

karen kunc

Woodworking: Process as Content

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Western culture typically emphasizes dualities: between mind and body, between means to the end and the end itself, between process and result. But occasionally we are reminded that these distinctions can be equivocal: the physical and conceptual share a common origin and sometimes even occupy common ground. This shared ground illuminates the woodcuts of Karen Kunc, printmaker and a professor at the University of Nebraska. She understands her medium so thoroughly that her conceptual decisions emanate from inside the process. The dazzling colors and shapes she creates serve as a prelude to deeper layers in both image and concept. Her artwork articulates the intersection where means becomes end, process becomes idea, and concept has a material form.

"I'm taking nature into another realm because I want interpretation"

Since the 1980s Kunc has lived on an acreage in rural Nebraska. Each woodcut begins in her observations of her natural surroundings, and her awareness of growth and change, and aging and beginnings. Yet she never sketches in situ: her artworks are completely studio constructions. Kunc is not interested in replicating natural forms but in the action and effects of natural processes: the marks left by the force of wind and rain and water. Her art making, involving force and resistance, presence and response, becomes an analogy to these processes. Through woodcuts Kunc transcribes the effects of time and generation into art. She often begins a work without a definitive idea, drawing thumbnail sketches, more like doodles, in black ink on 5x8" cards. And through the movement of the pen on paper, through the traces of the ink, forms emerge which engage her. In fact, Kunc sometimes imagines stopping at that point because the sketches look beautiful, but she claims that "they look ordinary." "I keep going to the woodcut because there IS more translation, it is not like anyone's drawn mark." Kunc is drawn to

emblematic shapes: a spiral, a circle, a triangle, a leaf, saying: "I try to make an iconic form - a stand in for all waterfalls, for all clouds." But she departs from the familiar depiction of isolated and rather somber icons: instead she animates her work with vivid colors - more than fifty applications of color in some of the works. Her color selections also reflect her independence from copying nature: the unexpected choices often don't correspond to the natural object at all but instead accentuate relations within the work. Through color the iconic forms radiate a concentrated energy, extending outward, creating sinuous paths encountering other forms. she layers the images so they enfold each other, form patterns, lead into movement. Her profusion of marks and lines and shapes variously recall molecular structures, or leaf patterns, or segue into Japanese waterfalls. The entire field takes on the clear color and buoyant rhythm of 1950s modernism design. It's as if she takes these iconic forms on a trip - they visit the world of nature, the world of science, the world of modernism.

"As a print maker I believe there is nothing like the real thing- the physicality of the work. It is a marriage between process and idea -the print the paper and myself all go through it"

Kunc prefers the medium of woodcut in part because of its physicality. The physical components to the process lead to involvement with more abstract ideas. We can most clearly see the links between the material and the conceptual explorations in Kunc's work by examining her printmaking process. For each image she uses just two wooden matrixes - one a positive block, and the other a negative block. Each print goes through the press about ten times - five presses of each block, continually changing each. She prints from one and then the other, recuts and changes each block and then prints again. The blocks become altered even partially destroyed in making the work. For example, look at the sequence of

printing for one small section of 'Original Fission' (2000):
The yellow first just pounced out around the edge.
Next a transparent red
Cut strips horizontally from one block and vertically from another
Three reds
Then a green on top of a red
Then a loopy woven knot
Each step in her process guides the next step and indicates characteristics of the next layer in the image. Each pressing of the wood blocks floats new shapes over the previous forms. She cuts the new images into the block as a response to the previous images, the final composition developing from her sense of the inner structure of the work. Each mark appears inevitable. And with each layer, changes to the elements contribute meaning to the final piece. The history of the process retains its physical presence in her finished work. "For me that's why the printing is not just a reproduction - I have to print to find out what happens at the next stage - I can't cover anything over, every history, every step remains on the page."

"It is a process that actually means something in the content"

Images in her woodcuts vacillate between appearing as concrete objects and intangibles. For instance, in 'Primeval Message', 2001, the mark left by the wood grain permeates the background, becoming a spiral design, which in turn transforms into a branch terminating in a single leaf. Kunc describes her process as "playing with pushing space around". These relatively small works feel as if they are much larger, holding such large themes.

When asked to comment on the unity between process and idea in her work Kunc smilingly stated "Woodcuts - they're my only medium."