

My science project

Artist Karen Kunc finds visual equivalents for the invisible forces of nature

By AGNIESZKA MATEJKO

The science lab was one of those places I dreaded in high school. Memorizing the periodic table and dissecting frog's intestines all seemed terribly important, but excruciatingly tedious. My negative attitude to science is not something I'm proud of, but it's not uncommon among artists either. Thankfully there are some exceptions to this rule, and internationally celebrated American printmaker Karen Kunc is one of them. Her show *Terrestrial Forces* looks like it was inspired by intricate charts from a Grade 10 chemistry text—only hers is no ordinary textbook. These gleaming, jewel-like woodblock prints convey all the magic and mystery of science that my classes left out. To see this art is to see science transformed into poetry right before your eyes.

There's a good reason why Kunc's art brings the thrill of adventure back into science. She didn't learn about science in a drab school laboratory; instead, her lab was the vast expanse of the desert, the cliffs, valleys and fields where she spent a large part of her childhood. "My parents were rock hobbyists when I was in seventh or eighth grade," she explains. "They took their hobby of rock hunting to the extreme."

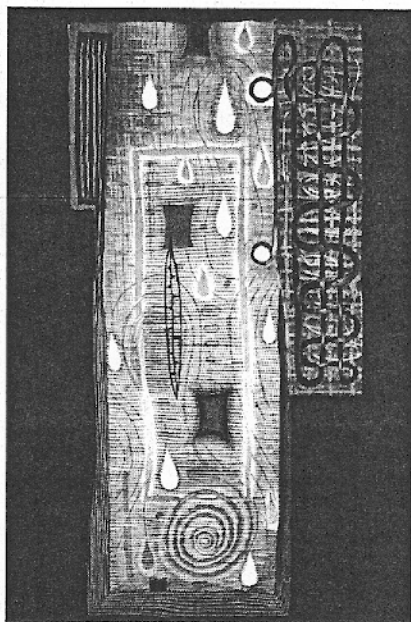
The difficulties of traveling with children did not hamper her family; they packed up all six kids and trekked off into the deserts of Wyoming looking for petrified fish, petrified wood, agates and other natural treasures. "We had the sense of being on a holy quest to find these important things," Kunc says. "You get caught up into the process of the searching. There is a chance that you might find something important, something beautiful and rare." When the big moment arrived and finally her parents discovered some grey-looking rock, they would hold it out to the children like a great treasure, explaining the ancient processes that went into creating this mysterious "artwork." "That's the moment when you can just marvel," Kunc says. "It triggered an understanding of lost treasure, things that are invisible that you have to search for."

THE SENSE OF BEING on a quest for unseen forces never left Kunc. She still searches for the hidden treasures of nature, all the things that we

know are there but can't see: the effects of winds, air currents, nuclear fission. "They are real phenomena that change things," she says. "We are a part of those forces. They end up creating us and shaping us. We don't know all the influences that make us who we are." But she can't search for nuclear fission inside cliffs. So instead of trekking down dusty roads, Kunc explores the mysterious forces of nature in her art. "For a long time I have tried to make invisible things visible in my own work," she explains. "In my studio I am imagining, I am making abstract things, making a visual thing of sound, wind, something that pushes, something that explodes."

For instance, in "Cast Into Amber" the imbedded moments in time are expressed by a myriad of delicate white lines cast against a brilliant amber background. These lines could be sound waves, strata of sedimentary rock, deposits of snow in the Arctic, or even the layers of our own memories. The drops that fall across the print are like rain, or

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teardrops. The mysterious line that weaves along the side of the image can be read as a strand of DNA or something closer to human experience. "The entwined woven structure is like a metaphor for storytelling, binding, tying, threading things together," Kunc explains. "It's like the movement between happiness and sadness."

Kunc is no longer digging for hidden treasures with shovels and picks, but she still gets that "rockhound" feeling as she works on her prints. "There is always that sense of discovery throughout the piece," she says. "I feel quite small in relation to the issues I am dealing with. I feel like a conduit for the bigger concepts of time and conflict." ❊

TERRESTRIAL FORCES

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