



Kunc, Top: "Inner Sanctum", 12 x 72 inches, woodcut print. Bottom: "Wand", 8 x 47 inches, etching, woodcut, screenprint



Pressing Matters

Bemis Center grooves on color woodcuts of Poskovic and Kunc

By Janet L. Farber

The print, essentially a child of Renaissance commerce and technology, fast became a matrix for fine art in a range of diverse expressions. Of all the print media, however, none seems to have such resilient and enduring power as the woodcut, whose legacy stretches from Dürer to the present day. The directness of its graphic simplicity is appealing. Made from such basic materials as wood carved knives and gouges, some ink and paper, and perhaps a press, the woodcut remains a recognizable vehicle for bold, expressive physicality. Last year's Jay Bolotin show at Joslyn demonstrated through his innovative woodcut film and related prints the dramatic, one might say operatic, potential of this form.

The latest local additions to this carver's feast can be enjoyed at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, where two exciting exhibitions of color woodcuts prove the attraction of opposites. "Endi Poskovic

They Are All Indispensable" and "Karen Kunc: Sensory Source" are solo exhibitions in a shared space presenting recent works by these artists as dual sides of a similar nature. Where his prints are forceful and aggressive, hers are delicate and subtle. His work seems overtly declarative; hers progressively expand. He courts whimsy and ambiguity; she invites poetry. One creates images through addition of layers; the other works reductively, eroding the block as the composition develops. Yet they are strangely harmonic in their chromatic revelry, narrative sensibilities, and attachments to our terrestrial world.

At the age of 36, Poskovic has enjoyed worldly experience. Born in Bosnia, a U.S. resident since 1991, and art professor at Whittier College in Los Angeles, he feels fortunate about the opportunities that his globe-crossing studio work has brought about. A veteran of 17 artist-in-residency programs, his travels into different cultures and landscapes has become important source material.

In his bold, vivid prints, Poskovic presents images combined with words. In each of the works from the series "La Souffrance et L'Aventure," he pairs a central vertical motif with a single word or short phrase in a real or sometimes faux Romance language. Subjects are animals, plants or wooden

constructions that play a conceptual line dividing a child's plaything and a Trojan horse—just observe the wooden ship on wheels with the heading "Lilliputiano." Poskovic plays games between symbol and language to prod us towards meaning, then blurs the associations with matter-of-fact titles written in the print's margins: this is "Toy-Mobile with Cannon in Green, Red and Orange."

His purposeful and, at times, vexing ambiguities are felt even more strongly in his most recent works—a series of small and large horizontal landscapes. Nature in all of its majestic sublimity—a beauty tinged with terror—is at the heart of these compositions, many inspired by his growing admiration for the western landscape. Some scenes present themselves as sunny and encouraging with an undercurrent of portent, while others are more manipulatively dramatic. "All Quiet on the Western Front" (captioned "L'Enigme du Souterrain"), a print made as part of his Omaha residency, imagines a broad vista where clouds of orange smoke belch skyward from background mountain peaks and the foreground is filled with dark, shark-infested waters. Is this the glorious and powerful force of nature or is it a warning or omen? Could it be both?

It is Poskovic's very poster-like and highly graphic woodcut style that makes the

viewer want to dissect the works, be persuaded by their messages, unravel the maker's point of view. It is no wonder, then, that many writers find them bristling with topicality and construct a too-specific quilt of artist-intended meaning from such facts of Poskovic's de facto refugee status from his native ("war-torn") Bosnia, his somewhat itinerant life, 9/11, the war in Iraq, and environmental issues. This is the "treachery of images" in action; to borrow intentionally (as Poskovic does) from the title of René Magritte's surrealist painting of a pipe captioned with the words "this is not a pipe." The artist has supplied us with "an amalgam of hybridized narratives and memory landscapes," so edgy and compelling in themselves that we are sometimes drawn away from the dichotomy between, say, the adventure and risks of migration or the magnificence and danger of nature.

The places and ideas that lend themselves to Kunc's art are from her world of experience, most frequently that of



Poskovic, "What a Sacrifice in Yellow, Ochre, Green and Red!", 22 x 30 inches, 12 Color woodcut print (*La Aventura Continúa*)

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the landscape of her native Nebraska. Kunc is especially familiar to area audiences for her exceptional work as a committed artist with studios in rural Avoca and on campus at UNL, where she is a Cather Professor of Art. Her lyrical abstractions from nature are collected internationally and she has literally traveled the world as a printmaker's ambassador. Among her countless achievements, she is being honored this Thursday in Kansas City with the Printmaker's Emeritus Award of the Southern Graphics Council.

Kunc's recent prints oppose Poskovic's in many ways. They exhibit the delicacy that is possible with a medium generally known

for the roughness of its marks. She is a master of color that can be soft and spreading, not limited by line, and her tonal choices tend more towards the earthy than the synthetic. The tiny titles she inscribes on her prints are suggestive, meant to push you in one direction only. Her complex techniques, which increasingly include the addition of etching or silkscreening, are seamless and meant to be part of the background of the work, where for Poskovic the specific language of the woodcut is critical to witness.

The exhibition focuses tightly on an aspect on Kunc's recent output, featuring prints in a narrow horizontal format, many of them printed on shaped paper. As an art-

ist drawn to the landscape, the wide-frame layout seems intuitive and the horizon has always been part of her vocabulary. What's new is the long, banded stretch of it and as a result her images unfold and encourage reading across the surface, telling stories in stages. Her use of shaped paper adds to this effect. It relates strongly to her work creating artist's books, many of them constructed in accordion folds, where the images can be read in sections or in toto.

Life cycles of growth and decay, forces of wind and water, nature wild and cultivated are all starting points for Kunc's abstractions. They appear in her art as spiraling tendrils, eddying pools, squares of structures and plowed furrows. In "A Potent Embrace," plant life stretches out across a divided paper. In the left half, the branching forms bear thorns, in the right, they bud with leaves. On the left, the motif threatens to overflow its bounds, on the right it is managed by a bar of mostly untouched paper, which gives it the appearance of a shaped page. Through image and color, it is all in dynamic balance.

In "Wand," a sense of human intervention lingers. It is printed on a wide sheet of paper that steps up from left to right like a staircase or siding of a house tipped on its side. Along the central horizontal axis is a tree form, cut off at its roots and branches, truncated along its growing top, floating

within currents of water and land. It is nature as element and product, both essential and useful for our world. It is nature both celebrated and denied, in a suspended animation between growth and decay. As ever, her work inspires consideration of the world we inhabit and encourages us to stop and discover its secrets.

The shows, which run through May 26, are enhanced by offerings that quietly announce the Bemis Center's initiatives to ramp up its programs. Each printmaker will be giving a free artist's talk: Poskovic's on April 28 at noon and Kunc's on May 26 at noon. In addition, both will conduct separate three-day hands-on workshops – a new venture for Bemis – Kunc's runs April 13-15 and Poskovic's April 20-22. A small catalogue adds another nice detail, reflecting a new publishing energy.

These "archaic" graphic statements linger long in a world increasingly noisy with short-term communication. As Bemis director Mark Masuoka put it in his exhibition's introduction, "It is because of artists like Karen and Endi that the field of printmaking has continued to flourish...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." That's the best message any medium can offer. 