



Far left: Karen works in her Avoca studio. She has been using the packet of tools (foreground) over the past three decades. Left: Standing in her studio, with one of her distinctive print works hanging behind her. Above: Land and sky is the vista looking west from the Kunc-Walton acreage.

the real deal

STORY BY ANNE PAGEL

PHOTOS BY DAVID DALE AND PAMELA S. THOMPSON

In March, Karen Kunc, UNL's Willa Cather Professor of Art, will be presented the prestigious Printmaker Emeritus Award by the largest printmaking organization in the country. The annual award goes to artists who have made a significant difference to the field

In art circles, Karen Kunc is *the real deal*.

"I think people here have no idea of her importance," says Vicki Northrup, president of Haydon Art Center.

Ed Forde does. As chairman of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Art and Art History, he is acutely aware of her worth.

"Karen was the first faculty member here to truly build recognition of the art program at UNL through her own professional success."

Kunc has built that recognition through her extraordinary woodcut prints, through workshops and residencies, through her position as UNL's Willa Cather Professor of Art, and through active leadership in

local, state, national and international activities in building opportunities for her students and other artists.

These efforts have included a summer residency program for students in Florence, Italy; spearheading formation of the Nebraska Women's Caucus for Art, and founding the Under Pressure Print Club, a town-and-gown group involved in understanding and advancing printmaking.

She has been a leading founder of the Haydon Art Center, a nonprofit center organized to offer cultural enrichment, new ideas, innovative educational and visual arts programming, and quality exhibitions.

"I believe a professional artist should go back to

the community that has given support," says Kunc. "It's still going to take time at the Haydon (to build the program), but we hear 'thank you,' 'this is exciting.' We've just received a grant to hire an educational coordinator and the Nebraska Arts Council is funding an exhibition this fall titled *Commentary: Art, Life, the Black Experience*."

"Karen's involvement in the Haydon has been invaluable," says Northrup. "She believes that artists and the community should interact. She has organized the artist's committee and is able to facilitate any need involving exhibition, artists and art experts. She gives 150 percent and she does it tirelessly."

Much of Kunc's community service effort is direct-

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ed toward trying to enhance her students' learning experiences. Numerous students have come to UNL's graduate program for the opportunity to work with her.

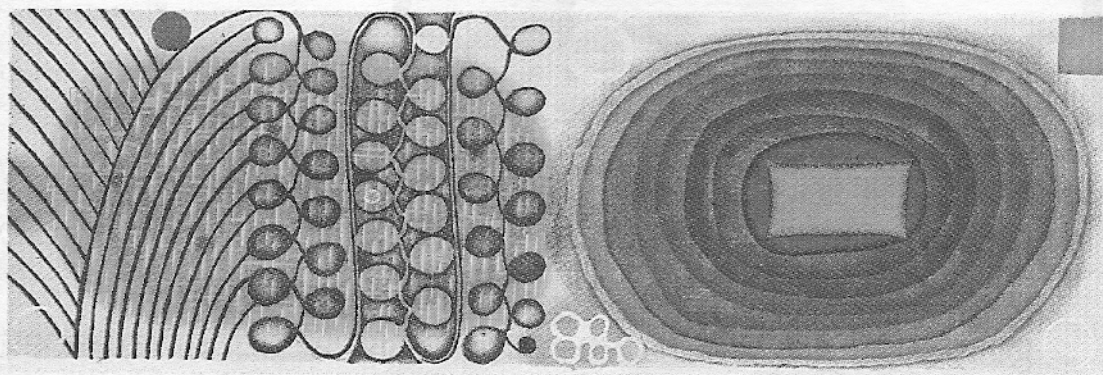
"I call it the spring recruiting wars," Kunc says. "It is a constant effort, because my peers in other institutions are doing the same thing."

She says that students' applications show that UNL's program is among the top picks nationally for printmakers.

"We have students from all over," she says. "There is one from Japan. But we have also gotten students here in Nebraska—Denise Brady, Deb Odin, Jaime Hackbart, and others— who meet that high standard."

In 2004, Kunc was conference director for the Mid-America Print Alliance, a massive effort that brought hundreds of printmakers to Lincoln for an impressive array of workshops, talks and exhibitions at venues across the city.

Kunc is visiting Poland, Germany and France this fall, where her woodcut prints are being shown in invitational solo exhibitions at the International Print Triennial in Krakow,



Top right: A rare moment: All three dogs look at the camera. Above: "Watery Realm"

Poland and the 7th Triennale Mondiale D'Estampes Petit Format in Chamalieres, France.

This is the first year for solo exhibitions at either competitive exposition, although in the past, some of her woodcuts have been shown. In fact, her feature exhibition at Chamalieres is an award for winning 2nd place at the last Triennale.

"It's great to be invited," Kunc says. "I'm going to France early so I'll have a one-week residency in the print studio. I want to have fun working with the

artists who're involved."

She will return home not just to her UNL classes, but to a series of other impending exhibitions.

There will be one at the Atrium Gallery in St. Louis, and in March, 2007, concurrent shows at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha and at Leedy Volkos in Kansas City. The latter is in conjunction with the Southern Graphics Council's conference, where Kunc will be presented the prestigious Printmaker Emeritus Award.

The council is the largest printmaking organization in the country and its annual Printmaker Emeritus Award goes to artists who have made a significant difference to the field.

April Katz, the Southern Graphic Council's past president says: "The beauty of Karen's relief prints and artist's books, her innovative approaches to the medium, and her international engagement all have had a tremendous impact on the print world."

The award is usually received in late career and has included such outstanding artists as Elizabeth Catlett, Kenneth Tyler, Garo Antreasian, Nancy Spero, Warrington Colescott, Leonard Baskin, Rudy Pozzatti and Maricio Lasansky.

"It's pretty amazing to have it come to somebody who is not so well known," says the 53-year-old artist. "People named recently have had big profiles on the international scene. It's humbling and really great to have it go to somebody who is unabashedly a print-maker."

Kunc is passionate about the medium. She is sometimes frustrated that prestigious presses, museums and galleries endorse well-known painters or other artists who periodically create prints, at the expense of committed printmakers who make prints on an ongoing basis and who have advanced the field.

And for her entire career, Kunc says, she has dealt with the public's confusion about the differences between reproductions and the various print media, such as intaglio, relief prints and lithography. The proliferation of computer-generated art has confused the issue of what is and isn't a print even further.

"I'm an educator," Kunc says, "so I'm willing to help people understand. Actually, the idea of what is a print has expanded over the last 20 years. There has been a big recognition that you don't always have to comply with rules. For instance, you no longer have to cancel plates. It's been freeing. I like having my students reuse their plates in different ways."

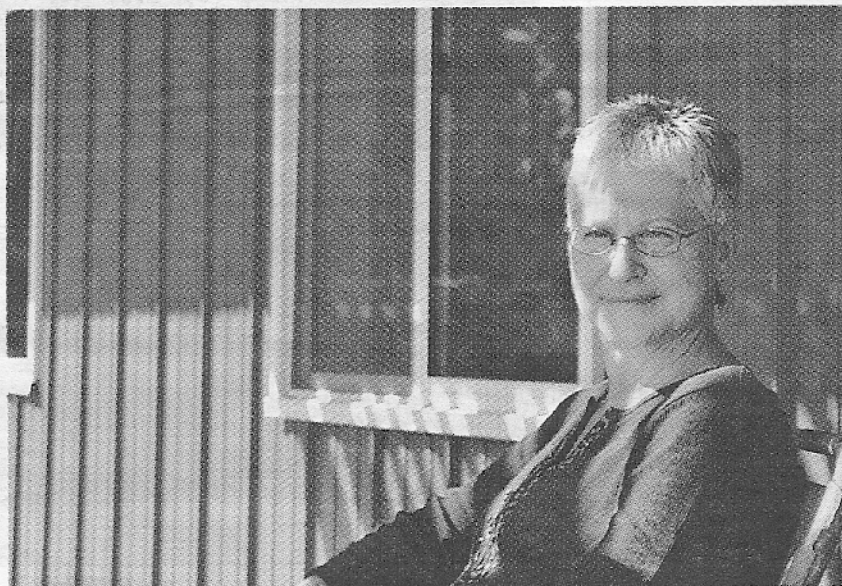
Although she has no interest in digital printmaking, Kunc says computers have opened numerous directions for artists. Furthermore, they offer less toxic, labor-saving techniques for some tasks.

"It's not my thing," she says. "(Digital prints) can look like doctored photos. But many artists are getting into it. Printmakers have always been on the cutting edge of technology. Think about it. Presses were the information revolution of 50 years ago."

Kunc sometimes incorporates etching into her prints and artist's books, but her primary medium is reductive woodcut. To create a print, Kunc carves images into one or more slabs of wood. She applies a color to certain parts of the woodblock and transfers these colors to sheets of paper, with the aid of a printing press. She continues to apply various colors, each time, transferring the colors to the sheets of paper. As her extraordinary sense of color tells her that each area has reached its ultimate point, she carves that part of the plate away, so that, by the end of the process, the plate is destroyed. She further hand-blends color on the finished prints.

Kunc's abstract compositions fuse ideas of natural and manmade phenomena. They're both simple and mystifying. They are unmistakably identifiable and unique. Even her titles have a contemplative allure: Obsidian Tears, Spun Straw, Forming Planets, Drift Melt, Molecular Web.

"Karen's style is a synthesis of several different influences," says fellow printmaker Turner McGhee, chairman of the Hastings College Art Department. "She's come up with a completely new interpretation and integration of Japanese woodcut into western art. I would guess Ukiyo-e prints were the most inspiring images to Karen when she was setting her path as an artist. It shows in her approach to coloration—to printing and to blending color. She absorbed those things,



Karen sits outside her studio enjoying the afternoon shade.

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yet what she came out with was thoroughly modern and distinctive."

Kunc says she would like to have more time to make art, but finds the idea of not being connected to the university scary.

"I'm tied to the university," she says. It's supported me. And I'm an educator. I can explain things."

When that time does come, it will be a loss to the university, to the department and to art students. Forde sees Kunc as "an institution" and among the most beloved printmakers in the country. She has had an immense influence on her printmaking students and maintains ties with them long after graduation from the MFA program.

Denise Brady— a printmaker, book artist and, now, director of the Kimmel, Harding, Nelson Center for the Arts in Nebraska City— is one such protégé.

"Karen's focus and ability to do her own work while managing so many other things have shown me how much it is possible to do," Brady says. "She manages a daunting calendar of exhibitions, teaching and community activities, and still maintains production of her own art."

Still, Kunc loves the idea of traveling to places long enough to feel like she's lived there. She has found it

takes about two months to feel at home and part of the culture.

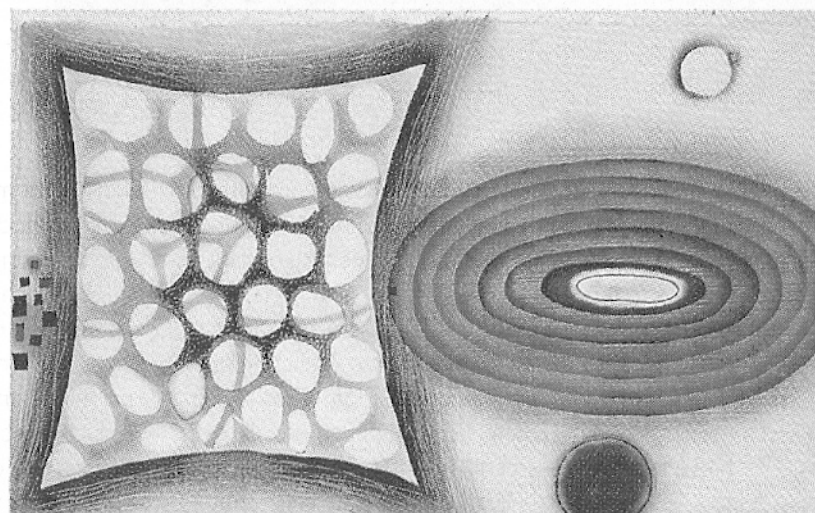
"I like to come back home and see how the Nebraska is referenced in my residency work," she says. "It always happens. I find images from here on our place."

She is also drawn to the prospect of uninterrupted time in the studio she and her husband, Kenny Walton, built on their acreage in Avoca.

It is easy to see parallels between her prints and her husband's glass art. Color is a key component of both artists' work. Both involve abstraction that references the natural world.

"If I go way back, we've always thought in the same ways," says Kunc. "There's a similarity in our taste. In museums, we're attracted to the same things. Kenny is much more intuitive. He isn't as academically motivated as I am. That can be very freeing. There is endless invention that can come out of that. Constant innovation is at the top of our aesthetic challenges."

Kunc says she and Walton never discuss one another's work and says that has been a factor in



"Luminous Wonders"

their long, strong relationship.

"No critiquing," she says emphatically. "My ego's too fragile for that."

There are still numerous avenues that Kunc would like to pursue. In recent years, she has worked to simplify her compositions.

"I want to get to the essence," she says. "I've done work that lets me know I can get there. I know where I want to go—what I want to do — it's just doing it. There are big resources I haven't tapped yet. I know they are there, waiting." **L**