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Nebraska

FOR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA—LINCOLN

SUMMER 2000

M A I N E



**COLOR HER
CREATIVE**

Professor and Alumna Karen Kunc

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Karen Kunc,
World Traveler,
Anchors Her Art in
Nebraska and at NU

By Kelly Bartling

The intriguing array of colors, swatches of designs, lines and doodles confronts visitors at creator Karen Kunc's office. It challenges eyes to explore it further. Kunc's office artwork is inanimate, but to the artist and those who enjoy studying the perplexing nature of her reduction woodcut prints, the piece has a life.

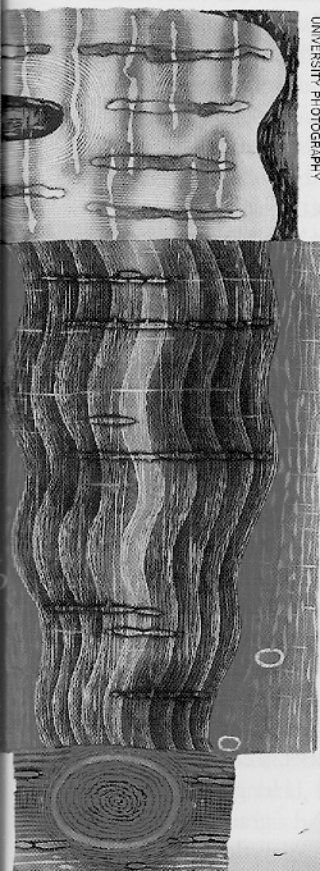
"I look at it. I study it and it still fascinates me," Kunc said of her print, "Presence of Chance," with that signature Kunc style, known by many throughout the world. "I don't get tired of looking at them."

Nor does the University of Nebraska-Lincoln art professor tire of her private and career world of creativity, exploration and connection with art students.

It's a life that proves to be hectic, but the medley of artist, teacher and traveler meets Kunc's needs.

Honored in February as the 2000 Governor's Arts Awards Artist of the Year, Kunc is in the height of her career, and enjoying every minute of it. The award, a surprise, she said, helped "validate" her work — a signal from others to "keep doing what I have been doing."

She looks at her office print, deeper than the casual observer might, and one gets the feeling she is communicating with it. She smiles.



FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Karen Kunc's art ranges from chaotic to eloquent — each piece an eclectic expression of her thoughts.

Stacks of Sketches

For Kunc, the act of creating art begins with the random thoughts, "doodles" on slips of paper.

"My sketchbooks are pieces of paper that I keep circulating and mixing up and keep refiling in a very loose file ... not a literal file. They're just piles, and there are so many ideas in there," she explained. "I have thought 'I would love to make this image or that image' and just never get to them. I go on to other things."

Inspirations come from observations of nature, a fleeting thought, a movement.

"And then I think the whole real inspirational part happens while you're in the making of

the piece because then, all kinds of new things occur. That's when I really discover that it's about so much more. And I have time to spend looking and thinking and working on it and getting excited.

"It takes on its own life."

Kunc's medium is reduction woodcut print, a process that works in negative and in stages. Using a variety of tools to extract layers of wood, she creates patterns, strokes and lines, printing color by color. Time-consuming and challenging because of its extractive nature, Kunc describes the process as ranging between chaotic and eloquent; mental vs. physical.

Kunc's prints are bold, dramatic, calculatedly puzzling.

"My work is actually very recognizable. People know my work and they know what it looks like," she said. "I can't make it look like anything else. It's actually a wonderful attribute to have something that's very unique-looking, very striking in color and arrangement, and in medium."

Each piece, though, is a unique expression of an idea, with the artist always trying something new.

"Sometimes ideas have been in my head for years and I don't even visually know how it's going to be," she said. "It's a

mixture of your mind, and maybe deals with an ideal, but the practicality of the physical world and the limits of what my hand and materials can do makes something else. I've settled for that, and I've also learned that's something I don't know anything about. It's the real physical manifestation of that struggle."

Many ideas do not go further than the scraps of paper with doodles. Others evolve, seemingly without struggle, into bold images of beauty.

A Niche in Nebraska

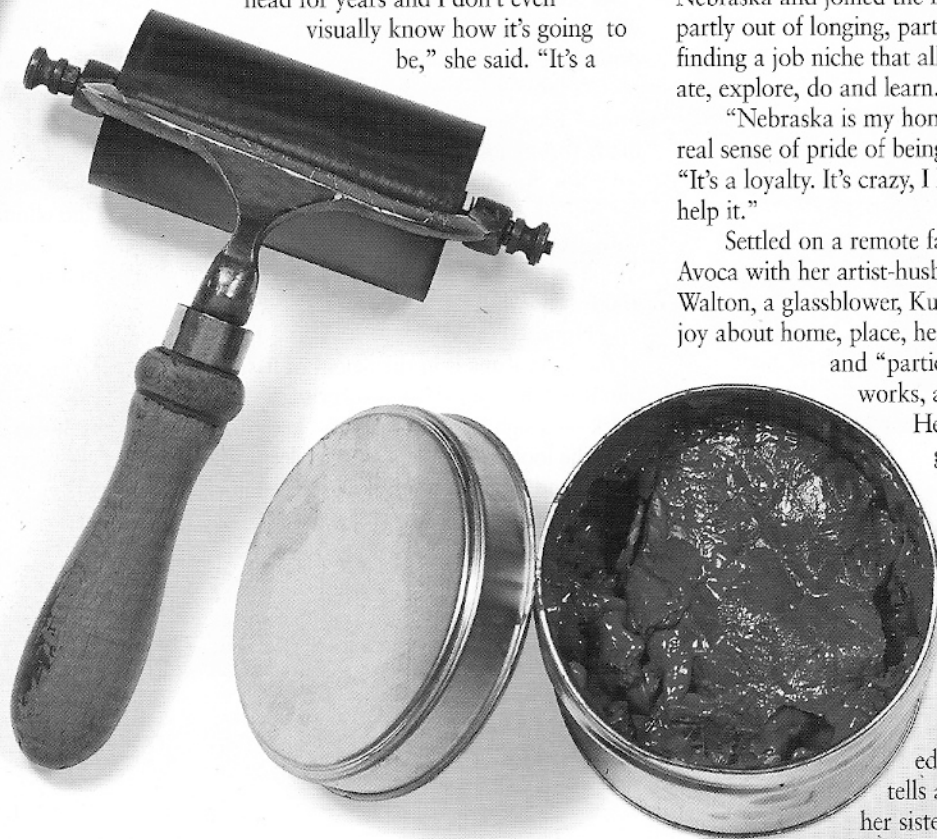
Kunc is a Nebraska native, and proud. Born in Omaha, she said she always knew she wanted to be an artist.

"I knew before I was in kindergarten I would be an artist," she said in her makeshift printing studio atop the northwest corner of Nelle Cochrane Woods Art Building, surrounded by metal plates, etchings, paper, colors and her characteristic prints. A degree from the University of Nebraska in 1975 led to a Master of Fine Arts degree from Ohio State University. It was there she developed her unique style of woodcut printmaking. She came back to Nebraska and joined the faculty in 1983, partly out of longing, partly of necessity in finding a job niche that allowed her to create, explore, do and learn.

"Nebraska is my home and I have a real sense of pride of being here," she said. "It's a loyalty. It's crazy, I know. I can't help it."

Settled on a remote farmstead near Avoca with her artist-husband Kenny Walton, a glassblower, Kunc expresses her joy about home, place, heritage, isolation and "particularity" in her works, a critic said.

Her great-great-grandfather settled at Wilber, and she remembers her awareness and pride in her heritage, a sense of her connection to past, deeply rooted in Nebraska. She tells a story of how her sisters and she won



first place in a Czech Festival singing contest, and how she was moved in visiting Sedlec in Czechoslovakia, from where her ancestor Joseph Kunc had emigrated.

Art writer Catherine Clader observed Kunc's Nebraska locale as being central to her success:

"There is merit in finding meaning in one's particularity, the specificity of one's background, roots, daily life, routine, personality and character ... (but) 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 ... Karen Kunc has the ambition and determination to face this challenge head on. Every success fuels Kunc's drive to make things work in spite of any obstacles."

Kunc, widely traveled, exhibited and often referred to as a master in her field, sees the good and bad that come with her choice to keep Nebraska as her home.

"I feel like I've always been able to have the best of both," she said. "I get to have the kind of life I want to have here, and then I get to go to all those places, but I don't have to live there. I can always come home."

While much of the art world remains closed to ideas of new emerging art centers, the arena is broadening, she said.

"I guess that's the thing I keep finding out, that there are artists everywhere, and equally interesting people in every corner of the world."

International Exposure

Kunc's work has earned her the ability to travel, study and exhibit in numerous corners of the world: the Czech Republic, Italy, Iceland, Finland, Poland, Japan and Bangladesh. She has had visiting professorships at the University of California, Berkeley; was a research fellow and lecturer at the Kyoto Seika University; was guest professor at Icelandic College of Art and Crafts in Reykjavik; participated three times in the Nebraska Study Abroad program at the Santa Reperata Graphic Art Centre in Florence, Italy; and won the Fulbright Scholar Award for research travel to Finland.

The presenter of more than 60 one-artist shows throughout the world, she has

had exhibitions throughout the United States: New York, San Francisco, Honolulu, Washington, San Antonio, Omaha, San Francisco, among others; and museums and galleries abroad: Munich, Moscow, Prague, Reykjavik and Lyubljana, Sarajevo, Vilnius, Quebec, Toyko, Taipei.

Travel, she says, offers experiences to stimulate creativity and inspiration.

"Certainly, I do go for many levels of reasons and one is the artistic connection, and that's been wonderful," Kunc said. "They all say 'You're so America!' It's probably because I'm friendly. I talk and I laugh. There's that whole connection with people that's very important."

"And then the travel. That's my time to just let my eye absorb and see how the rest of the world lives."

The Challenge to Teach

Kunc learned long ago that the secret to her happiness is to remain challenged. She teaches because it is difficult, she said, but she has grown to love it.

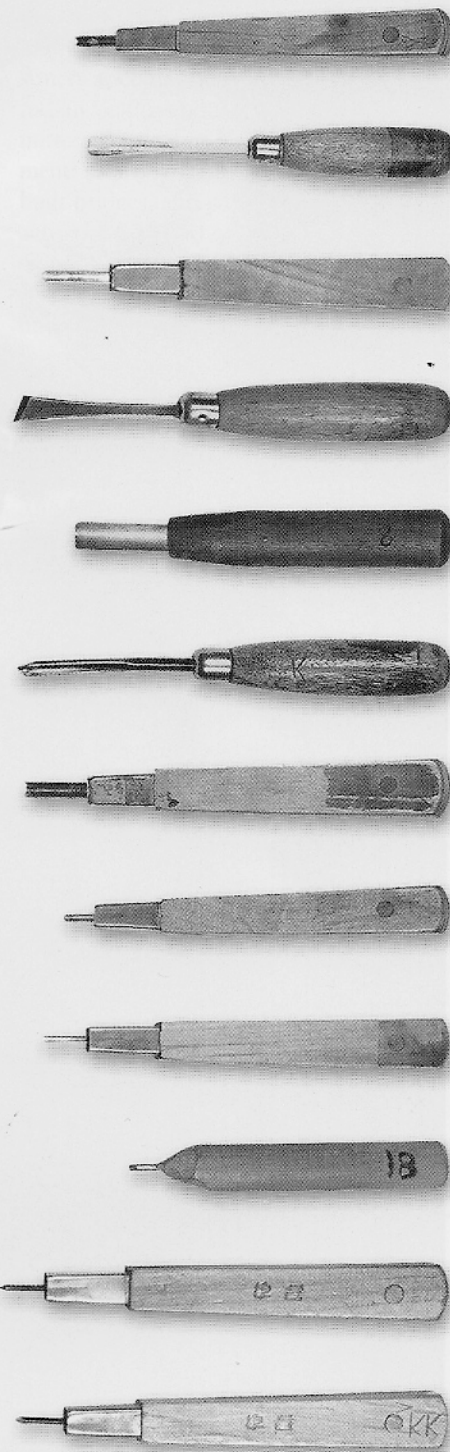
"Teaching has always been important and my career has paralleled my teaching. I don't think I could have been the artist I am (without teaching)," she said. "It's taught me how to talk. It's made me come out of my shell."

"For me, that has been important because I've always tried to do the things that are hard and scary. The idea of personal challenges to yourself by the things that are not second nature for you, that are hard for you, that you don't really want to do ... If I really don't want to do it, that means I have to do it and that has made me do all kinds of amazing things like talking in public and traveling ... challenging my work."

Looking back at her career, she sees mileposts. They are in the works completed that were different, reaching.

"My art gets better all the time," she said. "It always has a profile like peaks and valleys, and there are pieces that I know were very important that I will always go back to as highlights. But I can't make that work again."

"I've traveled too many miles. I've lived way too much." ■



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Kunc wields an assortment of engraving instruments to extract layers of wood for her distinctive reduction woodcut prints.