

Nebraska's Karen Kunc is called one of the most important American printmakers of her generation.



Nationally known printmaker Karen Kunc, an art professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has a studio on the farmstead she calls home near Avoca, Neb. At top is "Predella," a book she created in 2003.

JEFF BEIERMANN/THE WORLD-HERALD

AT HER PEAK

If you go

Karen Kunc's work is on display at two regional art galleries this spring.

"Karen Kunc: Sensory Source" runs through May 26 at Omaha's Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. For details, visit www.bemiscenter.org.

"Lyrical Legacy: The Prints of Karen Kunc" runs through April 28 at the Leedy-Voulkos Art Center, 2010 Baltimore Ave. in Kansas City, Mo. Gallery hours are Thursday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. For details, visit www.leedy-voulkos.com.

BY DANE STICKNEY
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

AVOCA, Neb. — The frozen skeleton of a tree reaches skyward just outside a large window in Karen Kunc's rural Nebraska printmaking studio. Behind its naked, bony fingers is an old, rotting barn.

Kunc has held artist and teaching residencies in Iceland, Italy, Finland and beyond. But all the artistic spark she needs is on seven secluded acres of an old farmstead three miles southwest of Avoca.

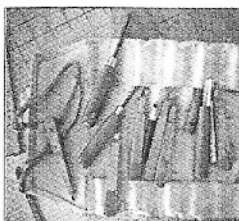
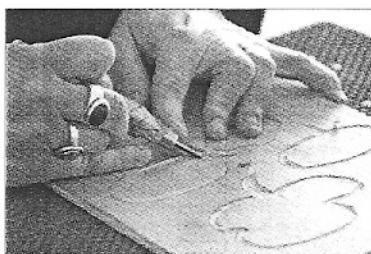
She is obsessed with the theme of growth and decay.

Kunc scribbles initial ideas with black pen on white paper. She transfers the abstract studies onto Mylar paper, copies it onto various sized sheets of birch plywood and carves layers of the shapes with small Japanese chisels. She spreads layers of slow-drying ink and rolls a large steel press over paper on the board.

She'll chisel some more, add some more ink. Chisel again. Add more ink.

Through the process that takes roughly a month, she slowly destroys her wooden block, demolishing in the name of creation. The end result is layers of colors and shapes, mostly abstract but usually re-

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Kunc's technique involves carving layers of shapes with small Japanese chisels, at left, onto sheets of birch plywood.

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AT

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ferencing something found on her farm.

Skinny, wispy lines allude to that leafless tree. A collection of squares symbolizes the pane-less windows in the barn. Not everyone may see exactly what she sees. But ideally they'll sense the intense thought and work behind each print.

Everything, though, comes down to juxtaposition, capturing living and dying, destroying a slab of wood to create a collection of color on paper, balancing the creative demands of art and the time constraints of building a renowned university print department.

Kunc, a 54-year-old Ralston native, is a full-time art professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. When she's not in the classroom or the studio, she's busy making business decisions — organizing exhibitions, selling her work.

Her career is both rewarded and displayed this month. A collection of her current work, "Karen Kunc: Sensory Source," is up at Omaha's Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts through May 26. A retrospective of her 30 years of printmaking, "Lyrical Legacy: The Prints of Karen Kunc," is on display at Kansas City's Leedy-Voukos Art Center through April 24.

Also in Kansas City, the Southern Graphics Council will present Kunc with its prestigious Printmaker Emeritus Award, one of the nation's top prizes in the medium.

The exhibits and awards are exciting, but such establishment trappings don't really fit Kunc. She's kind of like the cool, free-spirited aunt you like to see at Christmastime.

Her gray hair has a ragged, edgy cut. She wears funky earrings and trendy small-rimmed glasses. She spends her days tinkering with tools and pumping out these dynamic, colorful, unusual artworks.

To her, art can't really be hung on a wall or distilled into an award on a mantle.

"The real art happens when you're creating it," she said.

That process begins when she spends between 20 and 90 minutes a day doodling at large wooden tables in her studio. She

fills a roughly 4-by-8-inch piece of white paper with miniature scenes in black ink. Swirls, loose shapes, and pockets of light and dark flow from her mind onto the paper.

She can't explain how it happens. Years of experience play a part, but Kunc feels something else.

"It's a mysterious thing," she said. "Sometimes, I have no ideas, and I feel so empty. But when I give myself time, something just happens."

The abstract shapes begin to take on significance — the lines become tree branches, the squared barn windows.

"Within the abstraction, I start to see things that are around me," she said.

From there, the process only intensifies — tracing, chiseling, spreading ink, rolling a press that resembles a large metal rolling pin.

Until she peels the final print from the wooden block, Kunc doesn't know how the finished product will look. That's perfect for her.

"None of the prints ever look like I thought they would," she said.

"I make prints because I want to do what I don't know."

That's a noble path to forge. Casual art viewers, and even many within the creative community, don't always understand printmakers.

Again, perfect for Kunc.

"In general, when you say you're an artist, people think you're a painter or sculptor," she said. "Printmakers have a sort of second-class status. Throughout my career, I've tried to find ways to combat that."

She has succeeded, said Jane Haslem, owner of the Jane Haslem Gallery in Washington, D.C. Haslem has shown Kunc's work for 20 years. Not only is it popular with collectors, it is top-rate, she said.

Kunc's work is abstract, but it isn't as cold and impersonal as many works in the genre. She also has matured to the point where she is consistent and comfortable in her unique style.

"Not everyone does that, but Karen has," Haslem said. "All the great ones do."

There is no doubt that Kunc is a great one.

"She's an innovator," Haslem said. "She's developed her own technique, created her own singular style. She's one of the most important American printmakers of her generation."

She's not showing any signs of decline, said Adelia Ganson, curator of the Kansas City exhibit.

"Karen is absolutely at her peak," Ganson said. "Her mastery of her technique is incredible. She pushes the medium like no one I've ever seen."

Her work attracts collectors, said Cara Marie Forrler, director of the Contemporary Prints and Drawings Center at Davidson Galleries in Seattle.

"Her shapes and colors are what connect with viewers and buyers," Forrler said. "Her work is very popular. It has been since the beginning and continues to be a top seller for us."

But Kunc's career is considerably more than gallery exhibitions and sales. After earning an undergraduate degree from UNL and a master's of fine arts from Ohio State University, Kunc found a job teaching at the Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio.

She didn't ever plan on teaching, but she welcomed the financial and creative support.

Kunc took a job at UNL in 1983. Save for some national and international residencies, she's been there ever since.

During that time, she's made a big impact, said Ed Forde, chairman of UNL's art department.

"She's basically built the printmaking department into a national powerhouse," he said. "Because of her teaching efforts, exhibition record, giving workshops and flying all over the world, she's helped get our program and our students international attention."

Kunc even donates part of her salary for student scholarships.

Still, being in the classroom detracts from the energy Kunc spends on her own art. She teaches three days a week and tries to find time for her printmaking in the evenings and on her off days.

Sometimes that isn't enough.

"It's always been hard not to put 100 percent of my focus on my work," she said.

In many ways, though, she's more teacher than artist. She has

none of the artistic stereotype of creative condescension. Her personality is polite and patient. She's eager to explain what she does and how she does it.

Teaching may have extended her art career. Full-time printmakers often suffer injuries from the physical rigors of the medium — hand and wrist issues from chiseling, muscle and joint problems from working the heavy presses.

Kunc hopes she'll be able to make prints for decades. Art has always been part of her.

Her early works were more realistic, but the flair for bold colors and shape was always there.

Her parents — who have taken up making jewelry in their retirement — often took the family on rock-hunting vacations. They'd scour Wyoming, Missouri and other spots for precious stones to be used in bracelets, necklaces and rings.

Kunc studied various media at the now-closed Ryan High School.

She took a printmaking class her junior year and was immediately impressed with the way the lines and shapes looked coming off the press. They had a deeper, more interesting quality than drawn or painted figures.

At UNL and Ohio State, Kunc focused mainly on screen-printing, etching and lithography. During her first teaching job in the late 1970s, she became more interested in woodcut. The organic qualities of the material and the way it works with ink made her a quick believer.

Her colleagues increasingly have turned to computer programs to enhance their prints. Kunc can't see herself ever doing that.

Because in her shop, working with simple tools and techniques that date back to Gutenberg, she is home. That rural, secluded farmstead where she lives with her husband of 30 years — glass-blower Kenny Walton — is where Kunc wants to be.

Nothing is as exciting as the mystery surrounding the medium, the moment when the paper first comes off the press and she sees what she has created — that magical last step.

"At the end, you're just waiting for something dramatic to happen," she said. "I love that."