

## PAPER'S WEIGHT

Paper carries a heavy load in the works of Karen Kunc and Endi Poskovic. They ask it to stand up to the rigors of printing; each sheet must get thoroughly stuck down to the oily, inked surface of a series of wooden blocks, and pulled off again, only to go through the same process again, and again and again: six, 12, 18 times, depending on the image. It must be laid down just so and pulled away untorn every time, or the print will be ruined. Then, after a week or two of printing, each sheet must carry its image before the world and bear the weight of the public's regard. How can a mere sheet of paper hold up to the strain?

It is excellent paper; both artists prefer long-fibered Japanese papers that hold up well to the pressures of printing. Both are fine printers, masters of the task of handling delicate paper. Each regularly conducts workshops and residencies in the craft of printing with wooden blocks around the world. They continually teach and learn about printmaking; partisans, if not zealots for this oldest print medium.

Paper was first subjected to the pressures of printing in China. Chinese printers were well able to produce an illustrated manuscript, dated to what would be 868 in our calendar and was published for free distribution by Wang Jie. This 1100-year-old example not only bears witness to paper's longevity, but also to its ability to carry a heavy conceptual weight as well; it is printed with an image of the Buddha and an array of disciples as an illustration to its text, The Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra records a dialog between the Buddha and his disciples that turns on the nature of perception and of the necessity of transcending attachments to the merely material. During the course of this discussion the text turns to its own importance pointing out several times that to relay even four lines of the sutra is an act of very great merit, indeed, and that to learn and recite the entire sutra is an act of even greater merit.

Conversely, The Diamond Sutra can seem critical of seeking merit, makes the perplexing observation that "merit partakes of the character of no-merit," implying that to claim merit is to cling to those notions of ego that run counter to true merit.

The text is among the most famous sutras of Buddhism, and its insistence that true compassion is free of any sense of ego or personal gain is a timeless inspiration. Still, the sutra's paradoxical language recalls the complexities often associated with Zen Buddhism, in which students sometimes meditate upon complex questions called koans, seemingly insoluble riddles. A famous koan asks, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The fact that The Diamond Sutra's message of enlightenment should be printed and thus spread, is surely meritorious. However, tagging the sutra with Wang Jie's name and the date smacks of just that sort of ego the sutra rails against. The internal complications in The Diamond Sutra along with the interesting implications that arise from Wang Jie's publication of it are the same sorts of currents that run through the works of both Karen Kunc and Endi Poskovic. Perhaps it is the nature of paper, carrying a layer of ink designed to be perceived only with sight, our most sensitive and refined sense, that has made it so successful a conveyor of paradox for 1100 years. Whatever the reason, these woodblock artists experiment with the difficult relationship meaning and perception implicit in printmaking's oldest example. Their works allow us to come to our own conclusions about the meaning of their art by asking "What do you think?" letting us collaborate in the process begun by the artist, conveyed by the artwork, but completed by the thoughtful viewer.

Like all of us, artists face the problem of perspective. What looms large in their personal experience may, or may not, be of significance to others. The

bare facts of an artist's existence do not automatically come together into imagery that moves other people. But it is personal experience that gives rise to these artists' works. We may know that Poskovic has lived a peripatetic existence, first as a teenage musician in Europe and then as an artist in the United States, and we may suppose that this gave rise to his repeated image of a small house variously supplied with wings, a hull, or wheels, looking out onto the succession of amazing landscapes through which it passes. His stylized bombs and bullets may be his meditations on the instruments of destruction that shredded his first home, Sarajevo. If art were therapy, this would be enough. Likewise, we may see Kunc's predilection for images divided into portions as representing forces balanced against each other, achieving harmony through oppositions of compositional forms and contrasts between intense colors, all reflecting her personal search for a great balance. We may interpret her forms as allusions to landscape and flora and link these to her choice to use wooden blocks to create her images and to her preference for country living. Still, whatever inner satisfaction the artists derive from their work, the imagery must also communicate to those looking at it; the purely personal must be transcended.

One of the ways that artists transform the personal is through craft. The exercise of a set of skills releases the purely personal into the public domain by creating a material analogue of thought. Artists' works are literally the fruit of their experiences, so the physical means by which the work is created is instrumental to understanding the works.

Kunc's prints are the end result of a process that balances plan against improvisation. She sets the broad outlines of her composition into place, worked up from the innumerable small sketches that explore in miniature the possibilities that are her current concern. As she cuts the blocks for the print, she opens herself to the exigencies of her craft; the response of her chisels, knives and gouges to the grain of the blocks, the interactions of layered inks and the thousand details of carrying out the craft of printmaking all impinge upon the necessities of the composition. The complex chain of exchanges allow her to grapple continually with the fundamental elements of the final image, extending the creative process into the practice of craft. The final work is the culmination of a process that starts from an internal source

but is informed by the material through which it is expressed. The organic development of the work sometimes means that some impressions turn out to be dead ends, evolutionary sacrifices toward a final, consistent edition of nearly identical prints.

For Poskovic, the creation, transformation and recreation of his images takes a somewhat different course. He, too, is an avid draftsman, making drawings that are sorted through, chosen among, revised, combined and finally allowed to rest. After a year or so, he feels he has sufficient distance to judge whether the drawing will finally become a print. If so, the elements of his composition are redrawn, tweaked and refined with a variety of tools (sometimes including Photoshop), and then returned to paper at scale so that they can be arrayed into the final composition and transferred to the block for cutting, which results in further adjustment of the image. Even when all of the blocks have been cut, the opportunities of further experimentation remain; he varies the colors he uses, printing them in different shades to gauge the final effect. The edition is the end result of this process of combination and refinement.

Despite their differences, each artist's method of work allows a constant engagement in the work as it progresses. This dialogue between artist and work extends beyond the work at hand, and both artists explicitly acknowledge that they work in sets, working through related ideas in separate prints. To call these related works "series" is probably too strong a word; each print is intended to function as an independent statement. However, looking at several works from the same period reveals a consistency of exploration: images recur, forms are echoed, even the size and shape of the paper can become part of the work's expressive vocabulary, establishing a work's relation to its group. When the artists manipulate motifs in this way, the viewer is challenged to make connections between works, creating theories about implication and metaphor within the works and participating with the artist in that imaginative act of understanding, which is the grand finale of the act of making art.

Poskovic and Kunc both use language as a means of further drawing the viewer into the imaginative completion of their woodcuts. Poskovic has noted, "I want you to understand the word, I want you to understand the image, and

I want you to make a connection between the two," with the disclaimer that "the connection can be anything at all."<sup>1</sup> He implies the sort of interaction with his prints that Kunc desires as well.

Kunc's titles often alert the viewer to the organic origins of her imagery. She gives titles to her works in the same way that a mapmaker might apply a compass rose: to orient the viewer. The words of the title provide a signpost for the exploration of her abstract images, sometimes suggesting an interpretation for the abstraction, and often reinforcing a visual element shared by several prints. Thus, the wooden tower of the print by that name becomes related to the stepped rectangular forms of other prints, a motif often played off against the curvilinear forms such as the circular center of Inner Sanctum. The viewer is encouraged to glean clues like a code breaker, accumulating hints from print to print that lead to an understanding of the works, which may not finally be linguistic, but in a hybrid dialect composed of both the verbal and the visual.

Poskovic intentionally creates a tension between title and work by placing a text into the work that is different from the ostensible title (that text that appears in the work's wall label). The text within the prints is often not English and sometimes made-up, though usually evoking words in Romance languages. Having a highly-visible text in the print that is different from its title casts doubt upon the function of the title; in most cases we accept the title as the accepted interpretation of the work. However, since Poskovic's prints title's don't match the text within the image, and neither one is given primacy, we are obliged to consider both with new eyes. The viewer must do a bit of processing to understand the relation of the text to the title and image. With the title no longer the final arbiter of meaning in the print, we are encouraged to examine other aspects of the print more closely as well. Poskovic's apparently realistic objects and the landscapes they inhabit are open to multiple interpretation, and the viewer is encouraged to interpret the work in new ways, rather than settling for the easy explanation a title might provide.

Bringing these three aspects of the work, its image, text and title, into a whole engages the viewer in the final creative process and interpretation. For example, Western Tale bears the image of a cloud arising from the ground,

which might suggest an illustration for some portion of the literature of the American West. As a result, the viewer starts on the path to imagining a narrative around the image. However, the text below the image puts a different spin on the image by implying an outside point of view, both by being in French and referring to "souvenirs of America" a class of objects more likely accumulated by tourists from abroad than those from the Americas. If the viewer of the print is still inclined to put the image into a narrative, the story would have to be imagined as being from a slightly different, perhaps continental, point of view. An understanding of what the work finally means may be elusive, but the activity of attempting to bring its elements into some sort of understandable constellation of meaning requires the viewer to look closely and consider carefully.

Both Kunc and Poskovic weight the fine paper of their prints with complexities that work to engage the minds of their viewers. Like the complexities of our oldest dated print, they encourage us to push our own thinking toward new horizons. Their works deepen and broaden as they are contemplated. The artists' creative processes and skillful craft coax mere paper to inspire complex notions and lofty ideas using color and form into balance with words and ideas. When perfectly attuned, these elements first grab our attention, then reward it by nudging it into the imaginative process of completing the work of art. Like the acolyte musing upon a koan, we are faced with complex questions not for the purpose of coming to a particular answer, but for the experience of exploring.

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<sup>1</sup>Julie York, "Printmaker a Worker in Wood and Visual Magic," South Bend Tribune, 22, Jan. 1999.

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For more than 25 years, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts has focused on one mission, to support exceptional talent. We accomplish our mission through our international Artist-in-Residence program and our nationally recognized exhibition program. With nearly 700 artists participating in our residency program and the hundreds of artists who have exhibited their work at the Bemis Center, I am proud to have the opportunity to support two artists who have had significant impact as printmakers, artists and educators.

Endi Poskovic and Karen Kunc represent the Bemis Center's on-going commitment to supporting artists who come through our residency program as well as to recognizing artistic talent within our own community. It is because of artists like Karen and Endi that the field of printmaking has continued to flourish despite a growing focus on digital imaging and new media. Their careers serve as a testament to their continual ability to pursue the highest standards of quality, excellence and creativity while remaining firm on the cutting edge of innovation.

The Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts is proud to present this dual exhibition and catalogue. I would also like to acknowledge our gratitude to our catalogue sponsors as well as to our exhibition sponsors, Omaha Steaks International, Nebraska Arts Council, Clark Creative Group and the National Endowment for the Arts for their continued support of our Artist-in-Residence program. And in recognition of their hard work, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the staff at the Bemis Center and especially my assistant director and curator Jeremy Stern for organizing this exhibition and for coordinating the production of this catalogue. Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Karen Kunc and Endi Poskovic for their support of the production and publication of this catalogue and for sharing their art with the world.

Mark Masuoka  
Executive Director & Chief Curator  
Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts  
Spring 2007

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

At the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, our three spacious galleries allow for flexibility in programming that distinguishes our offerings from similar programs at other contemporary art organizations. Within each quarterly exhibition period, we represent a section of the Bemis Center's history by featuring former Artists-in-Residence in one gallery, community or regional artists in another and in the third, a sampling of the broader trends and ideas emerging within the international art scene. In all cases, the direct emphasis on supporting exceptional talent remains prevalent as we always show the highest-quality art currently being produced.

When I first met Endi Poskovic during his residency in 2004 and encountered the exceptional quality of his large-scale prints, I was challenged with how best to feature his work beyond a run-of-the-mill solo exhibition. Endi, who is known internationally, suggested a pairing with another internationally renowned and respected woodblock printer, Karen Kunc, who lives in rural Avoca, Nebraska. After a few conversations, the two artists who had never shown together, agreed to share a 2500-square-foot gallery, allowing the public to explore the shared subtleties and the distinct differences between their equally captivating bodies of work. It was in this collaborative spirit that the dual solo exhibitions, *Sensory Source*, featuring Karen's reductive woodcuts, and *They Are All Indispensable*, featuring Endi's additive woodcut prints, came to fruition.

For Karen, *Sensory Source* represents a continued evolution of her woodblock printing. She is now adding etching as a regular component to her printing process and is exploring a renewed interest in horizontal compositions while still retaining the shaped paper technique she has been using for more than a decade. Endi's new prints continue to refine his use of symbols and the incorporation of text, and the pieces in this show reflect the profound impact his residency at the Bemis Center has had on his current work. We hope that this catalogue reflects the dynamic visual exchange between these two long-time friends and important contemporary printmakers.

Jeremy Stern  
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