other hand, isolation affords its own opportunity. Distance brings freedom from distraction, allowing Kunc to focus and become immersed in her Nebraska surroundings, in her work, and in the routine of her daily life, which appeals to her sense of independence and self-reliance. Every success fuels Kunc's drive to make things work in spite of any obstacles. All part of the continuing dialogue between limits and possibility that seem to be a hallmark of her art and life.

Kunc travels frequently. This summer alone she was in California, Vermont and New York. In recent years there have been trips to Italy, Canada, Bangladesh, Iceland, Finland, Japan and the Czech Republic. These opportunities to know different natural environments and cultures have added to Kunc's growing accumulation of sensory source information. She has cultivated her longtime interest in folk art, especially wooden folk art, as well as other objects and artifacts made of wood. In addition, extended trips to foreign countries have created the means by which Kunc can continue to explore the unknown, to experience the unfamiliar and unpredictable, thereby providing for discovery and surprise that balance her Nebraska experience of intimate and ongoing knowledge of one particular place.

There is merit in finding meaning in one's particularity, the specificity of one's background, roots, daily life, routine, personality and character. Karen Kunc is a master. A master of technique. A master of formal orchestration. She is also a formidable artist. What distinguishes her art from mere virtuosity and decoration is the particularity by which it is informed. The quirks of Kunc's personality, the details of her personal history, the peculiarity of her situation. What makes her tick, what drives her forward, what matters to her in life, what she does every day. Her complexity and her duality and her essence. It is this that gives the art of Karen Kunc its power and its edge.

Catherine Glader
Independent Curator
Iowa City, Iowa

This article has been reprinted with permission of the author and from Grapheion, the European review of contemporary prints, book and paper art, where it first appeared in issue number 3-4, 1998.

POINT TOURNANT: L'ART DE KAREN KUNC

de Catherine Glader.

La technique de réduction utilisée par l'artiste Karen Kunc pour la gravure sur bois en couleur ne cesse de faire parler d'elle. On ne se lasse pas d'évoquer la beauté rare de ses images évocatrices qui touchent au paysage, à l'écologie et à la nature. Karen et moi nous connaissons et sommes amis depuis vingt ans. Naturellement, à moi aussi, trois mots simples viennent à l'esprit lorsque je songe à son travail: la gravure sur bois, la beauté et le Nebraska. Trois mots clés qui nous font comprendre la complexité des thèmes qui ont instruit et formé Karen Kunc en tant qu'artiste et personne.

Ces trois mots sont pour moi une référence. "La gravure sur bois" représente la méthode de travail en relation avec la matière. "La beauté" souligne l'esthétisme et la théorie postmoderne. "Le Nebraska" symbolise les notions de foyer, de lieu, d'héritage, de solitude et de particularité.

LA GRAVURE SUR BOIS

Le procédé de réduction pour la gravure sur bois en couleur représente une technique complexe de gravure qui associe à différents stades la sculpture, l'utilisation de l'encre et la gravure à partir d'un seul et unique morceau de bois. A mesure que le travail avance, le morceau est peu à peu transformé et ainsi perd sa forme originale. Les images qui en résultent alors ne sont pas préconçues, mais acquièrent leur forme à travers le procédé lui-même.

Karen Kunc apporte au procédé de base de réduction de la gravure sur bois certaines innovations et modifications techniques qui agrandissent de façon extraordinaire les possibilités de fabrications d'images, d'orchestration des couleurs et la complexité de composition à laquelle on associe généralement cette méthode. A l'aide de pochoirs, d'encres spéciales et de un ou deux morceaux de bois supplémentaires, Karen Kunc a étendu les paramètres et en a augmenté le potentiel, qui autrement n'est que relativement restreint, et a ainsi clairement défini cette méthode de travail.

Pour sa création, Karen Kunc se base uniquement sur un simple croquis. Son approche s'avère alors libre et ouverte à toutes possibilités ce qui à la fois laisse le champ libre à l'intuition, l'improvisation et l'exploration à mesure que le travail avance. Cette méthode laisse ainsi une grande place au hasard. La chance, les accidents, la découverte et la surprise entrent alors en jeu. Par conséquent, ce travail peut présenter des risques. Une fois le travail commencé, il est impossible de faire marche arrière. Cela nécessite une certaine conviction, une clarté, une grande concentration et aussi de la confiance; de la confiance dans ses instincts, dans son talent, dans sa vision et surtout en soi. Karen Kunc évolue grâce à l'énergie, à la vulnérabilité, au défi et à l'incertitude de ne pas savoir où elle va, jusqu'à ce qu'elle y arrive.

Le procédé de réduction de la gravure sur bois en couleur ne permet pas de revenir en arrière. Ainsi il est essentiel de concilier technique et décision dès le début. Lorsque que l'image évolue, les choix se restreignent et une voie de travail prend ainsi forme. Ce procédé implique totalement l'artiste qui, dès lors, doit se fier à une méthode stratégique. Karen Kunc se base sur un système à options réduites qui facilite la clarté et le développement d'une idée. Il s'agit alors d'un jeu créatif du hasard pour Karen Kunc qui voit le résultat de son travail lorsque l'œuvre est terminée.

Karen Kunc est une artiste qui produit ses propres gravures, une artiste qui aime la gravure et pour qui la presse et le rouleau fonctionnent comme des pinceaux ou encore comme une paire de ciseaux et un marteau. La gravure est son principal support. Elle représente le champ approprié à son engagement artistique (dans l'objet et à partir de cet objet) plutôt qu'une activité secondaire permettant de reproduire plusieurs images similaires réalisées à partir de différents supports. Même l'édition elle-même n'est pas une réalisation routinière, ennuyeuse ou répétitive. Elle fait partie intégrante de la création. L'association de talents techniques et d'une vision créative chez un même artiste donne à Karen Kunc, et à d'autres, la liberté et le luxe de pouvoir produire des images qui seraient sans cela impossibles à contempler. La connaissance des techniques ouvre alors les portes de l'indépendance et de la liberté qui à leur tour permettent à l'artiste de s'engager sur la voie de la recherche et de la satisfaction. Le résultat serait sans doute différent si l'on ne pouvait concilier la